

**Malaysian Hybrid Ghazals**

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### Abstract

The English ghazals originated from Urdu ghazals, which had evolved from Arabia. Melancholia is a central component in such ghazals. Reading English ghazals brought the realisation that this form is suited to themes of heartbreak and unrequited love, one that is also central to my writing. Agha Shahid Ali edited *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English* (2000) to take back the form and offered a framework. Consequently, I crafted Malaysian hybrid ghazals based on his framework.

There are three chief purposes of this creative writing thesis. The first purpose was to further hybridise the ghazals written by Shahid Ali. Secondly, to create ghazals that are multi-toned, and finally, to use a pre-dominantly Sufi-Muslim construct to house biblical Catholic metaphor and allusions. In the anthology that he edited Shahid Ali states his eight requirements for a ghazal. For the purposes of this thesis, 100 ghazals were written with the aim of following these eight requirements: (1) the ghazals should be between 5–12 couplets; (2) the ghazal should contain no enjambments; (3) each couplet should stand alone; (4) the ghazal should have a rhyme scheme and a refrain; (5) each line must be of the same length; (6) the last couplet should contain the *takhalus*; (7) the scheme of rhyme and refrain should occur in both lines of the first couplet and then only in the second of every succeeding couplet; (8) ghazals should be written in terse language that evokes sorrow, heartbreak, and constant longing. *Takhalus* originates from Arabic, meaning "nom-de-plume."

An analysis of the 100 ghazals revealed that the ghazals did not consistently follow the framework of Shahid Ali's eight rules completely. All the ghazals written in the portfolio adhered to requirement (1), except for Ghazal 49, which is in four couplets. A sizeable number of the ghazals followed rule (2), no enjambments, rendering most couplets un-enjambed. The first part of rule (4) was never achieved, as none of the Malaysian hybrid

ghazals have a rhyme. However, almost all the ghazals have a refrain. Rule (5) was followed successfully on the grounds of aesthetics, by arranging the lines on the page so that they are of the same length.

One fifth of every ghazal, (20 ghazals) written for this portfolio contains the takhalus, “Elizabeth.” The findings revealed that the majority of the ghazals were melancholic—love poems longing for the beloved and lost opportunities—sustaining the spirit of the ghazal. The final rule on language was disrupted and interrogated to a large extent, with 119 words from the Malay, Chinese, Turkish, Tamil, Malayalam, and Arabic languages incorporated into Malaysian hybrid ghazals.

What emerged are hybrid ghazals, which I term *Malaysian hybrid English ghazals*; a manifest use of indigenous languages in the ghazals. Their multi-tonality speaks of sorrow and joy. These Malaysian hybrid ghazals use Catholic motifs. The considerations were only on the contemplations of Shahid Ali, contained in *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*. The result of this study is two-pronged. First, a collection of 100 Malaysian hybrid English ghazals, a form not known to be attempted in Malaysia before. Secondly, a definition of Malaysian hybrid English ghazal.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

*...form for form's sake – I turned politically correct some years ago*

*and forced myself to take back the gift outright*

*(Ali A. S., Introduction :Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English)*

### Background to the Study

During the study for an MFA (Master's in Fine Arts, Creative Writing) I was introduced to the work of Agha Shahid Ali, a Kashmiri-American poet. The ghazal is an ancient form that deals with the theme of “unrequited love, loss and longing” (Schreiderman, 2014, p. 11). For Shahid Ali, the ghazal was tied to the notion of melancholy, to the loss of something, using metaphors drawn from Muslim mysticism but not appropriate for feminist angst. However, the American poets found the form conducive to their own poetics of lesbian feminism and poets like Adrienne Rich went on to publish ghazals “without keeping to the spirit” of the ghazal (Ali A. S., Introduction :Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English, 2000, p. 1). Shahid Ali's issues with the American poets began at this point.

Rich published two collections of ghazals: Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib, including 17 poems composed in 1968 and The Blue Ghazals with nine poems, written in 1968–1969, which were published respectively in Leaflets (1969) and The Will to Change (1971). It was with these ghazals that Shahid Ali wrote against and become incensed over. He claimed that they got it wrong. Shahid Ali's passion for the form and adherence to the ancient form resulted in his editing an interesting anthology titled *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English*.

This is how my interest in the English ghazals began.

The chase in a romantic endeavour was far more exciting than the attainment of the love; the drama of the heartache of being denied what or whom I sought was more captivating, deeply soul wrenching, than being in a successful relationship. As a young adult reading the Victorians writers in English Literature, I found myself appreciating such works of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, many of the novels by Thomas Hardy, particularly books such as '*Far From the Madding Crowd*', and '*The Woodlanders*' which tell stories of men who suffered immensely because they were spurned lovers. The fact that they suffered long and sometimes died while waiting to be re-united made that love much more valuable. I was known within my circle of family and friends as one who preferred unhappy endings to happier ones. My sisters never read the books I had in my collection simply because they had sad or unhappy closures. When I was finally introduced to Rumi's work, I found the energy in the work to have a certain combustion. His metaphors were always larger than life, making references to the universe, the sun and the moon, and always seeking the *beloved*. the idea of the beloved being an unattainable object of desire is a similar theme to Hardy's work. The ghazal's point is lamenting the loss of the beloved. When that becomes the case, the ghazal equals to life, one of longsuffering, one of enduring the consequences, and less of sequences of happy events. Looking back on my own life and such relationships, I discovered that my thoughts most often remember and cherish those relationships that were unrequited. Those moments of anxiety, heartbreak, and suffering were valued for their deep intensity and strength of feeling compared to when a relationship received a happier closure. I was always drawn to the melancholic.

This melancholia also extended to the loss of what Malaysia was in the 1960s and the 1970s. In my mind and memory, it was a place of community where Malaysians lived

together and built their lives together, sharing food and space, despite our race and religion. Our best friends in school were girls and boys who were multiracial; the impetus for the nationalistic advertisements that were brought out yearly in the early 2000s. It was a time when Malaysians generally accepted our *rojak* culture—‘a food metaphor about national identity that is embraced as inclusive and reflective of Malaysian cultural diversity’ (Duruz & Khoo, 2015).

This rojak culture, in my memory, ends with the events of the May 13 race riots of 1969. According to Martin Vengadesan, in his The Star article with the title May 13, 1969: Truth and reconciliation dated Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> May 2008, he reports that

... a day after the May 10, 1969 general election which saw sweeping gains for the Opposition, thousands of Chinese marched through Kuala Lumpur, parading through predominantly Malay areas hurling insults. Umno Youth members then gathered at Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Harun Idris’s residence in Kampung Baru in KL on May 13 for their own counter victory celebration since the Alliance had maintained its majority in Parliament, albeit a reduced one, and had retained Selangor with the support of the single independent assemblyman. That led to outbreaks of violence in parts of Kuala Lumpur that continued over the following days. Houses, shops, vehicles were torched, people killed and injured. Official figures put the death toll at less than 200 but many commentators put the figures at between 800 and 1,000. (Vengadesan, 2008)

Being a five-year-old living in Banting (the hometown of the *Menteri Besar* of Selangor, Dato Harun, generally considered a major player in the May 13 incidents), there are significant memories of these events that can, until this day, trigger feelings of fear and unease. On one occasion, I remember sitting with my mother and my sisters at a park close



by my home, when we were literally chased home by the army patrol at rifle-point. The township was still under curfew and we had disobeyed the law. Another traumatic memory was peeping out from the window and seeing an armed soldier standing outside my home. Although the force of the communal riots was relatively unclear to a five-year-old, these situations made us children uneasy and fearful. Till this day, I am traumatised by the thought of the smell of carbine. Under curfew conditions, lights go out at sundown and homes are enveloped in darkness. In our home, the curtains were drawn, and we were always reminded to keep silent. My father would then light the carbine light to help reduce the darkness within the home which emitted a strange smell within my sealed home. My memory of these nights are always tinged with fear and anxiety.

These events of May 1969 have consistently been in the creative landscape of Malaysian writers in English. Although my ghazals do not directly refer to these events, part of the trauma of witnessing the security measures described above has leaked into the ghazals. Although I was unable to bring myself to confront these issues directly, the ghazal form allowed for these issues to be confronted in the convoluted ambiguity of the ghazal.

These horrific events have always been the bogeyman tale recounted to the masses every time there is an altercation in the racial relations of the Malays, Chinese and Indians in Malaysia. The following quote by Tunku Abdul Rahman appears in the acknowledgement section of the book *May 13 Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of 1969* indicating the scare tactics that the Malaysian government continued to use to whip its seemingly recalcitrant citizens into acquiescence:

For the PM (Dr Mahathir) to repeat the story of the May 13 Affair as a warning of what would have happened if the Government had not taken appropriate action is like telling ghost stories to our children to prevent them from being

naughty...The tale should not be repeated because it shows us to be politically immature (Tunku on Operation Lalang, 1987). (Soong, 2007)

Fortunately, Malaysian writers in English have not shied away from deftly navigating this traumatic landscape in their stories. Unlike the politicians who until this day tell “ghost stories”, Malaysian creative writers have touched on the incident with both caution and sensitivity (Vethamani M. E., 2000). In the journal article *The Malaysian Albatross of May 13, 1969 Racial Riots*, Malachi studied how Malaysians who write in the English language explored the incident that has a strong psyche scarring on Malaysia. The May 13, 1969 riots appear in many Malaysian works in the English language.

The space we used to share as a community has drastically transformed. Malaysians of all races used to eat together in food courts and *Taman Seleras* of old, which is not the case anymore. Middle-class Malaysians who grew up during the 1960s and early 1970s “remember a time when race/ethnicity was not as important a government category” (Duruz & Khoo, 2015, p. 8). This is directly attributed to the New Economic Policy’s pro-*Bumiputera* policies in the late 1970s. It is further suggested in this chapter that Islamic consciousness is an important factor that has affected the culinary cultures of this once rather accommodating society, resulting in the disappearance of this space of common eating between Malays and Chinese, which was normal until the late 1960s. The main reason was the eating of *haram* meat like pork. Interestingly, the haram rule was always present and, in fact, what has changed is the hypersensitivity to the law that did not “register so strongly in the past” (p. 9).

In short, most Muslims seldom eat at the same table with non-Muslims friends unless they are at a halal restaurant. However, in Malaysia, cultural adjustments, accommodations, and tolerance are practiced on many fronts by non-Muslims in

order to avoid inter-ethnic/religious conflict and to respect Muslim cultural sensitivities. (Duruz & Khoo, 2015, p. 9)

What is suggested here is that we have lost that communal space that we once shared even when non-Muslims have tried to accommodate the Muslims. I am conscious of the growing distance between Malaysians on account of religion. Through the years, the tolerance and divide has deepened and seem to operate on superficial degrees. There is a sense of nostalgia for this space, which was once a marker of our unity. Malaysian food used to unite us once when we used to eat together or visit each other's homes or share each other's food; sustenance to grow us as a nation. When part of the community grows suspect of each other, it is unlikely that we will be able to grow as a nation that understands and appreciates each other. For this reason, the ghazal form is suitable and appropriate in embodying this theme of nostalgia for the time that was: when Malaysians of all creeds visited each other in open houses and ate at each other's tables without fear or suspicion. I agree with the authors of *Eating Together* when they suggest that Malaysians "are longing for inter-ethnic communities . . . a Malaysia that is either of the past or, of an indefinite and utopian future that allows for mutual human flourishing" (Duruz & Khoo, 2015, p. 41). Much like the "*Bangsa Malaysia*" that Mahathir Mohamed referenced in his speech when he envisioned such a populace emergent around 'independence and before NEP when English-educated Malaysians of all ethnicities felt and identified themselves first as Malaysians, and only secondarily as Chinese, Malays and others' (p. 41).

The ghazal form and its preoccupation with nostalgia and melancholy is an appropriate form for lament. Consciously, I wanted to keep returning to a time in my personal history when we could walk about in the parks in our neighbourhood without fear. The melancholic tone required in a ghazal was appropriate for recounting the better times we

shared as a peaceful nation before the riots. The fear and anxiety created by the curfew was an appropriate theme for the ghazal with its repetitive *radif*. Further, as each couplet needed to stand alone without enjambments, this allowed for various disjointed events to be placed in one ghazal, like a quick succession of fragmented images. Much of what took place during the riots remains undiscussed and, in my mind, this dark patch in Malaysian history remains patchy and disjointed. The ghazal then, with its inherent disjointedness, is the perfect form to hold such memories.

The repetitive nature of the ghazal provides a hypnotic quality via the *radif*. The *radif* appears in the *matla*, the first couplet of the ghazal—an endearing feature as it has a repetitive quality. It is present in the *matla* (first couplet) twice, creating an end rhyme. The refrain becomes a reference point of meaning. As has already been acknowledged, each couplet is thematically different from other couplets, but the refrain remains the same. In this manner, the refrain or *radif* grounds the ghazal as it constantly returns to the refrain at the end of every couplet. The reader is made aware of the focus of the ghazal. Although the possibilities of what the ghazal is about might be varied, historically, the *radif* was a point of collaboration between the poet and the audience.

Finally, it is a motivating form as it is an Indian form that originated in Arab and then to India (Kashmir) to America. Most importantly, it has Indian roots. My mother was born in India during the Second World War (1940) and the ghazals were an opportunity to connect with my Indian roots. Having studied English Literature and the poems of Shakespeare, Hardy, Blake, and Yeats, the ghazals offered a different emotional landscape—one that was geographically and culturally closer to home.

Being in Malaysia in the 1970s and 1980s meant that we were constantly faced with the question of who we really were. One factor that contributed to this identity crisis was my

childhood locality. Bamboo Gardens, Ipoh Road was in Kuala Lumpur. It held a community of Malaysians, Indians, Chinese and a few Malays. Most of the Chinese who lived here were tradesmen, bao sellers and small businessmen while the Malayalis mostly belonged to the Catholic community of the Church of the Risen Christ. Majority of the fathers worked as chief clerks, or government servants while most mothers came from the same village in India—now Trivandrum, Kerala in India. Many from this group were related to each other or were known to each other because of their connections back in India. It was a space of mixed identities.

There were a few markers of success that were important to this community. Chief among these was education, which meant that you were looked upon as a success if you attended the local university. Consequently, the community valued young graduates, which they had very few of. At that time, I had not yet graduated from university and, along with the other young people, I looked to be accepted and identified with by finding my own connections to a common culture and literature. I was a Malaysian of Indian origin but the colour of my skin as well as my facial features could not be clearly identified as an Indian. To add to this, was the issue of my name—Elizabeth Marshall was an unusual name, although we lived among the Mirandas, the Rodriquez, and the De Cruzes. Within the church community, many understood that we were given European names because of colonialism, but in the 1970s and 1980s, the concepts of colonialism had not reached us over in little Ipoh Road. To add to this displacement were the countless explanations I had to make over the phone that I was a Malaysian Indian and not of Caucasian descent. Furthermore, my aunties and uncles really did look somewhat mixed. One uncle who lost his life in a swimming accident was said to have blue eyes; an aunt of the same family had greyish-green eyes. All of these contributed to the identity crisis I had during the 70s.

Another complication was our lack of skill with the Malayalam language. My father had earlier on dictated that we should not speak any other language except English at home. My mother spoke fluent Malayalam, Tamil, English, and Bahasa Malaysia while my father spoke English, Malay, Malayalam, and Tamil well. As he wanted us to become proficient in the English language, he forbade us from speaking in Malayalam to my mother, which meant that she spoke to us in Malayalam and we answered in English. As time went on, we could only speak to each other in English and were unable to speak to our aunts and uncles in Malayalam. Hence, another crack in the identity as, although we identified as being Malayalis, we could not speak the language. Personally, I wanted to belong to my mother's Kerala—craving to be able to speak the language she spoke and to experience Kerala with her through her language and culture.

India has a wealth of literature. Beginning with the Vedic hymns and the Upanishads in Sanskrit, Indian verse has a tradition of more than 5,000 years, in various regional languages. Traditionally, poetry was at the centre of all creative arts (Srinath, 2020, p. 1). The poet was regarded as a seer who had astonishing faculty of vision. The most prominent literary, religious and social movement of the middle period is Bhakti, which began in the far south (the Tamil region) after the sixth century and spread across the subcontinent by the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Green, et al., 2012).

Bhakti is predominant in Hinduism where co-dependent religious societies rose with Bhakti as a guiding theological and social principal. The Bhakti movement challenged the dominance of sacrificial Vedic religion, caste issues, gender bias, and the use of Sanskrit as the exclusive language of religion. “Bhakti integrates aspects of personal religious experience, social protest and a variety of ritual modes around a notion of intimacy with one's deity that colours all aspects of human existence” (Encyclopedia B I Encyclopedia of world

religions., 2006, p. 127).

Bhakti saint-poets have expressed their love of God through song in two general modes. In the first, *Saguda* (with traits), the poets evoke the image of the deity, portrayed in human and tangible ways, with colour, personality, and definition. Saguda Bhakti songs also explore numerous relationships between the deity and the devotee by considering them in human terms (e.g., a child trusting in a parent, a servant humbled before his master, or a lover yearning for her beloved). Examples of such saints are the female poets Mahadev (12<sup>th</sup> century), and Mirabai (16<sup>th</sup> century), who seek shelter in Krishna, her beloved. A second Bhakti approach, *Niguna* (without traits), conceives of spirituality as singular and deep, beyond the realm of human discernment. They prefer a focus on the recitation of God's name. Niguda saint-poets like Kabir, Ravidas, and Nanak (15<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries) often articulated Bhakti's intensity in ways that elude comparison to the natural forms of relationship favoured by Saguda poets. Within their communities, the teacher-student relationship was major. Consequently, in their own poetry as well, we find the figure of the transcendent True Teacher (Encyclopedia B I Encyclopedia of world religions., 2006, p. 127).

Poetry in this tradition is supposed to be composed in the natural mother tongue (not Sanskrit). It essentially must be spontaneous, urgent, personal, and God-inspired. Consequently, it tends to be "more immediate, colloquial, autobiographical, confessional than many of their counterparts" (Encyclopedia B I Encyclopedia of world religions., 2006). These are composed in short forms or regional origins and written in meters, using verse forms with end rhymes, addressed to fellow worshippers, or to a God or to an audience and set to music and sung. Often these are used in performances such as in dance, dance-drama etc. Similar to the ghazal, the Bhakti poems include an opening refrain and a concluding signature line that explicitly identifies its author (p. 687).

The colonisation of India naturally impacted Indian literature and Indian poetry. Poets wanted to write poetry of the Anglo-American. On one hand, it became more westernised, yet, at the same time, it was a time of ‘complex, creative interaction among local regional, subcontinental and international trades, leading as much to reactionary traditionalism and reactive nationalism as to stimulating cultural syncretism’ (Green, et al., 2012, p. 686).

This impact came in the way of a shift from poetry and poetics of the middle period to modern and newer poetic genres in terms of “forms, themes, conventions, images, metrical frames, and structural principles, as well as by radical changes in the conception of who the poet is and their functions” (Green, et al., 2012, p. 686). According to *The Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*, the *Kavi* (poet) was regarded as a seer because of his extraordinary faculty of vision.

The poetic word was mantra (incantation). It was a product at once of Prathiba (imagination), Jnana (wisdom of the sage) Karuna (compassion of the saint) and Kausala (craft) or a Sadhaka a disciplined explorer who carved poetic utterance out of silence and primal sound. (Srinath, 2020, p. 1)

The following table showcases the impact of colonisation on Indian writers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with many factors contributing to the genre and language in which these poets wrote. Among these factors was the availability of Western-style education in schools, colleges, and universities. As a direct result, the later 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian poets began encountering Anglo-American literature and other European works, which resulted in imitation of these Westerners. Significantly, these changed the “formal, thematic and generic complexion of the literatures in indigenous languages” (Green, et al., 2012, p. 686) as is evident in the genres indicated in the first column.



Genres	Poet		Title/Language
Long philosophical or speculative poem	Sri Aurobindo Ghose	1872 - 1950	Savitri (English)
	G M Muktibodh	1917 - 64	Andhere Men (Hindi)
Nationalist Epic – retelling an ancient myth	Micheal Madhusudan Dutt	1824 - 73	Meghanadvadha (Bengali)
	Jaishankar Prasad	1889 - 1937	<i>Kamayani</i> (Hindi)
Long sequence of short poems	Rabindranath Tagore	1861 - 1941	<i>Gitaanjali</i> (Bengali)
Prose Poems	Rajagopal Parthsarathy	1934	<i>Rough Passage</i> (English)
Ghazals Nazms and gits	Faiz Ahmed Faiz	1911 - 84	Ghazals (Urdu)
Sonnets	Buddhadev Bose	1908 - 74	Sonnets (Bengali)
Free Verse	P S Rege	1910 - 78	The love poems (Marathi)
Free Verse	Dhoomil, Shrikant Verma & Raghuvir Sahay		(Hindi)
Bilingual poetry	A K Ramanujan	1929 - 93	(Eng & Kanada)
	Arun Kolatkar	1932 - 2004	(Eng & Marathi)

Figure 1 Adapted from *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* pg. 687

Within the context of this thesis, it is important to highlight the fact that Shahid Ali translated Faiz Ahmed Faiz 's Urdu ghazal. Shahid Ali grew up with Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poetry being recited and sung to him. *The Rebel's Silhouette* presents the English translations of Faiz Ahmed Faiz poetry, with the Urdu text on facing pages. The poems are arranged chronologically, and Shahid Ali had chosen poems that demonstrate the wide range of Faiz's concerns, from the purely romantic to the purely political. Faiz's language, true to its Urdu

and Persian ancestry, can be filled with ambiguity, allowing the poet to combine the passion of love with the passion of political commitment (Haraway Jr, 2002). According to the reviewer, some of Ali's most successful efforts are with ghazals, where the language of love dominates, but where politics may also be present. Though Shahid Ali often departs from the strict formalism of the Urdu ghazal, "he arranges the English words on the page in such a manner as to force the reader to linger over the lines, much as Pakistani readers do when reading or singing ghazals" (Haraway Jr, 2002, p. 226).

During the early phase of Indian-English poetry, the notables were poets such as Henry Derozio, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Romesh Chunder Dutt, and Manmohan Ghose. According to *A companion to twentieth-century poetry*, Derozio wrote "some impressive sonnets and lyrics in addition to the narrative poem, *The Fakir of Jungheera* (1828). He displayed great originality and possessed a firmer command of English than his forebears. By the age of 16, he had set about single-mindedly Indianising himself, conceiving original poems around Indian stories, characters, and experiences, celebrating Indian 'ways of feeling', and building up more ambitious lyric and narrative pieces for inclusion in *Poems* (1827). His poetry contained some of the initial articulations of Indian nationalism, being the first to use the phrase 'Mother India.' Derozio also deployed a wide variety of metres and verse forms, and 'invented distinctive images comparisons and analogies to naturalise and aestheticize the landscape in the English Language' (Roberts, 2001, p. 267).

Madhusudan was famed for his Bengali epic, *Meghnad Badha* (1849). He was a student of Derozio's, but it is believed that his *The Captive Ladie* (1849) and *uncollected poems in English* were technically more varied and inventive than Derozio's. Madhusudan was the first to bend the language itself so that it could convey the verbal and syntactic flavour of Sanskrit, Persian, and Bengali sensibilities as precisely as possible. After his early success

in English, he abruptly switched to writing literally works exclusively in Bengali, “becoming the first great modern playwright and poet—and an immediate precursor of Rabindranath Tagore—in that language” (Roberts, 2001, p. 268).

The family of Govin Chunder Dutt—which included his brothers, Hur and Giris; his cousins Oomesh, Ishan, and Soshee; as well as his daughters Aru and Toru and Ishan’s son, Romesh collectively produced a large body of English poetry in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The most notable individual books were Toru Dutt’s, *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1875,1878) and *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882).

I sought to connect with my south-Indian roots by way of discovering the ancient poetry forms that were written in India, and the Urdu ghazal was the form best suited to my writing and the themes of loss and longing (among other themes). Tracing the history of the ghazal from when it was solely a Sufi construct to the time when Agha Shahid Ali published his ghazals in America, I was able to understand how the form evolved. The ghazal is still written, to this day, in the English-speaking world. A ghazal entitled *Off-World Ghazal* by Stuart Barnes was short-listed for this year’s Montreal International Poetry prize. Over the centuries, the poets used the ghazals to embody themes of loss and yearning for the , however contemporary writers have used the form to embody themes ranging from love to everyday matters.

There are inspiring similarities between the ghazal and Bhakti poetry. Both these forms employ a highly metaphorical language, with specific metaphors drawn from erotic experiences to describe the devotion to God. However, the Bhakti poems were reverential pieces that portrayed the relation to God in wonder and praise; whose most common forms are prayers, meditation, hymns, and praise. Although the Bhakti tradition originated from South India, to which I can trace my ancestry, this form of devotion could not suit the themes

that I wanted to write on. Bhakti poetry was direct and straightforward in worship, while the ghazal always held within its form an acute sense of ambiguity (Kashani, 2014). This ambiguity was necessary when I wrote ghazals that were critical of organised religion, and which allowed for veiled criticism directed at parties—either the ruling parties or the Papacy—without over exposure of the writer. For this reason, the ghazal was a better form.

### ***The Urdu Ghazal***

The ghazal is a lyric poem from Arabia, thematically centred on love, and developed into a “fixed form” in Persian, Turkish, Urdu, and other Islamite literatures. The “Arabic root ghz-l semantically encompasses the gazelle, the act of spinning/weaving and eventually, amorous talk with a woman”. In the Umayyad period (660–750), it developed into a fixed form love poem, suited to singing. It continued to evolve and became the form to express unrequited love or unattainable love, which eventually became synonymous with verse that left the beloved unnamed (Green, et al., 2012, p. 570). The homoerotic environment and the anonymous beloved characterised the later ghazal traditions, especially in Persian, Turkish, and Urdu, which enabled Neoplatonic and mystical symbolism to penetrate the ghazal during the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, particularly within Sufi circles. Persian poetry was cross-pollinated by various influences, but chiefly by Arabic images, motifs, and prosodic structures.

There are several theories about the origin of the ghazal. According to *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (1960) there are various possibilities about the origin of the ghazal. One theory is that it originated in the erotic *nasib* of the *qasida* (panegyric) and developed in a technical form. According to this theory, the growing influence of Sufism on Persian poetry and the decline of the courtly panegyric were some cultural changes that directly influenced the form of the ghazal. According to this concept, the ghazal was practised in the courtly

circles and many of those who wrote ghazals were not Sufis. Yet another notion is that the Persian ghazal originated in pre-Islamic popular indigenous lyric. However, most scholars agree that the ghazal is characterised by the theme of love (Eve, et al., 2020).

There are many uncertainties in this culture and tradition of writing the ghazals. Evidently, scholars disagree on certain aspects of the ghazal, particularly on the aspect of the origin of the ghazal. Chief among this uncertainty is the nature of the beloved. There are certain stock characters in the Persian ghazal and the beloved is a highly disputed stock character. Most literature attest to the idea that those who participated in the writing of the ghazal were only men. Some believe them to be Sufis (male) whilst others believe the practitioners were individuals close to the courts who were mainly male. It may therefore be concluded, if the writers of the ghazals were male and if their beloved was indeed a young man, that the erotic language that was used in the poetry was an indication of the evident homoerotic love practised by the poets towards the “young man or teenager, a soldier, a page” (Eve, et al., 2020). From this quote, the beloved can be assumed to be a young boy, and from such assumptions, the notion that the individuals participated in homosexual relationships, as women did not participate in the same social space as the men.

### ***The Structure of the Ghazal***

There are six important structural requirements as explained in the book titled *History of the Ottoman Poetry*. It is a short poem of about 4–15 couplets. The first couplet is called the matla “and it is invariably *musarra*,” meaning the two hemistiches always rhyming together. All the second lines rhyme together end with the matla. The last couplet in the ghazal is called the *maqta*, where the poet introduces his name, much like affixing his name to the ghazal. The themes in ghazals are as follows: pleasures of wine; the delights of spring tide;

and the woes or joys of love and laughter. Several couplets are unrelated to the poems. Only one tone should run through the whole poem. Finally, each couplet should be complete with a complete idea, fully expressed.

The introduction of the name towards the end of a poem is not particular to the ghazal, but common to all the verse-forms of more than two couplets derived from the Arabian rhyme-system. From this system, the *takhalus* (introducing the name towards the end of the poem) is not particular to the ghazal, rather it is common to all verse-forms of more than two couplets.

Shahid Ali “took back” the form from the American poets who were using the form in a diluted manner. He strove to correct the erroneous claim by Paul Oppenheimer that the sonnet is the oldest popular form. Shahid Ali counters that the ghazal history can be traced back to seventh century Asia, and therefore, the ghazal is older than the sonnet. Shahid Ali further claims that the scholarship produced in Western academia tends to exclude everything that did not emerge in the west (Ali A. S., Introduction :*Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English*, 2000, p. 1).

In his introduction to *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English* he expresses dismay at the complete distortion the ghazal form has met with in the West and displeasure at the way American poets have practised the form with complete disregard for its formal structure (Zaidi, Center/Margin Dialectics and the Poetic Form: The Ghazals of Agha Shahid Ali, 2008).

He offered an explanation and guide as to what the ghazal was supposed to adhere to and worked together with a group of Americans to make it right. The product of this was the world’s first anthology of English ghazals entitled *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English* published in 2000. The ghazal became prominent in America from the mid-1960s.

1969 marked the centennial anniversary of the death of Mirza Ghalib, a Persian/Urdu poet, who was one of the form's masters. From then on, the ghazal form caught on the imagination of some of the contemporary poets. David Caplan gives a brief history of how ghazals came to America in his book *Questions of Possibility: Contemporary Poetry and Poetic Form*. According to Caplan, a Pakistani critic, Aijaz Ahmad, who was living in New York solicited some well-known American poets to work on a pamphlet of translations for the centennial, who were supplied with translations from which they crafted their poems. This attempt had far reaching consequences as the planned pamphlet eventually became a 174-page book. *Ghazals of Ghalib*, published by Columbia University Press appeared in major American and Indian literary periodicals (Caplan, 2008, p. 41).

More importantly, the contributors included four Pulitzer-Prize winners, one of which was Adrienne Rich, who composed the ghazal sequence, *The Blue Ghazals*—the first to be published by an American. However, Rich's ghazals did not adhere to the form, except to the ghazal's traditional argumentative structure, "explaining how Ghalib's ghazal provided techniques for expressing the particular 'fragmentation' and 'confusion'" (Caplan, 2008, p. 41). What the Americans achieved was an appropriation of an Eastern form without entirely and truly emulating the spirit of what the ghazal meant for Shahid Ali. For Shahid Ali, the ghazal must be written in "autonomous, thematically and emotionally complete in itself...there is no context" (Ali A. S., Introduction :*Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English*, 2000, p. 2).

However, Shahid Ali's politically correct turn was at the prompting of "his real-life mentor, a flesh and blood friend, and a powerful influence whose example led Shahid Ali both toward the increasing formalism that opened out onto his embrace of the ghazal, as well as his guide into death..." (Schreiderman, 2014, p. 11). In his introduction to *Ravishing*

*DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*, Shahid Ali explains how the form, when written in Urdu—a language closely connected to Persian—lends itself perfectly to this form as the language is pliant and allows this flexibility in not having an accent, mould the pieces into “falling on almost any syllable in accordance with the quantitative pattern.” Conversely, in the English language, “Quantity plays a considerable but “undefined and unsystematic part does not lend itself in the same way as Urdu does.” To illustrate this difficulty, Shahid Ali quotes Victor Kiernan, a Marxist historian and a translator of Iqbal and Faiz as follows:

This pattern cannot be reproduced with much fidelity in English, where quantity plays a considerable but an undefined and unsystematic part, and where two “long” (or strong”) syllables cannot be made to stand side by side in a fixed order, as they do habitually in Urdu verse. (Ali A. S., Introduction :*Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English*, 2000, p. 3)

Hence, Shahid Ali suggested that there was a foundational mismatch between Urdu and English which caused much of the disparity when poets tried to write ghazals in English, as many of the American poets tried to do during the 1960s (Ali A. S., Introduction :*Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English*, 2000). Consequently, he recognised that there were some rules that should be followed, and he set these out.

For Shahid Ali, the couplets need to be thematically different, and therefore can be quoted by themselves. Take for example John Hollander’s poem entitled *Ghazal on Ghazals* from the anthology *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English*.

For couplets the ghazal is prime; at the end  
Of each one’s a refrain like a chime: “at the end.”

But in subsequent couplets throughout the whole poem,



It's this second line only will rhyme at the end

One such a string of strange, unpronounceable fruits,  
How fine the familiar old lime at the end!

All our writing is silent, the dance of the hand,  
So that what it comes down to all mime, at the end.

Dust and ashes? How dainty and dry! We decay  
To our messy primordial slime at the end.

Two frail arms of your delicate form I pursue,  
Inaccessible, vibrant, sublime at the end.

You gathered all manner of flowers all day,  
But your hands were most fragrant of thyme, at the end.

There are so many sounds! A poem having one rhyme?  
—A good life with sad, minor crime at the end.

Each new couplet's a different ascent: no great peak,  
But a low hill quite easy to climb at the end.

Two armed bandits: start out with a great wad of green  
Thoughts, but you're left with a dime at the end.

Each assertion's a knot which must shorten, alas.

This long-worded rope of which I'm at end.

Now Qafia Radif has grown weary, like life,

At the same he's been wasting his time at. THE END.

Firstly, the matla, which is the first couplet, sets up the *qafia* (the rhyme) and the radif (the refrain) by having it occur in both lines. Subsequently, this scheme occurs only in the second line of each succeeding couplet.

For couplets the ghazal is **prime**; at the end

Of each one's a refrain like a **chime**: "at the end."

This ghazal. In his personification of the Qafia Radif growing tired, ending with a simile—"like life" the line ends with an emphatic "." (full stop). The second line of the last couplet begins afresh, "At the same he's been wasting his time at. THE END." Furthermore, in the takhalus, he refers to the poet and time wasted, which is then followed by a two-word sentence: "THE END". The final couplet is a "gem" on its own, that fits into the entire ghazal; plucked out on its own, it philosophically signals the end.

Shahid Ali suggests that a ghazal has five couplets with no maximum limit. Equally pertinent to the spirit of the ghazal is his definition of the ghazal—it is the cry of the gazelle when it is cornered in a hunt and knows it will die. The finality of death in the cry intensifies the melancholic quality of the form. Finally—and for me this is most important—as quoted by Shahid Ali in his introduction from Ahmed Ali's *The Golden Tradition* "...atmospheric and emotional cohesion and refinement of diction hold the poem together, permitting at the same time terseness, intensity, and depth of feeling, uniqueness of imagery, nobility of language, and a high conception of love" (Ali A. , 1973 as cited in Ali AS., 2001).

In Hollander's poem, each couplet is self-contained; however, present within the ghazal is a simple cohesion of subject matter, which is that every couplet considers the makings of the ghazal right from the first couplet. However, some couplets may be referring to other aspects of life other than the ghazal. For instance, couplets 3, 5, 6, 7, and 10 may be referring to other aspects of life, besides about writing the ghazal.

One such a string of strange, unpronounceable fruits

How fine the familiar old lime at the end!

In a couplet such as the above, although one is not sure why the fruit is unpronounceable, within the context of the entire poem, what we know is that the radif will become familiar to us because of its repetition. There is always a certain comfort in reading or hearing the familiar; as if approaching known territory. The second line then refers to the reader's delight in encountering a fruit at the end of a branch, much like the delight of finding something familiar. Urdu ghazals have a common culture and context which allow the poets to draw from this corpus of imagery and metaphors. However, in this context, I am unsure of what the lime might stand for.

Similarly, couplets 5, 6, 7, and 10 seem to be doing the same. Some couplets seem like gems that are a standalone for Shahid Ali—there should not be any enjambment between the couplets, which Hollander's poem complies with.

Perfect diction, ending with a serious radif of "at the end." However, the final couplet's "at. THE END." 'is unlike the rest of the refrains. "At the same he's been wasting his time at. THE END." As with English movies, the end of a narrative—such as at the finish of a story—the end of the ghazal is emphatically signalled by the refrain in full capital letters: "THE END."

### *Aims of the Thesis*

This study aims to firstly, further hybridise the ghazal, secondly create ghazals that are multi-toned and thirdly, use a predominantly Sufi-Muslim construct to house Biblical-Catholic metaphors and allusions.

Shahid Ali's ghazals were seen as hybrid ghazals as they were written in English. Comparatively, the Malaysian hybrid ghazal I wrote were polyglots because they were not exclusively written in English as when I penned the ghazals, I used Malay, Tamil, Malayalam, Arabic as well as English. Consequently, to fruitfully decipher the meanings of these ghazals, it is necessary for the reader to understand the nuances of these languages. For instance, in Ghazal 3, from Chapter 3 of this thesis, the refrain is "Ah Chee" which is a Malaysian term of endearment commonly used by the Chinese community, among themselves. Later, it became common for people of other races to address older womenfolk of Chinese or Indian ancestry with the term. This is one example of how non-English words were incorporated into the ghazals to add a Malaysian flavour to the ghazals I wrote. Some instances of when words from other Malaysian languages were incorporated are in Ghazals 4, Ghazal 6, Ghazal 8, Ghazal 11, Ghazal 16, Ghazal 17, and Ghazal 19 (Chapter 3). The ghazals origins were from a non-English, non-Western domain and infusing it with non-English words was another step in claiming the form. In this way, my aim for this thesis is to problematise the main language of the ghazal—English—to include the various cadences of the other languages to conjure the spirit of the ghazal to accommodate ghazals written in English but with code-mixing, to reflect a post-colonial Malaysian construct. In summary, my Malaysian ghazals were further hybridised by the inclusion of other languages such as Malay, Tamil, Malayalam, and Arabic.

Secondly, the aim is to craft ghazals with melancholic and nostalgic tones. A relatively high percentage of the ghazals were love poems; a longing for lost opportunities. These were melancholic poems that fitted well within the ghazal form (ghazals were written by the ghazal masters to mouth this longing for the beloved, be it or human). However, the celebratory poems (Christmas, Raya, and Thaipusam) were included as subject matter, too. Although Shahid Ali insisted that the ghazals must have a melancholic tone and most of the 100 ghazals followed this requirement, a small percentage of the ghazals I wrote were happy ghazals. For instance, the food poems such as Ghazal 30 is a poem of seven couplets, each one a description of a type of Indian food that Malaysians were generally accustomed to. As such, the tone in this poem is joyful rather than melancholic for most Malaysians take pleasure in eating, which is a favourite pastime (Duruz & Khoo, 2015). Granted that the ghazal form is best suited for melancholic subjects such as death and illness, yet it can also be the site for celebration. In summary, the second aim is to incorporate the contrasting tones of melancholy and joy within a Malaysian ghazal.

The third aim is to positively use this traditionally Sufi-Muslim construct (metaphors and allusions in traditional ghazals were Muslim-centric) to house my Malaysian-Catholic concerns. For example, Ghazal 11—which was essentially about the Passion of Christ in general, and Good Friday in particular—was an attempt to push the limits of what a ghazal might discuss. The refrain “Alah, Alah,” an incantation of the Muslim God, was used as a site for appropriation of the form to hint at the precarious Malaysian position on religious inclusivity. This was an attempt to widen the use of the ghazal form to encapsulate these real concerns of religious inflexibility and allow it to speak for multi-religiosity; to appropriate a Sufi-Muslim construct such as the ghazal to encapsulate various non-Muslim concerns such as Christ’s Passion, and Thaipusam. Fundamentally, to permit non-Muslim concerns,

allusions, and metaphors to be used within the ghazal. Importantly, to dismantle the form and to allow newer Malaysian concerns to be framed within these hybridised ghazals. Here then is my contribution to the ghazal form, to offer Malaysian ghazals that extend the traditional ghazals, by including multiple languages into the English language ghazals. Furthermore, although the traditional ghazals were melancholic, primarily lamenting the beloved, the Malaysian ghazals I wrote incorporated both the melancholic and the celebratory, for the Malaysian experience was a paradox of both sadness and joy. Just as crucial was the use of Catholic-Christian imagery, metaphors, and allusions that were included in many of the Malaysian ghazals I wrote for this portfolio of ghazals. It was fascinating to stretch this traditional form with its inherent Sufi-inspired figurative language to include Catholic-Christian poetic language.

My poems thematically embodied the challenges and struggles I faced as that of a Catholic-Malaysian woman of Indian origin. Finally, I reflected on the ghazals that I wrote and deliberated on how the structure of the English ghazal was the best suited structural home for my poems and found that the rules in *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English* as mentioned below, allowed a sense of certainty to my craft. In writing the ghazals, I adhered to all the basic structural rules explained below but achieved different degrees of success. This is discussed in the chapter, Reflections. Thematically, my ghazals did not always strictly embed an element of “constant longing”. Similarly, the use of takhalus (the poets name) is only evident in some of my poems.

The basic points about the ghazal as stated in *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English* are as follows:

1. A ghazal is a poem of five to 12 couplets.
2. It contains no enjambments between couplets. Think of each couplet as a

separate poem, in which the first line serves the function of the octave of a Petrarchan sonnet and the second line the sestet. That is, there must be a turn, a Volta, when one moves from line 1 to line 2 of a couplet. Thus, certain kinds of enjambments would not work even within the couplets, the kind that would lead to a caesura in line 2. One must have a sense that line 2 is amplifying line 1, turning things around, surprising us.

3. Once again, there are absolutely no enjambments between couplets.
4. Each couplet must be like a precious stone that can shine even when plucked from the necklace, though it certainly has greater lustre in its setting.
5. What links these couplets is a strict formal scheme. The entire ghazal employs the same rhyme plus a refrain. The rhyme must immediately precede the refrain. If the rhyme is merely buried somewhere in the line, that will have its charm, of course, but it would not lead to the wonderful pleasure of immediate recognition which is central to the ghazal.
6. Each line must be of the same length (inclusive of the rhyme and refrain). In Urdu and Persian, all the lines are usually in the same meter and have the same metrical length. So please establish some system—metrical or syllabic—for maintaining consistency in line lengths.
7. The last couplet may be (and usually is) a signature couplet in which the poet may include their name in the first, second, or third person.
8. The scheme of rhyme and refrain occurs in both lines of the first couplet and then only in the second line of every succeeding couplet (that is, the first line of every succeeding couplet may be anything if it maintains the syllabic or metrical length).
9. There is an epigrammatic terseness in the ghazal, but with immense lyricism,

evocation, sorrow, heartbreak, wit. What defines the ghazal is a constant longing.

### ***Structure of the Thesis***

This thesis comprises of five chapters. In Chapter One, is the introduction to the study. Chapter Two consists of the Literature Review. Chapter Three has 100 ghazals. These ghazals are written in an attempt to follow the guidelines set by Shahid Ali in *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*. Chapter Four, the reflection on the writing of the ghazals. My ghazals are different from those advocated by Shahid Ali in aspects of culture and theme. In the foreground of the ghazals is the Malaysian culture. The hybrid ghazals I wrote are about the Malaysian experience of celebration and the food Malaysians favoured. I alluded to the Catholic-Christian festivities that Malaysian Christians celebrated, and contemplated on the lived experiences of a young woman living in Kuala Lumpur during the 1980s and the 1990s in a relatively Catholic-centred neighbourhood. Although I understand some of the concepts of Islam, I wrote from the perspective of a Malaysian-Malayali-Catholic woman. Chapter Five begins with the summary of the entire thesis, my contribution to the form, and a final conclusion. My main contributions to the ghazal form are that I have further hybridised the English ghazal, created ghazals that were multi-toned, and used a predominantly Sufi-Muslim construct to house biblical metaphors and allusions.

The Introduction begins with the background of the study. In this section I explain how I came to be introduced to the ghazal form and to Shahid Ali's work, the Kashmiri-American poet who laid a claim on the ghazal form, editing a seminal anthology—the first of its kind in the world—thereby guiding American poets to write the ghazal in its traditional Urdu/Persian form. Following this section is the section on the aim of the study, and in it are



detailed three aims. The main aim of this study was to write 100 ghazals according to the guidelines prescribed by Shahid Ali. My poems thematically embodied the challenges and struggles I faced as a Catholic-Malaysian woman of Indian origin. Finally, I reflected on the ghazals that I wrote and deliberated on how the structure of the English ghazal was the best suited structural home for my poems.

This discourse begins with the early history of the ghazal and a brief debate on who the beloved is. The subsequent sections deal with Rumi and his variety of Sufism, the literary devices he used, his influence, and his love poems. Included, is also a background of how Rumi came to write his *diwan* (register of the Arabs) after losing his beloved.

Rumi was a prolific poet. His *Diwan-e Shams* contains more than 3,000 poems, mostly ghazals (Harmless & Harmless, 2007). In the next: the role of Sufism discusses the definition of Sufism, a variety of Islam which was closely connected with the ghazal.

This section is followed by a discussion on the consolidation of the different sects of *wool wearers*, as these mystics were often called, into a one recognisable group called the Sufis. The Sufis used some stock metaphors in their ghazals, which is the basis of this section, followed by a brief attempt to explain Mysticism. According to *The Encyclopaedia of World Religions*, it is a 'spiritual quest for hidden truth or wisdom, the goal of which is union with the sacred' (Encyclopedia B I Encyclopedia of world religions., 2006, p. 768). Rumi was a mystic and at the heart of his mystical practice was the Sufi ritual of *sama* (spiritual concerts) who saw the practice as a calibrated spiritual discipline, a 'method of contemplation and mystical prayer, a way of focusing mind and heart and body, on God the Beloved' (Harmless & Harmless, 2007, p. 177)

This argument is then followed by an explanation of the theme of melancholy in the ghazal. As mentioned by the rules set out by Shahid Ali, the ghazal is always melancholic.

Contemporary readers of Islamic poetry are now familiar with Rumi because of the ghazals that were translated by English translators. It goes without saying that Rumi had a huge influence on the ghazal.

The section then leads the reader into the history of the ghazal in America—an important development in this thesis. Shahid Ali was particularly concerned with the appropriation of the ghazal form in the hands of American poets. This study reviews Adrienne Rich's ghazals and how dissimilar they are from the ghazals of Ghalib, followed by a discussion on Rich's, *The Blue Ghazals*.

The ensuing section deals with the Indo-Muslim type of Sufism, as the discourse moves toward South Asia. This pathway is important to illuminate how this affects the ghazal form, how the language of the ghazal changes from Persian to Urdu, and the metamorphosis from the Persian ghazal into the Urdu ghazal of today.

The penultimate sections refer to Shahid Ali's contribution to the ghazal form in America. He was a translator of Urdu ghazals into English, translating the poetry of Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Further, he also wrote English ghazals, which were posthumously published by his siblings. In the final section: a discussion on his contribution to the strict ghazal, which is an anthology of ghazals edited by Shahid Ali titled *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*

In the concluding section is a discussion on scholars who argue that Shahid Ali's ghazals were not original, but hybrid ghazals. More importantly, I agree with this line of reasoning that they were indeed hybrid ghazals. My hybrid ghazals followed some of the rules set out by Shahid Ali. It could begin with my shared position of a hybrid—he, a Kashmiri-American poet; and I, a Malaysian-Malayali-Catholic. I found the hybrid ghazal's Indian-Urdu ghazal as a connective strain that connected my ancestral roots to India, my mother's

homeland. Interestingly, its Islamic strains were part of my interest in the ghazal form, as Malaysia is a Muslim-majority nation. Being born and bred in this country, I found that Islam was part of my creative imagination. In the landscape of my imagination was the consciousness that I belonged to Malaysia, while my ghazals were the construct of a non-Muslim Malaysian. In this regard, my ghazals had Christian-Catholic themes of piety and prayers. Shahid Ali regularly alluded to the Karbala as metaphor in his poetry to point to a Muslim trope in his work. We were similar in that religion was an important element of our creative imagination. Under the section, *My Ghazals*, I deliberate on how I have used the ghazal form as advocated by Shahid Ali, and elucidate on the composition of my ghazal titled, *Yellow*. Using the poem by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper” I offer a discussion on how I make a necessary deviation from Shahid Ali’s rules and produce my own context to lay the foundation of my ghazal. My attempt is to ride on the agency provided by Rich. I did not go back to the basics of writing a ghazal, which I found I could not do, as I did not come from the same religious background as the ghazal writers. I circumvented the lack of Islamic culture with a feminist text and used it as the context or backstory of my ghazal. My elucidation was to show how my ghazals are a hybrid—of Shahid Ali’s hybrid.

Under the Creative Writing portfolio, I wrote 100 ghazals, in couplets; each line with about 10 words. I chose to start writing the ghazals from the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 2018. As it was a day of many achievements for Malaysians, I began my ghazal journey from that victorious moment in 2018. The 2018 Malaysian elections was a moment in history with high drama. Politically, it marked the end of the UMNO era, shifting the power from Barisan National, the once popular coalition, to the Pakatan Harapan Government. That victorious moment was a high point for me. I was determined to leave the country as I knew that politically and religiously, Malaysia was evolving into a mono religious and monocultural society. Slowly,

the tolerance for a multiracial society was waning. This possibility frightened and threatened my sense of wellbeing in Malaysia and I was looking for a change. However, being middle-aged meant that many doors were shut to my family and me. When the new government was formed, the will of the electorate and what was achieved sparked a new belief in what a united country can do. The euphoria of the elections results renewed my faith in a small but significant way, and I planned to use this point in Malaysia's life and my own life to take a backward gaze at our nationalistic and personal journey. So, the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 2018 was the point for reflection and planning. It signified a new hope. Personally, it was a signpost on the personal journey of time when reflection and planning is necessary. It was a time of stock-take.

Thematically, the ghazals are on contemporary Malaysian life which broadly fall into 25 categories, namely spirituality, illness, food, family, home, the pandemic, friendship, and gender. Traditionally, ghazals were love poems written by the Sufis to lament the loss of the beloved. I chose the ghazal form to investigate the suitability of its home and found it to be an appropriate fit.

One essential element of the form was the radif. The ghazals that I wrote on the theme of love also frequently expressed a sense of loss; yearning for something, either a lost opportunity or a loved one, and this sense of loss and melancholy could perfectly be incorporated into the poems by the use of the radif. As the radif is repetitive, twice in the first couplet and towards the end of each subsequent couplet, this incantation helped intensify that sense of loss and drama befitting a love poem. For this reason, the ghazal was found to incorporate the most effective elements to craft a Malaysian hybrid ghazal.

As discussed in the previous sections, the ghazal is an ancient Eastern form being first introduced in Arabia. Many changes took place to the form when it was used by the

aristocracy in Northern India. Similarly, because of its Urdu origins, it amalgamated into various songs and performances in the Malay world. In fact, taking into consideration its Malay form, it seems to have a life of its own, becoming a genre that is hardly recognisable. My intention then, is to use this form to write about the Malaysian experience of a non-Malay, Malaysian woman living in a pre-dominantly Malay country. Being a first-generation Malaysian of Indian/Malayali origin, I believe there is a social and literary space for a hybridised perspective and voice.

The ghazal, being a hybridised literary form, evolved into the current form over a long period of time. I identified with the concept of a hybrid—a mixture of heritage and culture. Malaysians were exposed to this literary form centuries ago, yet it evolved into a different art form than the Urdu ghazal. Another reason is the Islamic connotations attached to the ghazal make it a new and interesting possibility. In this era of suspicion among the religious groups, I find the coexistence of a mixed heritage an appealing solution. Housing my Christian-themed poetics into a predominantly Muslim literary form licenses a new kind of hybridity. It removes the shackles of suspicion and allows for the expression of a renewed form.

Apart from contemporary Malaysian life, many of the ghazals are thematically arranged; some, on the beautiful landscapes I visited in the last decade. For instance, the visit to Yosemite National Park in the United States of America. In that ghazal, I recall the loss felt for the thousands of burning trees in the Yosemite region after the fires of 2013. Some poems on the theme of loss, include for example, on a train journey out to the Swiss alps where I recalled feeling deeply, the loss of my mother; her beauty and the exquisiteness of the alps fusing together in symbolic ways. Similarly, my first visit to my mum's beloved Kerala, in South India, was a journey into the interior recalling the stories she told us about her childhood and her happy but impoverished life in Chelitura, a small municipality of

Trivandrum, Kerala. Furthermore, the loss was compounded by the fact that I failed to locate any resemblances of my mother (a Malayali woman) and the jigsaw of her world (in my mind) in present day Kerala.

Other ghazals are arranged chronologically, narrating my personal life. Growing up north of Kuala Lumpur, I belonged to the Catholic-Christian communities of Sentul, Ipoh Road, and Kepong. As is common in such societies, the Church formed the centre of my childhood until, years later, when I married and moved away. Therefore, many of the ghazals are situated in these localities, recalling the births and deaths, faith and faithlessness, food and gathering of these communities. They tell the stories of First Holy Communion, Confirmation; of faithfulness, of religion, and spirituality. These ghazals tell my personal history from the 1970s until the 1990s.

In Chapter 4, I reflect on my creative process. Chief among the considerations was the conventions prescribed by Shahid Ali. Having to adhere to this standard, the ghazals were worked out according to the *radif* or the refrain. Before writing a ghazal, I thought about the refrain first, after which I would begin to craft the piece according to the rhyme and the refrain. Taking a selection of 100 ghazals with various themes, I explained how much each ghazal reflected the form as set by Shahid Ali. Upon reflection, subtle but moving motifs appeared in the work. Essentially, the loss of something old in a fast-evolving Malaysia. In a sense, making conscious, the unconscious. Additionally, I offered a critical reading of the ghazals. Themes, tone, allusions, setting, and intertextuality were some of the aspects I analysed.

In Chapter 5, a summary of the entire thesis, my contribution to the form and a final conclusion. One of the aims of this thesis is to write English ghazals after the style of Shahid Ali's hybrid ghazals. The portfolio of 100 ghazals attests to this feat. These ghazals are a

hybrid of Shahid Ali's in that there is a manifest use of many languages in these ghazals. Their multi-tonality speaks to the Malaysian condition of melancholia and the joy in the consumption of food. I believe that using the ghazal, a traditionally Sufi-Muslim form, to hold Malaysian themes and ideas is an excellent discovery and opportunity to re-cast this treasure trove of a form to be shared and showcased. My main contributions to the ghazal form are that I have further hybridised the English ghazal, created ghazals that were multi-toned, and used a predominantly Sufi-Muslim construct to house biblical metaphors and allusions. The Malaysian hybrid ghazals I wrote were polyglots because they were not exclusively written in English as when I penned the ghazals, I also used Malay, Tamil, Malayalam, Arabic as well as English. Consequently, to fruitfully decipher the meanings of these ghazals, the reader must understand the nuances of these languages.

### ***Significance of the Thesis***

This thesis investigates the success of the ghazal. The ghazal is a versatile form that can be used to articulate contemporary concerns. It has evolved over the centuries from being used by the higher classes to a form that champions the middle classes.

I believe this thesis will help to illuminate this ancient form. By writing and teaching this form, it is hoped that there might be an awareness of the rich history of this form over the centuries and create interest for writers and poets to rediscover this traditional literary form. This and various social media platforms have helped Malaysians participate in these ventures, thereby increasing the kind of poetry Malaysians engage with. Within this context, I believe the output of a corpus of work such as the ghazals in this creative portfolio has a significant chance of creating a buzz within these circles to ignite some interest in this ancient form for further inquiry and awareness. Secondly, as discussed in the previous section, a hybridised

form that has evolved from a Muslim and Indian culture seems a perfect point to bring form and theme together. Structurally, it is a Muslim form, yet my themes are of a contemporary middle-aged Malaysian woman.

Research into the Urdu/Persian ghazal and its literary history in Malaysia has not been inspiring. Apart from the fact that there remains a literary form practised by small pockets of Malaysians in Johor, in the Malay language, there is no record of the English ghazal as advocated by Shahid Ali. Ghulam Sarwar Yousof explains this confusion in the similarities of the term “ghazal”. He claims to have no knowledge of why it has evolved into two different genres despite possibly having come from the same source—the Arabic ghazal. In Ghulam Sarwar’s interview with the authors Chintaka P. Meddegoda and Gisa Jahnichen for their book *Hindustani Traces in Malay Ghazal*, he attributes this lack of understanding to the lack of scholarship in these art forms. He concludes that it is difficult to conclude how the term “ghazal” came and why it came to Johor. The following excerpt of the interview gives his view to the question, why do they call it “ghazal”? Is there any connection with other ghazals?

I do not know. They assume that, because if we look at the Arabic ghazal, it is not really sung and recited in that same way. It is hard to say how this term ‘ghazal’ came and why it came to Johor. It might have come along with the Arabic literature. There are many people in Johor who are interested in art forms, but they have not really written much. The problem is that not much has been done regarding the research of music (Meddegoda P & Jahnichen, 2016)

As Ghulam Sarwar states many times during his interview, the loopholes are numerous and there are far too many missing links in the literary history of the Urdu ghazal in Malaysia. Sarwar is an authority on traditional theatre of South Asia. He is a Malaysian of Pakistani descent who is a multilingual poet, playwright, and short story writer. As Malaysia



comes into its own, the time is right for ghazals to be explored, explained, and experimented with. Contextually, the country is trying to rebuild itself. Culturally, this merging of literary from is promise for new possibilities. As the country changes to become a better place, so to must our literary landscape.

### ***Limitations of the Thesis***

This thesis only considered Shahid Ali's ruminations on the ghazal form contained in the Introduction to *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*. Although there are poets who worked in this form from many centuries before, the focus of this thesis is his influence on my writing of ghazals. One important reason for this is that he was an excellent, celebrated writer who made significant contribution to the form (in the English-speaking world) to edit the *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English* (Benvenuto, 2002). Shahid Ali loved the form enough to set a standard of what should constitute a ghazal. Although the writing of ghazals continued to flourish in other societies and in other languages, this research only investigates his seminal work.

This thesis is limited to the ghazals written in English. Because ghazals were from a non-English tradition, they continue to be written in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and other languages. The corpus of study of the ghazal in other languages such as Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu is large. Rumi is believed to have "composed 60,000 lines of poetry and authored two massive collections of mystical poetry, the first is *The Collected Poetry of Shams (Divan-e-Shams)* which contained 3,000 poems, which were mainly ghazals" (Harmless & Harmless, 2007, p. 173). Rumi wrote in Persian and naturally, there have been many studies into the ghazal. However, these studies are not available to scholars who only read and write in English and not the Middle Eastern languages such as Arabic, Persian,

Turkish or Urdu. As a result, English scholars are severely disadvantaged in this area of research. One is only able to access a very small portion of research in English compared to materials available in other languages. Fortunately, Rumi is made available to us English readers because of the translation efforts of Coleman Barks, who published *The Essential Rumi*. He was, however, criticised for softening the Quranic echoes and Islamic themes by Persian speakers and other scholars (Harmless & Harmless, 2007). The difficulties scholars face will be accessing good translations of a representative corpus of work. Here, the work is massive, yet the translations are from English speaking poets who base their work on earlier translations.

The lack of knowledge in aspects of Islam and Mystical Islam is a very serious and debilitating issue. Although one can read and study the religion, there are concepts within Mystical Islam (Sufism) that are challenging to understand. Being a Muslim would certainly help, to a point. Sufism is a practice of religion that desires to keep aspects of the practice secret which makes understanding its concepts abstract and difficult to decipher. However, the ghazal's fundamentals were deeply entrenched in this practice of Mystical Islam and therefore it is difficult to clearly define every aspect of the religion. There is an inherent quality of ambiguity in the ghazal that needs to be accepted.

## ***Conclusion***

This chapter sets the foundation for the thesis by contextualising the issues of writing ghazals in English by focusing on the guidelines offered by Shahid Ali in his book *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*. This study is significant in the Malaysian context as it will offer another literary form for poets and writers to work with, given that this cherished form has new and interesting ways of putting forward the experiences of the contemporary

urban Malaysian society. My ghazals are different from those advocated by Shahid Ali in aspects of culture and theme. At the foreground of the ghazals is the Malaysian culture. The hybrid ghazals I wrote were about the Malaysian experience of celebration and the food Malaysians favoured. I alluded to the Catholic-Christian festivities that Malaysian Christians celebrated, and contemplated on the lived experiences of a young woman living in Kuala Lumpur during the 1980s and the 1990s in a relatively Catholic-centered neighbourhood. Although I understand some of the concepts of Islam, I wrote from the perspective of a Malaysian-Malayali-Catholic.

## Chapter 2

### Literature review

#### *Introduction*

This discourse begins with the early history of the Ghazal and a brief debate on who the beloved is. The subsequent sections deal with Rumi and his variety of Sufism, the literary devices he used, his influence, and his love poems. Included here is also a background of how Rumi came to write his diwan after losing his beloved.

Rumi was a prolific poet, his Diwan-e Shams contains more than 3,000 poems, mostly ghazals (Harmless & Harmless, 2007). In the next, the role of Sufism discusses the definition of Sufism, a variety of Islam which was closely connected with the ghazal.

This section is followed by a discussion on the consolidation of the different sects of wool wearers, into one recognisable group called the Sufis. The Sufis used some stock metaphors in their ghazals which is the basis of this section followed by a brief attempt to explain Mysticism. According to *The Encyclopaedia of World Religions*, it is a “spiritual quest for hidden truth or wisdom, the goal of which is union with the or sacred” (p. 768). Rumi was a mystic and at the heart of his mystical practice was the Sufi ritual of *sama* (spiritual concerts), who saw the practice as a calibrated spiritual discipline, a “method of contemplation and mystical prayer, a way of focusing mind and heart and body, on God the Beloved” (Harmless & Harmless, 2007, p. 177).

This argument is then followed by an explanation of the theme of melancholy in the ghazal. As mentioned by the rules set out by Shahid Ali, the ghazal is always melancholic.

Contemporary readers of Islamic poetry are now familiar with Rumi because of the ghazals that were translated by English translators. It goes without saying that Rumi had a huge influence on the ghazal.

The section then leads the reader into the history of the ghazal in America, an important development in this thesis. Shahid Ali was particularly concerned with the appropriation of the ghazal form in the hands of American poets. This study reviews Adrienne Rich's ghazals and how dissimilar they are from the ghazals of Ghalib, followed by a discussion on Rich's, *The Blue Ghazals*.

The ensuing section deals with the Indo-Muslim type of Sufism, as the discourse moves toward South Asia. This pathway is important to illuminate how this affects the ghazal form, how the language of the ghazal changes from Persian to Urdu, and the metamorphosis from the Persian ghazal into the Urdu Ghazal of today.

The penultimate sections refer to Shahid Ali's contribution to the ghazal form in America. He was a translator of Urdu ghazal into English, translating the poetry of Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Further he also wrote English ghazals, which were posthumously published by his siblings. In the final section, a discussion on his contribution to the strict Ghazal, which is an anthology of ghazals edited by Shahid Ali titled '*Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*'.

In the concluding section is a discussion on scholars who argue that Shahid Ali's ghazals were not original, but hybrid ghazals. I agree with this line of reasoning that his ghazals are hybrid ghazals. My hybrid ghazals followed some of the rules set out by Shahid Ali. It could begin with my shared position of a hybrid. He was a Kashmiri-American poet, and I shared a hybrid position as a Malaysian-Malayali-Catholic. I found the hybrid ghazal's

Indian-Urdu ghazal as a connective strain that connected my ancestral roots to India, my mother's homeland. Furthermore, its Islamic strains were part of my interest in the ghazal form, as Malaysia is a Muslim-majority nation. Consequently, being born and bred in this country, I found that Islam was part of my creative imagination. In the landscape of my imagination was the consciousness that I belonged to Malaysia, (a country with a heritage of multi religions and diverse culture) while my ghazals were the construct of a non-Muslim Malaysian. In this regard, my ghazals had Christian-Catholic themes of piety and prayers. Shahid Ali regularly alluded to the Karbala as metaphor in his poetry to point to a Muslim trope in his work. We were similar in that religion was an important part of our creative imagination. Under the section, My Ghazals, I deliberate on how I have used the ghazal form as advocated by Shahid Ali, and elucidate on the composition of my ghazal titled, "Yellow". Using the poem by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "'The Yellow Wallpaper'" I offer a discussion on how I make a necessary deviation from Shahid Ali's rules and produce my own context to lay the foundation of my ghazal. My attempt is to ride on the agency provided by Rich. I did not go back to the basics of writing a ghazal, which I found I could not, as I did not come from the same religious background of the ghazal writers. Instead, I circumvented the lack of Islamic culture with a feminist text and used it as the context or backstory of my ghazal. My elucidation was to show how my ghazals are a hybrid—of Shahid Ali's hybrid ghazal.

### ***The Early History of Ghazal***

The ghazal is a lyric poem from Arabia, thematically centred on love, developed into a fixed form in Persian, Turkish, Urdu, and other Islamite literatures. The "Arabic root ghz-l semantically encompasses the gazelle, the act of spinning/weaving and eventually, amorous talk with a woman". In the Umayyad period (660-750), it developed into a fixed form love

poem, suited to singing. It continued to evolve and became the form to express unrequited love or unattainable love, which eventually became synonymous with verse that left the beloved unnamed (Green, et al., 2012, p. 570). The homoerotic environment and the anonymous beloved characterised the later ghazal traditions, especially in Persian, Turkish, and Urdu, which enabled Neoplatonic and mystical symbolism to penetrate the ghazal during the 10th and 11th centuries, particularly in Sufi circles. Persian poetry was cross pollinated by various influences but chiefly by Arabic images, motifs, and prosodic structures.

There are several theories about the origin of the ghazal. According to *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* there are various possibilities about the origin of the ghazal. One theory is that it originated in the erotic nasib of the qasida and developed into a technical form. According to this theory, the growing influence of Sufism on Persian poetry and the decline of the courtly panegyric, were some cultural changes that directly influenced the form of the ghazal. According to this concept, many of those who wrote ghazals were not Sufis and the ghazal was practised in the courtly circles as well. Yet another notion is that the Persian ghazal originated in pre-Islamic popular indigenous lyric. However, most scholars agree that the ghazal is characterised by the theme of love (Eve, et al., 2020). The fact remains that a traditional form such as the ghazal with centuries long literary history must have “flows and counter-flows of literary and cultural exchanges across languages” (Zaidi, 2015). Zaidi believes that the ghazal ought to be seen as a form that received an amalgamation of influences and that attempts to claim it by “territorially defined, identity-centric, essentialist political discourses” would seem illegitimate as the form traces its origins to Pre-Islamic Qasidah (Zaidi, 2015, p. 170)

There are many uncertainties in this culture and tradition of writing the ghazals. Evidently, scholars disagree on certain aspects of the ghazal particularly on the aspect of the

origin of the ghazal. Chief among this uncertainty is the nature of the beloved. There are certain stock characters in the Persian ghazal and the beloved is a highly disputed stock character. Most literature attest to the idea that those who participated in the writing of the ghazal were only men, some believe them to be Sufis (male) whilst others believe the practitioners were individuals close to the courts who were mainly male. It may therefore be concluded, if the writers of the ghazals were male and if their beloved was indeed a young man, then the erotic language that was used in the poetry was an indication of the evident homoerotic love practised by the poets towards the “young man or teenager, a soldier, a page.” In the following quote, the beloved can be assumed to be a young boy and from such assumptions the notion that the individuals were involved in homosexual relationships as women did not participate in the same social space as the men.

The beloved is usually depicted as a young man or teenager, a soldier, a page, a cupbearer ... His beautiful luminous and round face is framed by long curly black hair: the sweetness of his lips and teeth is opposed to the cruelty of his narrow black eyes... His white face is enhanced by rosy cheeks, a dark mole and green down... the beloved is an abstract figure, deprived of name and individuality, a universal manifestation of an ideal beauty. (Eve, et al., 2020)

Throughout the centuries, there has been differing views as to who the beloved of the ghazals is. It makes sense to have an inclusive definition such as that provided by an imminent Urdu scholar, Ralph Russel, who takes a broad view on who the beloved might be. In his journal article *The Pursuit of the Urdu Ghazal* he surmises that:

She is the betrothed or the wife of another man... where the sexes are strictly segregated, love found one outlet in homosexuality, and one of the ‘beloveds’ of the Urdu ghazal is a beautiful male youth... the courtesan-the woman who learned



all the skills of love-making as a professional accomplishment. (Russel, 1969, p. 117)

By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Persian ghazal had assumed a fixed form defined as a mono rhyme poem (aa, ba, ca, etc) or five to 14 lines including a line mentioning the poet's pen name (takhalus), which worked as a "seal of authorship" for ghazals sold to musicians as lyric texts, to be performed in the poet's absence. Besides, it also acted as a closure for the poet to exit the mood of reverie, comment on the theme, or possibly to dedicate the poem to a patron (Green, et al., 2012, p. 571).

The ghazal spread to many associative literatures in Central and South Asia including Anatolian in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and Chaghatay in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Persian poets of the Indian style provided the model but increasingly took on a modernist cast in the ghazals written by Mirza Ghalib and Muhammad Iqbal (Green, et al., 2012) who remained most popular despite the popular writings of Persian poets such as Sayyid Muhammad Husayn, Shahryar, and Simin Bitibahari. The ghazal took a pre-eminent place in Persian poetry as a result of the growth of Sufism, a form devoted to the expression of the spiritual longing to be connected with the Divine, and this is the type of ghazal that arrived in India. Amir Khusu (1253-1325) was among the first Indian poets who wrote such ghazals in both Persian and Hindi. These poets who wrote in Persian developed their own genre known as Sabki-Hindi, which were less like the poems of the West and fragmented in terms of theme and mood. Characteristically, this genre is marked by "excessive use of metaphor,...achieved by ambiguity, obliqueness, metaphoricity, wordplay, verbal congruity and so on" (Zaidi, 2015, p. 171). Mirza Ghalib was a powerfully eloquent, erudite poet who captured life's experiences in his ghazals. Today his name is synonymous with Urdu poetry which has transcended borders and languages and found its way to America. Interest in the Persian ghazal grew

because of translations of poets such as Hafiz into German. Some of the pioneer German translators and poets were Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, Friedrich Ruckert, and August von Platen (Sahapedia, 2017).

By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Federico Garcia Lorca, the Spanish poet had already popularised ghazals (or “*gacelas*” as he called them) in Spanish through his collection, *Diwan del Tamarit* (1940) as result of his Moorish heritage and background. However, the form finally caught the attention of American poets and entered the framework of American poetry through Ghalib (Sahapedia, 2019).

This section attempts to give a brief overview of how the ghazal was established in Jammu and Kashmir (Sahapedia, 2017). With this connection made clear, one understands why and how the ghazals became closely associated with Shahid Ali. Annamarie Schimmel in her *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* explained the influence of Rumi in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent where his poetry has been popular since the early 14th century. The Chishti saints of Delhi were believed to have studied Rumi’s *Mathnawi*. Interestingly, the saints allowed mystical dance, the consequence of which made Shams-I Tabriz a legend. This love poetry had a great impact both on Persian and later Urdu literature in South Asia. The Persian ghazal was a type of Arabic ode and it was a “refined” form that invented ways of speaking to an absent beloved in a romantic and mystical register. The same form was the favourite genre of love poetry in Persian and later developed into the Urdu ghazal found in Jammu and Kashmir. However, this is not to say that the ghazal form was readily accepted without censure, as the early Muslim community rejected these Sufi poets, believing them to be spokespersons for pagan gods and ancient rites. However, this denunciation of poetry relaxed once the religion was established firmly and the ghazal form flourished. The Chishti Sufis were instrumental in forging Urdu into a literary language. Shi’i poets wrote lamentations about

love for and martyrdom of the imams which added to the growing literary status of the Deccan dialect of Urdu. In the Deccan, authors innovated by using Persian script to write Deccani vernacular language, which mixed local languages with Persian, Turkish, and Arabic expressions (Schimmel, 1975).

The aim in presenting the Literature Review is to provide the context for the claim made by Agha Shahid Ali, who while in America turned politically correct and who was “forced” to take back the gift outright.

In contemplating what the “gift” is and why Shahid Ali needed to do this, it is necessary to provide the issues surrounding the gift—which I believe is the ghazal.

### ***The Role of Sufism in the Ghazal***

Shahid Ali does not overtly state his religious affinities, but he does make a reference to his Muslim background. This section is crucial in the understanding of the connection between the Sufis and the ghazal. The ghazal, being an ancient poetic form, was taken from Arabia travelled from there to Persia, India, the Malay Archipelago and to other parts of the Western world, including America. It was largely the construct of Muslim mystics whose mainstay was poetry. Consequently, concepts such as ‘the beloved’ and divinity transferred to this genre.

An understanding of the history of Sufism and its principals are imperative to the genre because the ghazals were mainly written to express the love of Sufis towards God. During the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the ghazal took a pre-eminent place in Persian poetry, because of the advance of Sufism. The ghazal became a form dedicated to the expression of the mystical longing to be connected with the Divine (Zaidi, 2015). Understanding Sufism is necessary and

connected to understanding the ghazal, as much of what was experienced as a mystic was relayed via the ghazals. The main theme of the ghazal was to show God the immense love the writer had for the Almighty.

A working definition of Sufism is problematic to identify. I have found them to be confusing in most instances or misleading at best. Sufi masters have presented several and seemingly wide-ranging definitions of Sufism and the Sufi. These differences, however, arose only from the fact that each master was speaking from his own spiritual station and level of understanding of his listeners. Thus, each definition uncovers a different aspect of Sufism, each correct in its proper context, and to grasp Sufism as a whole, one must consider as wide a range of definitions as possible (Bilqies, 2014).

Annemarie Schimmel in her book *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* explains the mystery surrounding the concept of Sufism. Sufism is generally the accepted name for Islamic mysticism and that part of the answer is with the word mysticism itself. According to Schimmel, mysticism means that which contains “something mysterious” and “not to be reached by ordinary means or by intellectual effort” (Schimmel, 1975, p. 3). She further explains that such definitions merely point the way to the seeker but only the wisdom of the heart—gnosis—may give clarity into some of its aspects. Once the seeker is on the path to this last reality, he will be led by an inner light. The light becomes brighter as he frees himself from the attachments of the world, that the Sufis refer to as “polishes the mirror of his heart.” There remains a long process of purification, via purgative, then via illuminative, and the *ultimum unio mystic*. On reaching the *visio beatifica*, the spirit sees what is beyond all visions—the primordial light of God, the veil that covers the essential identity of God and His creatures (Schimmel, 1975).

William Harmless in his book *Mystics* explores this mystical tradition of Islam by

focusing on the Sufi mystic Mowlana Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207-1273). Rumi was a Sufi and founded one of Islam's major Sufi orders popularly known as the whirling dervishes, or the *Mevlevi*. Rumi is one of the greatest icons in the literary Persian canon, better known by his epithet Maulana. He left a treasure of poems and didactic works that had a vast effect on the development of the mystical Sufi traditions throughout the Islamic world. His last and most accomplished work is *Mathnawi*, which has been a classic textbook for generations of Sufi mystics. Indeed, the *Mathnawi* still exerts an immense influence, both in its homeland and in the entire Turkish-Persian-speaking world and far beyond. Compiled between 1262 and 1273, it consists of six volumes, each of which contains about 4000 verses, with a separate introduction, foreword, loosely connected stories illustrating man's lower instincts, a specific Sufi doctrine, folk tale, or explain a story of the Koran (Zahmatkesh & Cheung, 2012).

There are differing views of who the beloved is to various scholars. The aim of this study is not to validate which is the truth, even if there is somewhat of a truth to be found. Suffice to say that there are various understandings of what the beloved came to stand for. Harmless is of the opinion that *love of God* is Rumi's core theme. He further states that for Rumi, God deserves our whole heart:

Rumi's poetry examines this love from every imaginable angle, in every imaginable mood. He is by turns ecstatic and depressed, panting with desire, and anguished by absence, playful and tender, serious, and stern, reserved and bawdy. (Harmless & Harmless, 2007, p. 174)

Harmless strongly suggests that Rumi's beloved is God. However, there are other interpretations of the beloved. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* describes the Beloved as follows:

The beloved is usually depicted as a young man or teenager, a soldier, a page, a cupbearer, or a boon companion. His beautiful luminous and round face is

framed by long curly black hair: the sweetness of his lips and teeth is opposed to the cruelty of his narrow black eyes, curved eyebrows, and long lashes... He, the beloved is an abstract figure, deprived of name and individuality, a universal manifestation of an ideal beauty. (Eve, et al., 2020)

One must accept that the term Sufism means many different things to different sets of people. Throughout the research, it seems impossible to keep to one definition as indeed it has proven to be a concept that was an ever-evolving set of values and practices. For the purposes of this section on American Sufism, I shall rely on Jacob Needleman's definition which is as follows:

Sufism is indeed a system of ideas rooted in the great perennial vision of man and reality that lies at the heart of all the world's spiritual traditions, but the contemporary, albeit modest, awakening interest in Sufism is directed mainly to its status as a practice leading to a higher state of Being. In short, Sufism is a way. What is meant by that term is a guided inner struggle, in which a man or woman strives to emerge from a state of egoism, submitting to a supreme goodness that is both idea and energy. (Aminrazavi & Jacob, 2014, p. xii)

### ***Influence of Sufist Imagery on the Ghazal***

At this point it is necessary to make the connections between Sufism and the ghazal. The fact is that many of these poets were Sufis and upheld the principles of Sufism and thereby infused their literature with mystical thought. Furthermore, poetry provided limitless possibilities for creating new relations between "worldly and otherworldly images," between religious and profane ideas. All the greatest masters of Persian, Turkish, and Urdu poetry reflect in some way on the religious background of Islamic culture (Schimmel, 1975, p. 288).

Another interesting point is that the meanings that can be found in the poems are never one dimensional, denoting that there is always a sense of fluidity in what they may mean. Take for example the beloved. As was discussed earlier, there are many versions to what the beloved refers to. The Sufi used the ghazal to show their outpouring love for the beloved. However, the beloved had an inherent quality of ambiguity in its concept, as it could be male or a female, human or divine . Furthermore, the ghazal is primarily about love,. The ghazal was a tool used by the Sufis to show their desperation for the beloved and the ghazal was greatly influenced by the Sufi beliefs and practice.

Kashani explains that the most important feature of the ghazal is its ambiguity which stems from the following factors. It was initially a love lyric that was practised in the courts to praise the king and the courtesans. In the two-century time gap between the Ghaznavid and Timurid dynasties, the Seljuqid (1040-1157) came into power, but their court did not revere artists and poets. Later, the invasion of the Mongols and the defeat of the Iranians and eventually the Mongol rule (1221-1256) led the poets to turn away from the courts and address normal people in their ghazals, which prepared the ground for the dissemination of Sufism (Islamic Mysticism) in the 13th century among poets and artists. The Sufis who perceived the world as an expression of the Divine, used a symbolic language to keep their esoteric doctrines and spiritual discoveries secret. They used symbols to refer to spiritual teachings and to express the love that could not be expressed explicitly.

Reading these symbols at face value has caused much confusion and misunderstanding among the undiscerning. Translations cannot truly interpret for the reader the context and the glistering symbolism that lies behind each word or couplet. Sufism had much to contribute to Persian lyrics and was the background upon which the poetry developed. Schimmel considers this phenomenon of the mystical love that underlies the

development of the imagery of the rose and nightingale as one of the most fascinating aspects of Sufism as an “absolute object is made the goal of every thought and feeling so that love gains absolute primacy in the soul and mind of the lover.” This intensity develops into an art of its own which she believes form the context of some of the first books on love ever written in the Persian language. Interestingly, at times, such a love would find its object in a human being in which the completeness of beauty and radiant glory seemed to be reflected, and out of this construct, the hybrid Persian mystical erotic poetry developed (Schimmel, 1975, p. 289).

In the following paragraphs I look at the emergence of Sufism, the major tradition in Islam which developed from within the renunciatory modes of piety from the last decades of the second to the fourth centuries. From the mid-third century, the Sufis of Baghdad become prominent members of a distinct mode of mystical piety. The same happened in other parts of the world, such as in Iraq, Iran, and Central Asia. These groups were not known as Sufis and they differed from the Baghdad Sufis. However different they were from each other, these schools gradually blended with the Baghdad mystics and eventually came to be identified as Sufis (Karamustafa, 2007).

Renunciants (people who renounce worldly things because of spirituality) and pietists were made up of all kinds. Some had an aversion to mainstream social life, and voluntarily adapted a life of simplicity. Yet others who cultivated the Qur'an and Hadith studies spent their time at special retreats. Essentially, these people moved to the margins of society. Others who identified as wool wearers were social activists connected with commanding right and forbidding wrong. In some cases, these renunciants were known to have given up scholarship and turned their attention to the cultivation of their inner life which manifested itself into new discoveries on spiritual states, intense stages of spiritual awareness, affinity to God, and love



with a distinct emphasis on the knowledge of the interior. These they attempted by close examination and training of the human soul. They explored the psychological aspects of spirituality such as repentance and turning towards God and placing absolute trust in God though the observance of the commands. This “look within the self” was concomitant by similar efforts to discern the inner meaning of the Qur’an and the Sunna (Karamustafa, 2007, p. 2).

As mentioned earlier, these trends of inner knowledge and selection were cultivated in other places, but they did not yet form a coherent and unified whole. In the second half of that century, Baghdad had emerged as the cultural capital and formed a distinct type of piety, one of the most durable pietistic approaches in Islam. For unknown reasons, the members of this Baghdad-centred movement came to be known as Sufis and the new movement itself was given the name *Sufiyya*. They developed views about the love of God and citing the love of God they deepened this connection by playing music and reciting and listening to love poems. For Sufiyya, God was the beloved and listening to these poems often put them in a state of “ecstasy...brought about in particular by the exercise of dhikr Allah (recollection of God)” (Bowering, 2012, p. 528).

In summary, the ghazal’s imagery ranges over three main themes of erotic and love poetry, the description and adoration of nature, and the division of mystical and spiritual concepts. The world of the ghazal bears a resemblance to an image depicted with rich colourful imageries. It illustrates gardens, roses, nightingales, and expresses an uninhibited sensual love, religious freedom if not outright heresy (Kashani, 2014).

### ***Mysticism***

It is important to define some concepts for the better understanding of this section.

Mysticism is the belief that union with the Deity may be attained through contemplation and self-surrender. According to *The Encyclopaedia of World Religions*, Mysticism in general is a spiritual quest for hidden truth, the goal of which is union with the Divine or sacred—forms of which are found in all major religions. There are four stages one goes through to reach the Divine which begins with purgation of bodily desires, purification of the will, illumination of the mind, and unification of one's will with the Divine. However, an interesting point is that the relationship with the religion of faith to mysticism is ambiguous as it is a mixture of respect and misgivings. For the purposes of this study, I will use the following definition which records the Sufi mysticism:

Another type of mysticism is that defined by love and devotion. A theistic attitude, or devotional mysticism, depends upon mutual attraction. In the words of a Sufi poet, "I sought Him for thirty years, I thought that it was I who desired Him, but no, it was He who desired me." The path of devotion includes the rituals of prayer, worship, and adoration, which-if done with sincerity, inwardness and understanding- can bring some of the most rewarding treasures of the religious life, including ecstasy. (2006, p. 768)

An ascetic is an individual who lives their life by severe self-discipline and abstention from all forms of indulgences, typically for religious reasons.

Rumi was a profound mystic and a very gifted poet, perfectly comfortable with the intricate and subtle traditions of Persian and Arabic poetry, both secular and religious. He also wrote quite deliberately under a mask. Shams was his pen name. Rumi consciously resorted to the Sufi distinction between the states of separation and union. In Rumi's poems, however one judges the underlying mystical experiences, and were not mere words to read. They were presented to Sufi disciples who had gathered around him and lost themselves in

the whirling dance of the Sama. Rumi as sheikh sought to lead them into the indescribable silence of God (Harmless & Harmless, 2007)

### ***Rumi's Ghazal***

In looking at Rumi's work, my concentration is on his ghazals. Many believe that the love poems show his devotion to Shams-e Tabrizi, also called Shams al Din (Rumi, 2016). The reason why I am interested to discuss Rumi is because the major theme in his poetry is the love for the beloved. Every ghazal has, at its centre, the yearning for the beloved which was present and strong in his entire corpus.

In the following paragraphs I investigate the life of one influential Sufi who greatly influenced Sufi literature. His Diwan was of the most exquisite kind and how his meeting with a single man inspired almost 4,000 over love poems and other works. The aim of including Rumi here is to see the connectiveness of the beliefs of the Sufi in absolute belief and love of God and how that came to be the core of Rumi's work. The ghazal rose to a dominant position in literature during the seventh or 13<sup>th</sup> century with Said (d.691/1292), the great Sufi poet Jalal al-Din Rumi (d.671/1273), and Iraqi (d.688/1289) (Eve, et al., 2020).

November 29, 1244 was a turning point and a historical moment as it was the date Rumi is believed to have met the controversial Shams-e Tabrizi. Legend has it that it was love at first sight and the two men "found in one another the object of their spiritual quests: Shams, a mystic Sufi and a wandering scholar became Rumi's partner, companion, spiritual guide and teacher" (Rumi, 2016, p. 10). Shams who has been searching for the ideal student to teach the art of mystical love found Rumi to be his ideal student. Rumi soon abandoned all his duties at the mosque and the teaching groups to spend all his time with Shams which undoubtedly was a source of alarm and resentment among Rumi's students. They feared this

relationship and Rumi's new Sufi practices of music and dance would sully his reputation. Consequently, they openly expressed their hostility towards Shams. Incidentally, Shams left the city one day to Rumi's shock and utter grief. When he found out that Shams was in Syria, he sent his son Sultan Walad to find him and bring him back and on Shams's return, Rumi arranged Shams's marriage to a woman from his own household which allowed both the men to continue their sessions and companionship. However, the town's hostility continued. After the death of his wife, Shams disappeared and was never heard from again. Rumi poured his devastation, grief, and inconsolable bereavement into his poetry. He had many other companions, however in his mind they were never meant to replace his beloved Shams-e Tabrizi but were merely an extension of that love. Through Husam al-Din's perseverance, Rumi allowed him to write down his poems, sermons, and talks. Husam al-Din was Rumi's disciple and successor. These were collected in a volume called *Diwan-e-Shams e Tabrizi*, meaning the collected poems of (or for, or by) Shams-e Tabrizi. In 1996, Coleman Barks compiled Rumi's lyrics, publishing them as *The Essential Rumi*, which sold 100,000 copies, turning Rumi, a 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian, into America's best-selling poet of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rumi's ghazals were in the American limelight (Harmless & Harmless, 2007).

The diwan is written mainly in Persian but some are completely in Arabic with the final line in Persian. Many poems have several lines in Arabic, with Persian verses preceding and following them. Arabic is used in Rumi's other works as well. His epic manuscript, *Masnawi* includes numerous single lines and longer passages that are initially in Arabic. But more importantly, "in all his poetry Rumi invokes his own all-consuming, burning and tragic love for Shams-e Tabrizi – his teacher, friend, mystic guide, and lost beloved" and so his poetry is replete with sexual metaphors and passion which they believe are "metaphors for spiritual longing, in other words longing for the lost beloved, although his use of images and

expressions are not usually tolerated well by his Persian readers. However, because he had written in both Arabic and Persian these expressions and images fit well within the Arabic tradition as they are accustomed to explicit erotic imagery and languages” (Rumi, 2016, p. 14).

The poetry that the Sufis penned were closely connected to their religion and God. Therefore, the literary devices that were found in the literature of this sort is highly developed, complex, and sophisticated. They embody a sense of melancholy prevalent in their diwans in the tone of the words and language that they use and most often the loss of the beloved and the yearning for the beloved is what contributes to this melancholy. Another feature of Mystical poetry is the sense of mystery about the work. Combined with this is the characteristic ambiguity of such poetry. Together, these make for the most exquisite verse. Water G. Andrews in his introductory essay in *Ottoman Lyric Poetry* is of the opinion that the poetry made its way to the Moghul courts of India and flourished in Urdu culture and that these were very “highly developed, complex and sophisticated...using lexical tools capable of fashioning the most perplexing ambiguities and the most mind-boggling hyperbole” (Andrews, Black, & Kalpakli, 2006, p. 7). One major haziness is who the beloved truly is. On the one hand, the possible love for the ruler or sultan and on the other, the use of symbols of human passion, to express love for God. Ambiguity is a deliberate tool of the Sufis. Islamic mysticism is part and parcel of this literary form—the Sufis belief system translated into Sufi literature (Zahmatkesh & Cheung, 2012).

Rumi’s poems of the 13<sup>th</sup> century have shaped Muslim culture for centuries and they still stand after 800 years as relevant and vital. They convince us of “the central role of love, not only in Islamic texts and traditions, but in the consciousness of the human race”. In mystical poetry he found a vehicle for the “expression of the endless spiritual bounties of love” which clearly became the center of his faith and practice and “his connection with the

Divine.” For Rumi, love was “the goal of his life and only form of true worship” (Rumi, 2016, p. 8) In the opinion of many scholars, the *Mathnawi* by Rumi is not only the greatest work of mystical thought but of Islamic literature as a whole. In his ghazals, the images of love and eroticism and those of nature combine with Sufi terms and traditions to form a mediating screen between earthly and divine love. The prevailing theme in his verses is the look of desire and madness for the unification with the ideal and heavenly beloved (Kashani, 2014, p. 59).

In the following ghazal, Rumi explores the symbolic resonances of Sufi ritual of Sama

The wheel of heaven, with all its pomp and splendor,

Circles around God like a mill, O my soul,

circumambulate around such a Ka’aba;

beggar, circle about such a table.

Travel like a ball around His polo-field,...happy and helpless.

Your knight and rook are circumambulating about the king,

Even though you move from place to place on this

Chessboard...Whoever circumambulates about the heart

Becomes the soul of the world, heart-ravishing.

The heart-forlorn becomes companion to the moth,

he circles about the tip of the candle,  
 The mystic's soul circles bout annihilation,  
  
 Even as iron about a magnet  
 Because annihilation is true existence in his sight

In this ghazal, the coming together of the Sufi imagery and the practice of the Sufi path is obvious. There is a myriad of metaphors within this ghazal. The millstones and the Ka'aba; the games of polo and chess and magnets and moths. The hardship of the Sufi spiritual path is symbolised by the millstone, whilst the polo ball denotes "joy of sport" and helplessness of being tossed by God (Harmless & Harmless, 2007, p. 178). The Muslim ritual performed by pilgrims to Mecca is thus evoked in this ghazal in the line "O my soul, circumambulate around such a Ka'aba;/beggar, circle about such a table" offering a small example of Rumi's Muslim heritage. More importantly, one sees how the ghazal was Rumi's mouthpiece for his mystical experience, when we locate the Sufi state of "annihilation" (fana) in the lines:

The heart-forlorn becomes companion to the moth,  
 he circles about the tip of the candle,  
 The mystic's soul circles about annihilation,

Love of God is Rumi's central theme—the gravitational centre around which all his poetry revolves. "For Rumi, God and God alone deserves our whole heart. Since God alone is Real, everything we love is a veil under which God at once hides and reveals himself" (Harmless & Harmless, 2007, p. 174).

### *History of the Ghazal in America*

The ghazal entered American poetry in 1969, as a mark of the centennial anniversary of the death of Mirza Ghalib, a Persian/Urdu poet—the forms master (Caplan, 2008). Aijaz Ahmad, who was living in New York, solicited a band of famous American poets to work on a pamphlet of translations. He offered them literal translation from which they crafted their collaborative versions. Thus, a handsome 174-page book titled *Ghazals of Ghalib* was published by Columbia University Press. These translations also found their way into major American literary periodicals. This is not to imply that the ghazals were the only Asian export to America. At this point in time, Asian-American poetry was already finding a place in American Literature. Asians migrated to the United States and established a rich literary culture, therefore writings in English by poets of Asian descent began to appear as early as in the 1890s (Greene et al., 2012). In Chapter One, it is explained that Sufi poetry was available to the European audience as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when Oriental poems were translated, such as when Sa'di's *Gulistan* was available in Latin as early as 1589. From then on, the interest in Persian and Sufi poetry steadily increased. Sufi poetry entered Western literary circles as versified adaptations. "Sa'di's *Gulistan*, Hafiz's *Divan*, Omar Khayyam's *Ruba'iyyat*, as well as Firdawsi's monumental work of Persian epic, *Shah Nameh*, were all available in English" (Aminrazavi & Jacob, 2014, p. 1). By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Sufi poets such as Rumi had become almost a household name and by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ghazal form resonated with the 19<sup>th</sup> century audience. They found a connectiveness with the themes inherent in these ghazals such as with the themes of nature, love, and the mysteries of life. It is believed that Sufi poetry was more significant to Romantic and Transcendental poetry than just as a means of providing a store house of Oriental poetry.



### ***Ghazal in the Hands of Americans in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century***

In America, Chinese and Japanese minority poets led the way in writing Asian poetry before the South Asians. The influence by the South Asian migrants would take a little while longer, catching the attention of the American poets through the efforts of Aijaz Ahmad, a Pakistani critic residing in New York. On Ghalib's centennial death anniversary in 1969, *Ghazals of Ghalib* was published. Aijaz Ahmad's aim was to introduce the Americans to a completely foreign aesthetic, to allow a communication of sorts. He handed out literal translations and notes to established American translators and poets such as Adrienne Rich, WS Merwin, David Ray, Mark Strand, and William Hunt (Caplan, 2008). Ahmad's aim was to introduce Ghalib to America, in that, the poetics of the poet was more important than the form. Taking as an example Eliot Weinberger's project *Nineteen ways of Looking at Wang Wei* (1987), for which 19 translators were commissioned to translate the same poem, Ahmad hoped for more than the form to capture the imagination of the collaborators. Consequently, the contact of a foreign art, sparked interest in the form and was the impetus for several ghazals being inspired by this translation. However, many scholars and poets from South Asia were appalled by the wanton use of the form, almost showing no respect to the genre but by claiming the poems to be ghazals. Since 2000, American poetry witnessed a vibrant ghazal scene "largely informed by a 1969 experiment in New York" (Sahapedia, 2017). When American poets used the ghazal form, many of them could only use or copy the structure of the poem, in that it must have five couplets, that it must have a refrain, and that the first couplet will have the refrain. Shahid Ali explained that these were superficial and that the ghazal form had much more than this structure to its benefit. He claimed the ghazal form and wanted the culture and language of Urdu to be incorporated into the English ghazals:

Perhaps one way to welcome the shackles of the form and be in emotional tune

with them is to remember one definition of the word ghazal: it is the cry of the gazelle when it is cornered in a hunt and knows it will die...atmosphere of sadness and grief that pervades the ghazal...dedication to love and the beloved...atmospheric and emotional cohesion and refinement of diction hold the poem together, permitting at the same time terseness, intensity and depth of feeling, uniqueness of imagery, nobility of language and a high conception of love...for the outstanding mood of the ghazal in Urdu and Persian has remained melancholic and amorous. (Ali A. S., 2000, pp. 3-4)

However as mentioned by Nishat Zaidi, in her article “Centre/Margin Dialectics and the Poetic Form: The Ghazals of Agha Shahid Ali”, there were many issues involved with the production of ghazals in English, particularly with the “level of lexicon, syntax, semantics and the cultural context.” According to Zaidi, since the ghazal form strives for maximum precision, their elaboration comes to depend on vocabulary taken from the lexicon of language which is pregnant with cultural context and does not need any elaboration. Thus Urdu words such as *saqi* (tavern keeper), *sharab* (wine), *mai* (wine), *maikhana* (wine-cellar), *paimana* (cask), etc come from the same semantic domain. (Zaidi, 2008, p. 59). As has been discussed previously, Urdu language brings along with it many traditional and cultural meanings. Take for example the cupbearer or *saqi* in Persian/Urdu poetry was “the object of amorous desires of the friends” (Eve, et al., 2020). This situation is made more problematic, as unlike English poetry where readers expect to be able to read between the lines for which the poems must make available the metaphors and symbolism within the poem, the ghazals were meant to be ambiguous. It bears remembering that the ghazal carries with it centuries of loaded meaning, and the influences on the ghazal form adds to this complexity. The metaphors took on added meaning when the Mystical Sufi poets used the ghazal to show their

devotion to God. The Sufi passage of rite rituals such as fana (ecstasy) and sama (audition) became part of the ghazal's literary heritage. These metaphors of the "moth" and "the candle" were also deeply entrenched in the Sufi practice of travelling towards the divine. In short, English readers of the ghazal need to understand the tradition of these metaphors including an understanding of Islam as well as the practice of Sufism to successfully unpack the symbolism within such ghazals. The Urdu words such as saqi, sharab, wai, maikhana, paimana 'come from the same semantic domain but given the value of their occurrence they can be used symbolically in multiple contexts to invoke multiple meanings such as divine blessing, beloved's favors, preacher, metaphysical experience, and so on. The lack of such a tradition of diction in English handicaps the poets as he cannot depend on the reader's participation in his metaphorical usages (Zaidi, 2008, p. 59)

I agree with Zaidi when she surmises that poets writing ghazals in English will not have the necessary ammunition in terms of language in English to translate the culturally specific metaphors to "keep the spirit" in which Shahid Ali wanted the ghazals to be written in. He had written in his introduction to *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*:

‘ those claiming to write ghazals in English (usually American poets) had got it quite wrong, far from the letter and farther from the spirit. Of course, I was exercising a Muslim snobbery of the Shiite élan’ (Agha Shahid Ali, 2000, p. 1)

Shahid Ali's explanation is confusing when he attempts to explain how the American poets have understood the form erroneously. The paragraph has more questions than answers, however for me, his attesting to Muslim Shiite élan is more telling. The "spirit" that he talks about has to do with his Muslim Shiite heritage. Shahid Ali was bilingual, he had at his disposal both Urdu and English diction to frame his ghazals in. More than this, he was a Muslim and of Sufi heritage. All these factors I believe contributed to his understanding of what the

“spirit” of the ghazal was. Although he points to the American poets’ inability to write within the form, I conclude that the form is irreversibly connected to a deep understanding of the language, culture, religion of Islam and the practice of Sufism.

In writing my ghazals, I tried hard to keep to the spirit of what Shahid Ali required. Although I do not understand Urdu but other Indian languages such as Malayalam and Tamil, I know that translating from one language to another language deals with much more than just the language. In this case, the culture, religion, and the form’s literary history have come to bear in the form.

Ambiguity lies at the heart of my creative process. My own strategy of keeping the “spirit” in writing the ghazals, is to write melancholic ghazals, to keep with the cry of the gazelle. However, my ghazals were mostly of the confessional kind and therefore, although they recounted lost opportunities, many were written about mundane everyday matters. Living in a Muslim majority country like Malaysia also allowed a sense of familiarity with some of the concepts of Islam. Admittingly, I did not encroach into the area of religion (Islam) per se but used some mystical metaphors in my English ghazals. I do believe that ambiguity is an important part of mystical poetry and I have tried to incorporate this element into my work. This works well with my South East Asian sensibility that much can be left unsaid or left in an unexplained state, and that what is in a ghazal might seem to be signifying one thing, with the possibility that it also might mean something else. I do believe that this concept of not knowing everything or simply accepting some concepts as unexplainable was a necessary compromise in writing a ghazal.

### ***Adrienne Rich’s Ghazals***

Shahid Ali was very specific in his criticism of Adrienne Rich in his *introduction* to

*Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English: Real Ghazals in English*. Firstly, he partly blames Aijaz Ahmad for not “quite explaining Ghalib to those who collaborated with him in translating Ghalib” (Ali A. S., 2000, p. 11). Then he quotes Rich from her note in her *Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib* in which she admits that she was not strict in following the structure and metrics of the ghazal but adhered to the use of five minimum couplets to a ghazal. More importantly, Rich seems to see a sort of unity between the couplets. For Shahid Ali, each couplet is supposed to be able to stand on its own, without contributing to some sort of a wholeness and he found this liberty that Rich took with the ghazal as clashing with the spirit of the ghazal.

The ghazal form caught the imagination of Adrienne Rich as she attempted to write her version of the ghazals. The American context at this point was turbulent and unsettling which further pushed for a new experiment. She finished *The Blue Ghazals* and started on *Ghazals :Homage to Ghalib* in July 1968, during the most turbulent years in the post-war history of the United States as the country was reeling from the assassinations of key leaders of America, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. Rich’s ghazals were considered the first ghazals to be written by an American poet (Caplan, 2008). Her ghazals showed up the tensions between politics and the poetic form. According to Caplan, “the verse form both expressed the poet’s political loyalties and complicates them, adding new resonance and unforeseen entanglements” (Caplan, 2008, p. 44). By doing so, the ghazals suggest the difficulties that arise when poets seek to translate their political commitments into their handling of these sorts of verse forms.

Rich’s ghazals are “erotic and political, speaks for women’s rights, marginalized groups as homosexual and African-American” (Kashani, 2014, p. 177). Cheri Colby Langdell in *Adrienne Rich: The Movement of Change* suggests that *Leaflet* is a political volume, given

to women's experiences and the women's liberation movement, dealing with socio-political break-ups such as the anti-Vietnam War movement. It was deemed radical and out of the norm as she used fragmented sentences with erratic punctuation.

In the collection, *The Will to Change*, she tries to project her will for transformation. She was also influenced by the cinematic techniques of Jean Luc Godard and Pier Paolo Pasolini. Her art is sort of a hybrid. She applied to her poems the rules of the couplet and took from cinema the conventions of snapshots. Therefore, her poetry is filled with symbolic images as she believed these images give poetry combustive power that empowers women. She believed that through this radical transformation, she created a new space. She needed a form to hold these ideas and familiarised herself with new poetic forms like the ghazal and worked through translation to find this new space. Sandra Bermann in *Re-vision and/as Translation: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich* suggests that in the "60s and 70s translation and poetic imitation contributed to feminist revision, a project meant to revise the patriarchy and to allow a feminist/lesbian perspective to evolve" (Bermann, 2011, p. 99 as cited in Kashani, 2014).

Another strategy she uses was intertextuality, by using new words, images, and concepts from foreign poems. She required this extra ammunition to fire her poetry to critique the dominant patriarchal tradition. Translating Ghalib's ghazals introduced her to these required images, themes, and form to give voice to fresh modes of feminist experience. These were apparent in her poetry collections *Leaflets* 1965–1968, *The Will to Change* 1968–1970, and other works.

Rich herself accredited her ability to create more concrete images to two main factors, firstly the translation of the Urdu ghazals of Mirza Ghalib which brought a highly associative field of images into her poetry and secondly, the use of language and images in the films of

the contemporary French director Jean Luc Godard (Kashani, 2014). These changes were particularly present in her poetry collection in the 60s and 70s, namely *Leaflets* 1965–1968 (1969), *The Will to Change* 1968–1970 (1971), *Diving into Wreck* 1971–1972 (1973), and achieved their perfection in *The Dream of a Common Language* 1974–1977 (1978) (Kashani, 2014, p. 184).

Although Shahid Ali did not agree with her radical use of the ghazal form, one can appreciate the fact that the form has allowed some poets to experiment with it and managed to appropriate the form to voice their agency. As (Barua, 2006) indicates, Rich creates disunited and autonomous couplets in her ghazals and brings unity to them by creating an association between its images. The ghazal's couplets were meant to be disjointed, each couplet shining as a single gem. Consequently, in Rich's ghazals too it worked in isolation and fragments, becoming the perfect form to showcase the postmodern fragmentation. The technique of non-linear unity in the ghazal helped Rich bring diverse themes such as feminism, lesbian life, politics, revolution, Black power, the Vietnam War, and the events of the 1960s together.

In the Urdu ghazals, the takhalus is used as a signature couplet in which the poet may invoke his name in the first, second or third person (Ali A. S., 2000). Also inspired by Ghalib, Rich uses the takhalus in her ghazals, except unlike Ghalib who uses it to identify himself as the poet, as most Sufi poets did, Rich uses the name of other poets or literary artists and historical figures in the last line of some of her ghazals:

It maybe if I had known them I would have loved them

You were American, Whitman, and those words are yours

In this aspect, she is closer to Rumi who uses Shams's pen name, his master and

soulmate, as takhalus in his ghazals (Kashani, 2014).

### ***The Blue Ghazals***

Kashani (2014) also suggests that *The Blue Ghazals* are poems from a woman's unconscious; filled with energy and therefore, filled with imagery connected to the sea and water—word-images related to the colour blue as indicated in the title, but also related to feminist thinking, as feminist thought links women to the cyclical and fluid nature of the sea.

Hence, Rich used her lesbian feminist politics to appropriate the Urdu ghazal form to give voice to newer issues and her brand of activism, combining gender issues with socio-political matters. Using disunited couplets; symbolic words; association between symbolic words, images, and allusions; Rich creates ambiguity in her ghazals. Rich says of her ghazals that they are American and concern her private life and the socio-political issues in her country and at the same time, owing their presence to the ghazals of Ghalib. (Kashani, 2014) concludes that images, forms concepts applied in the ghazals mirrored those of the male Muslim poet Ghalib. The ambiguity and the possibilities it offered to voice her lesbian feminism was so powerful that it managed to serve the objectives of Ghalib and Rich, despite being centuries apart.

Caplan concludes that Rich's attempts to use the ghazal are less successful. He surmises that her use of the ghazal as a motif—a non-Western gesture, and not as a prosody, a requirement she must fulfil, is what makes it less effective (Caplan, 2008). Nevertheless, Rich's exploration sparked interest in English ghazals, and other American poets credited her work as their inspiration to follow suit, among them Jim Harrison's *Outlyer and Ghazals* (1971), John Thompson's *Stilt Jack* (1978) and Denise Levertov's *Broken Ghazals*. True to Rich, most of her ghazals consisted of at least five unrhymed, metrically irregular couplets, which apart



from their titles would be impossible to identify as ghazals. However, because of the work of Shahid Ali, the ghazal which started in America as a largely free verse structure was coaxed into its traditional rhyme and stanzaic features. Considering Rich's use of the form, it is illuminating to situate Shahid Ali's remarks in his introduction to *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*:

The ghazals disconnectedness must not be mistaken for fragmentariness: that underscore a profound cultural correctness. The ghazal is not an occasion for angst: it is an occasion for genuine grief (Ali A. S., 2000, p. 13)

Rich found the fragmentary nature liberating, whilst we know from Shahid Ali's account that this is what he was cautioning against. As mentioned elsewhere in this chapter, each couplet should resemble a gem, a single pearl that should shine on its own as well as when being strung with other pearls. There is a serious and profound difference between angst and grief. There is a strong possibility that much of this difference is embedded in the Kashmiri culture and the difference in understanding it goes beyond linguistics.

(Caplan, 2008) makes an interesting observation about Rich's need to dabble with a foreign form. What he really means by her political commitment is unclear, however upon reading on, one gets the idea that Rich might have misunderstood some of the more pertinent requirements of the ghazal. Her ghazals do not adhere to any of the conventions of the ghazal except for the "fragmentary thought-structure of the ghazal". Each couplet is a self-sufficient unit, detachable, without enjambments but generally containing the complete expression of an idea. Even if this is the case, the Urdu ghazal which seems fragmentary and stand-alone traditionally belong to a context that most readers can make a connection with, either culturally or nationalistically. For Rich, the fragmentary nature allowed her a certain kind of liberation, as freedom even to write about the turbulent times in that ill-fated year. To avoid

the ghazal from descending into a heap of facile fragments, the couplets needs to be held together by a fabric of woven imagery, by transparent bits of Kashmiri context, without which they might appear as disjointed gibberish. Two affinities attracted her attention to the ghazal: the fragmentariness of the form and the ghazal's non-Western origin. She saw the form as counter logic to the Western nationalism. By using the ghazal form, she sought a connection with Ghalib, although this is rather a simplistic strategy, but Ghalib became a "presence" in Rich's mind (p. 46).

Shahid Ali registered many issues he had with the free form ghazals that the Americans poets wrote. For the purposes of this research, I will contextualise some of the ways in which Rich uses the ghazal form. Although she did not get the approval of Shahid Ali, she was very successful in using the ghazal to push her brand of lesbian feminism to give voice to the concerns of the time.

### ***The Urdu Ghazal***

Urdu's earliest poetic texts appeared chiefly in two Muslim courts in South India—dynasties that patronised major poets and their art. Much of the substantial poetry consisted of ghazals. One significant development took place in Delhi which was that poetry became an art that one learned by becoming the pupil of some leading poet who explained the details of poetics to the pupil and corrected his verse for grammar and idiom and defended his pupil if he was criticised by fellow pupils of another master during the frequently held assemblies of poets called *mushaira*.

By the 1780s, Delhi was progressively losing its best poets to such regional courts in Lucknow and Hyderabad. Urdu poetry continued to flourish in Lucknow, Patna, Hyderabad, and other places. Furthermore, the introduction of lithography in the 1840s revolutionised

book production in Urdu and newspapers and literary journals enabled poets to gain readership beyond local audiences.

After the failed rebellion of 1857, British control over North India became total. In 1837, the British had replaced Persian with Urdu in official use and gave the language further prominence by making it a part of the school curricula.

The Urdu ghazal also made its way into Indian cinema as discussed in Kathryn Hansen's article titled "Passionate refrains: the theatricality of Urdu on the Parsi Stage," which traces the impact of the Parsi theatre to the early Indian cinema (Hansen, 2016). She explains how the aesthetic sensibility associated with the Urdu language was also of great importance, especially to the emergence of the Islamic idiom in Bombay cinema. The work introduces the Parsi theatre of the later 19<sup>th</sup> century and describes the process by which Urdu became its most popular language.

Even before the Parsi theatre, the Indar Sabha/The Assembly of King Indra marked the starting point of the transmission of Urdu lyric and narration poetry to the popular stage. Hansen's article also explores why the Urdu language was the preferred language and "how Urdu poetry's rhythmic cadences and rhyming refrains enhanced the audience's experiences." The Indar Sabha, penned by Agha Hassan Amanat, signalled the entrance of the Urdu ghazal into the theatrical space of South Asia (Hansen, *The Indar Sabha Phenomenon: Public Theatre and Consumption in Greater India [1853-1956]*, 2001). It tells the story of a heavenly monarch, fashioned after the Hindu deity Indra who was attended upon by four beautiful fairies. This bliss is disrupted by the arrival of the prince Gulfam who falls for one of the fairies. As with such stories, this narrative was a hybrid of various other cultures, making it just the right formula to be accepted in Bombay, and taken to Ceylon and Malaya via the movement of the theatre companies. Its popularity transmuted the text into diverse languages

and many imitations (Hansen, 2016).

Safdar Ahmed makes an interesting argument about how the modernist agenda for social reform led to the birth of a new literary romanticism in Urdu poetry. To understand the theme of love, *ishq*, in the traditional Urdu ghazal of the pre-modern Indo-Persian tradition is to contemplate its ambiguities and reluctance to be exposed to one or another type of reading. Much like the Persian and Central Asian courtly poetic tenets, which formed a prototype for the early Urdu ghazal, this doubleness was expressed through poetic conventions that were at once sensual and ethereal. For illustration, the theme of love was often described according to a set of romantic and erotic conventions that concurrently carried an ideal notion of union informed by the Islamic mystical tradition. This gave to the poem an ambiguity that opened it up to different possibilities of interpretation and meaning. Thus, the subject of love might have evoked a metaphoric relationship (connoting the worshipper's relation to God), whilst its descriptive power, semantic affects, and forums of appreciation (as a ritualised form of courtly, aristocratic entertainment) lent its erotic content a secular or worldly appreciation and context. Thus, the Persian ghazal received its own local colouring in India (Ahmed, 2012).

In the Indian ghazal or the Urdu ghazal, the poets strived to make a clear distinction between what is the actual theme or the ghazal and the intended meaning of the ghazal—“between the *mazmun* of a poem, which was its chosen theme or content, and the *ma'ni*, which was its real significance or deeper meaning”. For the Indian Muslims, it was a concern that the ghazal contained erotic and sensual imagery, especially since it was against the tenets of Islam, particularly the explicit references to the homoerotic. When they were able to separate the general theme from the deeper meaning, they were pleased with the evolution of the ghazal, which “opened the poem to the possibility, and delight, of variant and overlapping

readings” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 440).

Urdu poetry incorporated cultural tropes and traditional stories, for example, the Arabic love story of Laila and Majnun and the Persian romance between Khusrao and Shirin. Included as well were a number of poetic tropes, such as the nightingale’s love for the rose, the moth’s (self-destructive) love of the candle flame and so forth within a pleasure garden *bagh*, the setting of which became a useful metaphor for the self-contained world of poetic discourse. And in this array of literary conventions describing the themes of love and union, motifs of male-to-male erotic love (of the king for his slave or of a Sufi master for a young male initiate) were not uncommon. It is worth repeating here that the subject of homoeroticism in the ghazal is wrought with major contradictions. Scholars on both ends of the divide, Eastern and Western, Muslim and non-Muslim cannot agree to what is meant by the homoerotic language and references in the ghazal. It is not within the scope of this study to delve into this contraction; suffice to state that it was indeed a subject of much thought.

Colonial authorities encouraged literature that was useful and moral. This resonated well with the emerging Muslim middle class and its leaders who despised traditional poetry, mainly for its explicit description of love. They found many enthusiastic followers. These ideas remained dominant until the 1920s, when a rehabilitation of Urdu’s poetic tradition began, enthused by a better understanding of Western, Persian, and Indian poetries.

Until the 1880s, Urdu poetics was fundamentally what Urdu poets had adopted from Persian and Arabic. The forms of Urdu poetry are the same as for Persian: the romantic lyric or ghazal, the lengthy narrative poem or *masnazwi*, the ode or qasida, and others. The primary unit of expression in the Urdu poetry was *bait*—two metrically matching lines, used as the chief unit to construct poems in various genres.

Poetry, both in Persian and Urdu, was the occupation of a literary elite and was essentially an oral form, meant for recitation in poetic gatherings or *mushaira* (Minault, 1974). The Urdu ghazal, of course, similar to other Urdu poetry, was made up of *bait*s. Formally identical to the *qasida*, the ghazal is shorter in length but more thematically expansive and each couplet demands that it be experienced as a gem on its own. Urdu speakers regularly experience poetry at gatherings called *mushaira* where poets present their verses, predominantly ghazals, to a large audience over several hours. The audience, in turn, interacts with the poets, responding to each couplet as it is presented by praising or criticising it. The list of great Urdu ghazal poets is long, but two names tower above everyone: Mir and Ghalib.

### ***Ghalib Mizra's Ghazals***

Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797–1869) is the most famous of the Urdu poets that the Indian sub-continent has provided. It was on his centennial death anniversary that the Pakistani Aijaz Ahmad brought together American poets living in New York to work on a pamphlet of translations. They were supplied with translations from which they crafted their poems. This attempt had far-reaching consequences as the pamphlet eventually became a 174-page book titled *Ghazals of Ghalib* published by Columbia University Press. The reason for including this section into this chapter is to explain some of the issues at the heart of the Urdu ghazal and the best place to start, I believe, is to look at the poet Mirza Ghalib, his Urdu ghazals and to get a glimpse of his life and times, for in this way one is to decipher the “spirit” of which Agha Shahid Ali was taking about.

Ghalib had a fetish about his mastery of the Persian language. He was taught by a Persian, but his natural aptitude showed him to be “wholly exceptional” (Russel, 1969). In his view, Persian was the language of literature and Urdu a poor cousin. In his esteem, Urdu

was an inferior medium for poetry and totally unsuited for prose. Strangely, by extension, he regarded his own Urdu poetry with scant regard and almost thought of it as insignificant. However, he was acutely aware of his prowess as a poet:

His reputation grew, strength to strength which he maintained and enhanced throughout the years. He is said to have other virtues besides that of being an exemplary poet, 'remarkable for his personal appearance, for his frankness, for his friendliness, for his originality and for his wit'. (p. 4)

It bears mentioning that he made no secret of the fact that he never kept the tenets of his religion, never said the five daily prayers, never kept the fast, did not perform the pilgrimage and never kept away from wine. In 1847, when he was 50 years old, he was charged with keeping a gambling den at his house and was sent to jail for three months. He was promptly abandoned by most of his friends. He deeply felt the abandonment of his friends and says so in his poetry.

His fortune did change after his release as he came under the patronage of the Mughal court. In 1850, he was commissioned to write the history of the Mughal dynasty. His star continued to rise, as he became the royal mentor in poetry of the king and even received a stipend. He was better off financially than ever before. However, this was not his goal. His aim was to become a great Persian poet, but his royal patron demanded that he write Persian prose. What is worse, the king looked to him for Urdu poetry which he deplored, and worse still was the fact that he was asked to write in Urdu prose. He duly expressed his displeasure in the preamble of the history he was asked to write. In any case, his prosperity was short-lived, and the patronage came to a quick end with the great revolt of 1857 and the exit of the Mughal court. Ghalib continued to live in Delhi during this tumultuous time.

In this section, a look at Ghalib's poetry as explained by Sara Suleri Goodyear and Azra Raza in the article "Ghalib and the Art of the 'Ghazal'". Ghalib was also known by his pen name Asad. He is said to have written the greatest poetry of his age "under conditions of extreme trauma." It must be remembered that Ghalib lived during a traumatic time with the conquest of India by the British and the war of 1857, during which time he lost many of his friends. All that he underwent is reflected in his ghazals particularly, the motif of loss as he saw his friends "violated and exiled" and this mode haunts his later verse (Goodyear & Raza, 2008, p. 112).

#### Ghazal 1

A sigh requires a lifetime to take effect

Who lives to reach the source of your mystery?

The gaping mouths of a hundred crocodiles from netted traps in each wave

Consider the labor within the sea change of a raindrop to a pearl

Love demands endurance which desire is consuming

What should be my state until obsession devours patience?

I agree that you will not remain indifferent, but

I will be dust by the time you became aware of me

The sun's ray teaches a dewdrop how to vanish

I live because you have not bestowed the grace of your attention upon me



Leisure for life is no more than the flash of a glance, O, ignorant

The warmth of festivity is one dance of the flame

Asad, what can cure the grief of existence, except dying

The candle is obliged to burn before extinguishing at dawn

In explaining this ghazal, the authors comment on the key question which is the conflict between infinity and the actuality of temporality. They point to the tension of desire and “mortality” in beautiful metaphors such as “the transience of a lock of hair, a dew drop, the burning of a candle.” They found in this excellent ghazal the regular themes of the ghazal to philosophical questions that have as much to do with culture as with classical traditions of love poetry.

Couplet one is interpreted as the lover’s lament, addressed to the beloved—be it the Almighty or an earthly being. Considering it is Ghalib, one might not be wrong in guessing that it might most likely be a human beloved. “In two short lines the verse thus takes one from the impact of a lifetime to that of a day” (Goodyear & Raza, 2008, p. 115).

The tone in couplet two changes from one of longing and desperation to one of a harangue. It also speaks about the paradox of nature, as with every wave might come the danger of crocodiles, but with water, the raindrops work their magic, “the sea change” to a pearl. This logic is embedded in Urdu mythology that says that “only the first raindrops that falls into the ocean do become pearls” suggesting the many number of times that has to happen before a pearl forms. In this interpretation, the authors see this couplet to mean that survival

of any kind is next impossible, with the world being as treacherous as it is. Yet, pearls are produced, among Ghalib's ghazals (Goodyear & Raza, 2008, p. 115).

In the third couplet, a question of endurance. Can love withstand the power of desire and what will the state of the poet be in such a tricky situation?

Couplet four is an excellent example of a switch in tone from one couplet to another. In the congregation of poets and poetry-lovers, this aspect of sudden changes was incorporated to help dispel the monotony of such gatherings. These poetry readings were long drawn out affairs, and to keep the liveliness and attentiveness of the audience, a sudden change of tone is normally affected. As such, tonal changes are often incorporated in ghazals (Russel, 1969). Here the poet prophesies that the target of his desire will not remain indifferent to him but by the time "you" became aware, Ghalib will be dead. This lament of Ghalib would always be a thorn in his side. He had always complained that he did not receive the recognition he deserved and that he might receive it only after his death, which was sadly the reality. He was celebrated on his 100th year death anniversary and is now famous even beyond the sub-continent.

Couplet five is remarkable for its classical imagery of "dew, the sunrise, and the gaze" (Goodyear & Raza, 2008, p. 116). The extreme desperation of the lover, as poet, as the long-suffering lover remains in despair as the beloved has not returned the gaze. This subtlety is refined and endearing.

Couplet six concludes with ideas of gloom, that all things are temporary and transient. Here a metaphor of par excellence, "one dance of the flame" suggesting the briefness and insignificance of a flame.

In the final couplet, life has become painful and it needs a cure and there is only one

cure for pain, that is death. The ironical solution lacks the comfort that one expects from a cure. Therein lies a paradox. The final line is an excellent example of our human condition, that whatever life brings us, it is but a journey one must live before our individual stories end.

In studying one ghazal by the master of Urdu ghazals, one gets a glimpse of his brilliance. He was the master of transmutations known for changing the ghazal form, at the least the Urdu ghazal forms, into startling bits of observances on the human condition. From his letters we know that he wrote from his life's experiences, that he lived during a difficult time, and that he suffered because of the conditions of his family and his environment. His poetry carried these themes. Paying attention to his poetry gives us some understanding of why Shahid Ali might have objected to the American use of the ghazal form. Every element of the ghazal seems to have a cultural and religious significance, as the form was closely connected to the religious beliefs of the Sufis and the metaphors that were incorporated held layers of meaning within the context of their society. An entire culture resided within the ghazal.

### ***Agha Shahid Ali's Contribution of the Strict Ghazal and the Poetics of Space***

Shahid Ali became the cultural ambassador of his country by attempting to make his culture available. (Zaidi, p. 55). Specifically, a completely new idiom of poetry drawn from the Indo-Persian tradition which Shahid Ali introduced into the English writing where the texture of his language is rooted in eastern poetic tradition:

... the English Language is something Ali had to wage a war with to make it his own. The process of making the English Language ductile began long ago with *Rebel's Silhouette* in 1991. Ali had ripped open the cloistered syntax, lexicons, and tropes of English Language and like an adept goldsmith hammered the words

into new possibilities, nuances, and meanings. (Noori, 2014, p. 4133)

He also tried to explore new meanings in old themes. Another strategy was in the wordplay, which was prized in the Indo-Persian ghazal form, which abounds in Shahid Ali's work. Metaphors, being a big part of word play, were given prominence and were part and parcel of the pollination of the ghazal in English. The English ghazals reflected a pronounced awareness of international politics and particularly of the Indian subcontinent. Many allusions were also made to other poets, pinching words and phrases that others have used, otherwise referred to as the art of *zamin*.

Nishat Zaidi explains Shahid Ali's contribution to the ghazal in her article "Flows, Counter-flows Across the Artificial Divides: The Case of English-Hindi-Urdu" as follows:

No discussion of the ghazal form in English can be complete without a mention of Agha Shahid Ali (1949–2001) who manipulated ghazal form at three different levels in his poetry. He himself composed ghazals in English (Call Me Ishmael Tonight): he translated ghazal of famous maestros such as Mirza Ghalib and Faiz Ahmad Faiz into English and inspired many American poets to write Real Ghazals in English. (p. 61)

The question of why Shahid Ali tried to reclaim the form might be answered by David Ward's, "The Space of Poetry: Inhabiting Form in the Ghazal". In his essay, he uses metaphors of structure, which in the ghazal refers to the *raffia*, couplet and the takhalus to discover how these structures affect an inhabiting imagination. His use of Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* to look at Shahid Ali's ghazals is insightful as it seems to bring a better understanding of two separate cultures. Shahid Ali's aesthetics are fundamentally a hybrid, being Muslim, Kashmiri, and American, which is essentially different from the aesthetics of

the European Bachelard. The use of Bachelard's notion of space is then an attempt to understand the effect on the inhabiting imagination. It is an attempt at understanding the culture and art of a foreign form through a looking glass of an alien perspective—that of Bachelard's space poetics. Ward makes a case for a dynamic relationship between the form, the poetic structure and the imagination, and the internal inhabitant.

“What does form do for the writers and readers who engage with it? In what ways can form affect the writers and readers' imagination?” (Ward, 2013, p. 62). Bachelard narrows his study to simple images of felicitous space, a study which begins with the images of houses and then narrows to images of corners, nests, and shells before opening widely into various spatial dialectics of inhabited space. Following Bachelard, Ward agrees to take the form as a home and the imagination as inhabiting the home. Bachelard's experiment with space and poetry allows Ward to conclude that a poem (form) inhabited by the imagination transcends its “geometric” schema. The imagination touching the metaphoric structures of poetry has added to the dynamic nature of poetry. Ward explains this dynamic nature of the ghazals by using as examples two of Shahid Ali's ghazals with the refrains “in real time?” (Rooms 69) and “even the rain” (Rooms 57). With “in real time?” Ward makes the point that because of the form of the ghazal which requires a refrain, the refrain acts as a “metrical template which reinforces the notion that the poem begins with a seed from which the poem grows and to which the poem continuously returns” (pg. 64) making it a dynamic living thing, as suggested by Ward in the introduction. He further makes a case for the ghazal by discussing the takhalus. The reader, for whom the poem (traditionally) exists...suddenly finds the creator himself explicitly within the poem...it is opening the urn and finding a river, the rain, the poet inside. For Ward, the poet “must imagine himself in the poem” and the hidden self within the last couplet is essentially symbolically scripted in and, according to Ward, shows the ‘inside space’ (p. 67).

Shahid Ali was very troubled by the turbulent history of his country and his work was grounded in his country and culture. Undoubtedly, the cultural background of the region and the disturbing political situation of Kashmir came to bear on Shahid Ali, as it is deeply reflected in his work. He wrote books of poetry—some of which were ghazals. This “act of writing ghazals in English was Ali’s way of reconciling his two worlds-Kashmir and America.” According to Fatima Noori, in her article “Agha Shahid Ali and the Ghazal,” his move to America for higher studies pained him on account of being separated from his beloved homeland, Kashmir and he tried “to create the same warm, secular, congenial and syncretic culture in the places he lived and in the poetry he wrote” (p. 4120). It makes sense then when Noori suggests that the task of giving the ghazal a fresh lease of life was important to Shahid Ali as he was both a practising poet and an Asian Muslim who was well versed in Urdu poetry and its tradition. Moreover, he was teaching MFA programs at the point in time and rightly felt it was “his duty to familiarise the western world with an Oriental beauty” (p. 4131).

However, his most important work, which is the focus of this study is his claim of the ghazal form. When the ghazal was transplanted to America, there was scarce adherence to the classical ghazal. Shahid Ali focused his attention on making a claim about the form and edited a volume of American ghazals titled *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English* by 107 American poets. Shahid Ali does not forget to remind the American poets the advantages of writing this real ghazal. Yet the spirit of the Urdu ghazal is not evident in most of the pieces. One reason, as explained by Noori, is “probably because they are not aware of the cultural history and histrionics that the form carries with itself; they have their own stories to tell” (Noori, 2014, p. 4128). She uses the ghazal *Eating the Season* by David Young to illustrate her point that this ghazal smacks of “Eliotisian sardonicism” whereas spring should rightfully evoke the emotions of love and romance in the tradition of the ghazal. She sarcastically

surmises that for the American poets, “the ghazal is the new house where they are to fit in their old furniture” (p. 4129).

This was an exercise to check the pliability of the ghazal; to test if it could be adapted to meet the needs of American poetry, and some critics agree that he was quite successful. Nishat Zaidi believes Shahid Ali’s insistence on form resulted in a new range of expression, exemplified in the ghazal by John Hollander (Zaidi, 2008) *See* Chapter 1. Not surprisingly, Sara Suleri Goodyear mentions the same poet for his wonderful ghazal in this volume:

If the ghazals can be written in American English, so be it. John Hollander’s wonderful ghazal ...can serve as an ironic reminder of the possibility of formalism. His poem allows the reader to remain both amused and entranced by a metaphysical play of words that knows both its own stringency and its open-endedness. (Goodyear, *Ideas of Order in an Afterword*, 2001, p. 180)

Goodyear’s afterword in this volume is difficult to pin down, as it throws the reader many more questions than it offers answers on the attempt by Shahid Ali to get American poets to write in the authentic ghazal form.

### ***Agha Shahid Ali’s Ghazals***

By this time, Shahid Ali accomplished editing *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English* and was battling a brain tumour and knew that the end was near. He devoted his last years to the ghazal, writing an enormous variety of ghazals himself, presenting his own multilingual heritage while indirectly imitating Michael Palmer, James Tate, Mark Strand, and other American poets he counted as friends (Burt, 2021). Critics have called “Tonight” which gave its title to his posthumously published *Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of*

*Ghazals* (2003) almost an “instant classic” (Burt, 2021).

Agha Shahid Ali was born in New Delhi in 1949. They were Shia, minority Muslims amongst the Muslims in Kashmir. Shahid Ali was 12 when the family moved to the United States. The family moved back to Srinagar where he completed his schooling. He took his undergraduate degree at the University of Kashmir and completed his MA in Delhi. He was offered a scholarship by Pennsylvania State University, where he remembers his time with much pleasure. This was followed by a series of jobs in colleges and universities: Hamilton College, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and finally, the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, where he was appointed professor in 1999. During a brief break at New York University, he had his first blackout, in February of 2000 (Ghosh, 2002).

In a meeting with Shahid Ali, Christine Benvenuto recorded Shahid Ali’s description of himself, the work he had been doing, his background, education and culture, his cultural grooming, and how his poetry begins and ends. Shahid Ali explained who influenced his work and how much he depended on these people to edit his work. Also, in this conversation he explained his decision to “correct the ghazal form.” Shahid Ali explained his position as a poet and how he distanced himself from the main arguments about form, particularly the ghazal form, and how he remained calm in the passionate debate in America about the free verse poetry and other formal verse. Benvenuto explains Shahid Ali’s *modus operandi* of appropriation whereby he seemed to have been schooled “to incorporate allusions and quotations in the fabric of your poetry” (Benvenuto, 2002, p. 266). He further explained how to work out this sort of usage into the fabric of his poetry and claim it as one’s own, sometimes without acknowledgement. And in understanding these allusions, he claimed to take an elitist stand by assuming that several poetry readers showed to be discerning readers who have been schooled in the English canon by knowing or recognising the bards, by reading poetry, and in



getting pleasure in recognising the allusions. Shahid Ali's poetry is replete with such additions of Arabic legends, Shakespeare, and Greek mythology. One fondness was "discovering obscure references to his native land in western authors" work (Benvenuto, 2002, p. 266). One example was Emily Dickinson's mention "of Kashmir" in *The Country Without a Post Office*.

Shahid Ali, in talking about the themes and subject of his poetry, cited his main concerns were political trash, such as the strikes in Bisbee, Arizona in 1917 and the destruction of Native American cultures, as serious tendency to mourn historical loss (Benvenuto, 2002).

Shahid Ali's achievement was to blend both the ghazal form to the English language; a sort of a contribution, hoping to enrich the English language with the ghazal's poetics. Therefore, writing in strict formal structure was his way to discover self and retain his identity. He manipulated the ghazal form at three different levels in his poetry; he himself composed ghazals in English, he translated ghazals of famous masters and he inspired many American poets to write real ghazals in English (Zaidi, 2008). In the next section, a discussion on some of the most valued ghazals of Shahid Ali.

Shahid Ali's "Tonight" is considered an almost "instant classic" (Burt, 2021) in the article "A Contemporary Take On an Ancient Arabic Form." This ghazal is about lost love and loneliness, Islamic and Western religious inheritance, and the lived experience of the poet. Always the teacher, instructor, this ghazal by Shahid Ali, is considered an "exemplary ghazal meant to show Americans how, and why, we should think about the form." Almost all the boxes are checked in "Tonight", when we consider Shahid Ali's requirements of how a ghazal should be crafted, which is enumerated in the following:

Early Arabic ghazals were lyric poems about erotic love ...they used monorhyme ...employing couplets of uniform meter and length, with the same word or phrase, *the radif*, at the end of each couplet. A rhyme-the qafia-also appeared in each couplet, twice in the first and once, just before the radif, in all others. All the couplets have to be complete and independent in sense and syntax, almost as if they were separate poems. The final couplet also contained a name ...*takhalus*. Like other kinds of classical Persian poetry, ghazals had stock phrase and comparisons, shared freely among writers; sometimes the poets cited earlier ghazals directly or quoted Islamic sacred texts. The form encompassed secular, erotic longing, and mysticism, in which the Beloved is God. (Burt, 2021)

This ghazal appeared in three versions between 1997 and 2003. The ghazal is preceded with the epigraph of Laurence Hope's *Kashmiri Song*, a popular song. Shahid Ali seems to be "thanking the English writer for her interest and then promising to show what a real Kashmiri song (a real ghazal) by a real Kashmiri (writing in English) can do" (Burt, 2021). Shahid Ali's strategy for including the epigraph is an attempt to show up the inadequateness of the *Kashmiri Song* (it was styled after the ghazal as it has a ghazal like refrain). Intertextuality of this nature is Shahid Ali's favourite strategy, and one which he used extensively.

### **Tonight**

*By Agha Shahid Ali*

*Pale hands I loved beside the Shalimar*

—Laurence Hope

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.

God's vintage loneliness has turned to vinegar—  
All the archangels—their wings frozen—fell tonight.

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

Mughal ceilings, let your mirrored convexities  
multiply me at once under your spell 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.

God, limit these punishments, there's still Judgment Day—  
I'm a mere sinner, I'm no infidel tonight.

Executioners near the woman at the window.

Damn you, Elijah, I'll bless Jezebel tonight.

The hunt is over, and I hear the Call to Prayer

fade into that of the wounded gazelle tonight.

My rivals for your love—you've invited them all?

This is mere insult, this is no farewell tonight.

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

God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight.

(Ali A. S., *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, 2003, p. 82)

One reading of this ghazal contemplates on the “you” that the questions in the couplet ask: “Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight?”. “You” might be the beloved, the listener—Kashmiri or American, or both. It is also suggested that “You” might be Kashmir itself. This explanation espouses then, “if you” are a human beloved then Ali must be lonely, but if “you” are God, or religion, then Ali has lost much more than a lover, and his ghazal must consider the loss of religious belief (Burt, 2021).

Intertextuality is Shahid Ali's approach and throughout this ghazal are apparent examples of Shahid Ali's stratagem. An illustration of such a strategy is in couplet two, from Emily Dickinson's *I am ashamed—I hide*. However, some critics do not think that he successfully handles these borrowings confidently. Agha Iqbal and Hena Zafar, Shahid's siblings, discuss these borrowings optimistically in their forward to *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* (2003), as his way of appreciating the craft of those whom he knew and loved. Wafa Hamid

in her article, *Bodies in Translation/Transition: (Re)Writing Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere in Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry* posits that it “adds a range that Shahid Ali’s gets access to through such borrowings ... and acts as a technique to challenge barriers and borders – of languages, cultures, times, locations and identities” (Hamid, 2020, p. 267) Shahid Ali does precisely that—challenge barriers and borders when his ghazal imagery and “polyglot allusions” leaps from one couplet to the next. From the archangels to the speaking idols, the Mughal ceilings, to hell, to priest in saffron’s robes; the ascend and descend continues from Judgement Day, in the future to the past, with the Biblical allusions to Elijah and Jezebel and finally the poet’s instruction to be called Ishmael.

With *Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals* (2003), he is considered to have found his correct expression in the form. Noori believes that in this collection, Shahid Ali “finds his correct expression – the form, the house is oriental, furnished with occidental language and the emotion is that of an in-between, of a diaspora.” However, one agrees with Noori that such a feat is a result of years of distillation of learning and yearning, of love, loss and longing, of involvement with roots, cultures, languages, histories, poetry and forms (Noori, 2014, p. 4132).

### ***The Hybrid Ghazal***

In Malcom Woodland erudite essay “Memory’s Homeland: Agha Shahid Ali and the Hybrid Ghazal”, Woodland questions Shahid Ali’s need to turn politically correct and take back the form. In his opinion, Shahid Ali’s pledge to return to the true form is marred by irregularities. Using Shahid Ali’s revised ghazal with the refrain “in Arabic” he explains that the revisions made by Shahid Ali are problematic and sets out to prove that Shahid Ali does not totally comprehend what he set out to correct. For Woodland, the change of refrain from

a “graceful Arabic” to “in Arabic” denotes a titanic change. In the ghazal, the change seems to be “subtle” but in post-colonial reading, it may have gargantuan repercussions. Succinctly put, “they embody two stances toward that thematic: one dominated by nostalgia and desire for return, and one dominated by an anti-nostalgic acknowledgement of cultural hybridity” (Woodland, 2013, p. 249). Woodland speculates that a backward gaze is necessary (as does Shahid Ali) to make visible the layers of literary history of writing in English, contextualising the Urdu ghazal of Faiz and Ghalib, moving towards the Persian of Rumi and Hafiz, and arriving at the origins of the ghazal. According to the noted Arab-Israeli novelist, a loaded metaphor is reduced “to a single component,” one dimensional, reducing a multifaceted individual to someone with a single characteristic.” Even so, it is not “nativist artifact” as it is written in English, allowing a return in the sense of language (Woodland, 2013, p. 249).

I agree with Woodland’s reading of the Shahid Ali’s refrain as a possibly failed endeavour to claim back the form entirely because of the many difficulties a poetic form such as the Urdu ghazal has. As has been explored elsewhere in this research, the fact that the ghazal was originally written in different languages posed one of its main problems, as the translation process was made even more problematic because the semantic structures of Urdu and English were very different. As stated by Russel

The meters were exceedingly complex, and for the most part yielded no rhythmic pattern that was discernible to me. I was familiar with the stress-based meters of English, and with the quantity-based meters of Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit, but none of them gave me much help where Urdu was concerned. (Russel, 1969, p. 108)

To circumvent this problem of translation, Shahid Ali had to allow some flexibility to the rules of writing ghazals in English. He advocated following “an inner ear” rather than any

clearly established rules. Clearly, contemporary poets were not able to follow “an inner ear” as I believe the inner ear is based on the cadences of the Urdu language itself. Russel further explains in his essay how his own experiment of reading in Urdu, to his friends rendered, it different from his South Asian friends. When he requested a friend to read him the same in Urdu, to his Western ears, both readings were the same. However, his friends disagreed but were unable to point out what that difference was. This clearly shows that ghazals in English can only imitate the original form to some extent. The original Urdu ghazal has rules that are impossible to follow on the account of the language structure, as discussed above. Even when Russel became a student of Urdu to make out the difficulties of the genre, he was unable to decipher the intricacies of the “inner ear” (Russel, 1969, p. 110). This being the case, one can safely agree that the ghazals written in English can only be hybrid ghazals.

### ***Agha Shahid Ali’s Stand on the Ghazal***

For Shahid Ali, the ghazal was tied to the notion of melancholy, to the loss of something, using metaphors drawn from Muslim mysticism but not appropriate for feminist angst. However, the American poets found the form conducive to their own poetics of lesbian feminism and poets like Adrienne Rich went on to publish ghazals “without keeping to the spirit” of the ghazal. Shahid Ali’s issues with the American poets began at this point. Rich published two collections of ghazals: *Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib*, including 17 poems composed in 1968 and *The Blue Ghazals* with 9 poems, written in 1968–1969, which were respectively published in *Leaflets* (1969) and *The Will to Change* (1971). It was with these types of ghazals that Shahid Ali wrote against and become incensed over. He claimed that they got it wrong:

Those claiming to write ghazals in English (usually American poets) had it quite

wrong, far from the letter and farther from the spirit. Of course, I was exercising a Muslim snobbery, of the Shiite élan, but the ghazal floating from so many monthlies to quarterlies was nothing of the kind. And wasn't the time ripe for stringent, formally tight disunities, not just arbitrary ones? (Ali A. S., 2000, p. 1)

It is necessary at this point to reproduce faithfully the basic points about the ghazal as can be found at pages 183–184 of *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*. Shahid Ali attempted to reclaim the ghazals by encouraging poets to follow these basic points:

- A ghazal is a poem of five to twelve couplets.
- It contains no enjambments between couplets. Think of each couplet as a separate poem, in which the first line serves the function of the octave of Petrarchan sonnet and the second line the sestet. That is, there must be a turn, a *volte*, when one moves from line 1 to line 2 of a couplet. Thus, certain kinds of enjambments would not work even within the couplets, the kind that would lead to a caesura in line 2. One must have a sense that line 2 is amplifying line 1, turning things around, surprising us.
- Once again, there are ABSOLUTELY no enjambments between couplets. Each couplet must be like a precious stone that can shine even when plucked from the necklace, though it certainly has greater lustre in its setting.
- What links these couplets is a strict formal scheme (I am talking of the canonical form of the ghazal, shaped by the Persians in, I believe the eleventh century). This is how it works: The entire ghazal employs the same rhyme plus a refrain. The RHYME MUST IMMEDIATELY PRECEDE THE REFRAIN.



If the rhyme is merely buried some-where in the line, that will have its charm, of course, but it would not lead to the wonderful pleasure of IMMEDIATE recognition which is central to the ghazal.

- Each line must be the same length (inclusive of the rhyme and refrain). In Urdu and Persian, all the lines are usually in the same meter and have the same metrical length. SO PLEASE ESTABLISH some system- metrical or syllabic- for maintain consistency in line lengths.
- The last couplet may be (and usually is) a signature couplet in which the poet may invoke his/her name in the first, second, or third person.
- The scheme or rhyme and refrain occurs in BOTH lines of the first couplet (THAT IS HOW ONE LEARNS WHAT THE SCHEME IS) and then ONLY in the second line of every succeeding couplet (that is, the first line of every succeeding couplet may be anything as long as it maintains the syllabic or metrical length).
- There is an epigrammatic terseness in the ghazal, but with immense lyricism, evocation, sorrow, heartbreak, wit. What defines the ghazal is a constant longing.

This is what a ghazal looks like

Couplet one :

..... rhyme A + refrain

.....rhyme A + refrain

Couplet two :

.....

.....rhyme A + refrain

Couplet three and so on:

.....

.....rhyme A + refrain

- THE REFRAIN MAY BE A WORD OR A PHRASE (If it is a prepositional phrase, given the temperament of English, it may be acceptable to change the preposition. For example, if the preposition is “at the end,” it should be all right to have “in the end,” ”to the end,” and so on.)

The above text is reproduced here as it is presented in his book. This includes capitalisation.

### ***My Ghazals***

In writing my own ghazals, I have observed the rules that Shahid Ali has suggested and adhered to the ones that allow my message to come across. In this section, an explanation of how Shahid Ali’s tenets influence my work. As mentioned elsewhere, the ghazal form was a way to get back to my Indian roots and I naturally gravitated to the form. Its melancholic cry of the gazelle resonated with the tone and mood of poems that I wrote as a young person, which means to say that I preferred an Indian form compared to any other. The ghazal was an appropriate form to collect my cherished memories into. The themes of my poems are closely connected to my personal experiences and using the disunited couplets provides a

challenge as well as a means of collecting a range of memories into a ghazal. My first rule was to follow Shahid Ali's "no enjambments" principle. Under Basic Points about the Ghazal, Shahid Ali had written:

2. It contains no enjambments between couplets. Think of each couplet as a separate poem, in which the first line serves the function of the octave of Petrarchan sonnet and the second line the sestet... One must have a sense that line 2 is amplifying line 1, turning things around, surprising us. (Ali A. S., 2000, p. 183)

First, when I attempted to write on a subject, my writing practice was to fix on the refrain as the refrain is an image that holds the ghazals together. For example, in writing a ghazal, I decided that it would be a maximum of five couplets. As I sat at my table to write, my mind settled upon the colour of the wall on my left, which was painted a sunny, warm yellow and on the wall were drawings—photos of Shakespeare, Elliot, Yeats, etc. On noting this aspect, I mentally decided that keeping the colour in mind, I would reflect on this moment in my thesis writing. When a cohesive argument refused to form clearly, this state of mind was hard to bear. Having read Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" years ago, I returned to the feminist text and decided to adopt lines from this text to embellish my work. Appropriate lines were taken from this text and incorporated as first lines for each couplet while the second lines of each couplet described the scene at my own home as I sat completing my writing. In the *matlqa* or the final couplet, I projected myself as the persona who went mad, reversing the order of the couplet. Which means to say that the four couplets consistently followed the same pattern of the first lines borrowed from Gillman's text, except for the last couplet, in which the persona is no more the persona of "The Yellow Wallpaper" (who by the story's end has gone mad) but is the persona of the Yellow Wall.

Taking Shahid Ali's rules on enjambment, I tried to keep the couplets from showing an overt connectiveness to each other. In that sense, the couplets were not enjambed beyond each couplet which was the requirement. However, what was recurrent was the narrative of the "The Yellow Wallpaper". As advised by Shahid Ali on fragmentism, each couplet seemed to be disjointed and unconnected, yet they offered little narratives of their own, and yellow was the thread that held the ghazal together.

When poets go crazy with the idea of composing thematically independent couplets in a free-verse poem, they manage to forget what holds the couplet together – a classical exactness... (Ali A. S., 2000, p. 13)

If the ghazals written by the traditionalists could base their ghazals on metaphors and allusions from their culture and religion, then I attempted to use the story of "The Yellow Wallpaper" to unpack the meaning or connectedness of the ghazal. When readers of Ghazal connect the theme of madness in Gilmore's narrative, then this trope becomes clearer in my work. As Shahid says in the quote above, "'they manage to forget what holds the couplets together.'" In my work, I try to avoid such a pitfall by invoking the work of Gilmore as the basis of the ghazal. What substitutes the absence of a common culture is the presence of Gilmore's short story in the reader's subconscious—which can be a feminist consciousness—and helps the reader to understand the meaning of the final couplet. In the final couplet, the persona of the ghazal morphs into the persona of "The Yellow Wallpaper", who is described as having lost her senses. Shahid Ali's no enjambments technique forced restrictions on my composition, and within that restriction one is able to appreciate and understand the ghazal more.

Shahid Ali further claimed that the ghazal is "not an occasion for angst; it is an occasion for genuine grief" (Ali A. S., Introduction :Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English, 2000,

p. 12) is rather problematic. For Shahid Ali, it seems that Rich's feminist concerns are likened to a teenager's rage, rather than a feminist's out-pouring of her lived experiences, for her ghazals dwelt on the difficulties of an American woman in the turbulent 1960s.

Following Shahid Ali's requirements, I endeavoured to avoid fragmentation. As explained, I attempted to build a backstory that resonated with readers who will be able to recognise the feminist tropes in my Ghazal 72. Because of the lack of a common culture (that which the Urdu poets readily had) I used Gilman's feminist text to act as the scaffolding to Ghazal 72. My ghazal is reliant on the "The Yellow Wallpaper" to fill in the details of my ghazal. By employing such a strategy, I hoped to enter the "spirit" of what Shahid Ali mentions.

In the above explanation, I hope to explain my strategy of entering the spirit of the ghazal. It is obvious from the discussion on Sufism and the ghazal that composing a ghazal comes with centuries of literary traditions. The poets had stock images that they relied upon to ensure that they conformed to the overall tone of the melancholic. More importantly, the ghazals were the purview of the Sufis as their outpouring love for the beloved. It was imperative that there was always a sense of longing either for the divine or a human beloved. I took a different approach when writing my ghazals. I was acutely aware of how my ghazals would look on the page and so used the printed words as a device to keep the length of my lines to look similar. It is a matter of fact that anyone reading the ghazal would approach it with their own unique pronunciation. It mattered less how these ghazals were going to be enunciated as that would be out of my control, as contemporary readers had a variety of "Englishes." My ghazals followed his rule visually on the page as it was important to me as a writer for the blank space on the page to show up the ghazal as a ghazal. I accepted the notion that mine were hybrid ghazals, as was Shahid Ali's.

Equally important to this experience of reading the ghazal was how this sort of poetry was consumed by the readership. Unlike how traditional ghazals were read in a gathering, the contemporary English ghazal readers would read these ghazals in a completely different setting; probably an individual experience of reading poems rather than a traditional group reading. By individual experience I mean reading it either aloud or silently with their own pronunciation. The awareness that the kind of ghazals I wrote are hybrids was an important one as I was using the rules suggested by Shahid Ali but went on to adapt to other linguistic, thematic, and cultural variations.

“...every single basic ghazal convention has been experimentally violated by ghazal poets...” (Faruqi & Pritchett, 1984, p. 121). I begin my conclusion with the above quote from *Lyric Poetry in Urdu: Ghazal and Nazm* by S R Faruqi and F W Pritchett, eminent scholars of the Urdu ghazal. Although in this influential work, there are reference to nazm, I will not begin to include here a discussion on the nazm except to state that it was a term to include all types of poetry in Urdu. Going back to the quote above, the ghazal form was a trailblazing evolution. At every juncture of its evolution, there were instances in its literary history denoting objections to its theme. Working backwards, we are aware of Shahid Ali's impassionate plea to the Americans, claiming the form and requesting that they keep to the spirit of what the ghazal was. Here we have the claim above that “every single basic ghazal rule was violated.” It goes without saying that a form with such strict rules must bear its rules being broken for one reason or the other. When rules are broken, it is probably because the form is suitable for the ghazal, but as has been discussed previously, some part of the ghazal needed to be re-adopted, as we have seen it creatively used by Rich. Even Shahid Ali's ghazals were hybrid ghazals as argued by Ward, as it was necessary to make the adaptation to allow for it to be translated into the English language. Shahid Ali worked and reworked his

ghazals numerous times to try to stay with the traditional ghazal form.

My hybrid ghazals followed some of the rules set out by Shahid Ali. It could begin with my shared position of a hybrid. He was a Kashmiri-American poet, and I, a Malaysian-Malayali-Catholic. I found the hybrid ghazal's Indian-Urdu ghazal as a connective strain that connected my ancestral roots to India, my mother's homeland. Interestingly, its Islamic strains were part of my interest in the ghazal form, as Malaysia is a Muslim-majority nation. Being born and bred in this country, I found that Islam was part of my creative imagination. In the landscape of my imagination was the consciousness that I belonged to Malaysia, while my ghazals were the construct of a non-Muslim Malaysian. In this regard, my ghazals had Christian-Catholic themes of piety and prayers, whereas Shahid Ali regularly alluded to the Karbala as metaphor in his poetry to point to a Muslim trope in his work. We were similar in that religion was an important of our our creative imagination.

Shahid Ali insisted that the ghazals had to be melancholic, and I followed this rule closely. Memory played a very important theme in the poems that I wrote. All the ghazals I wrote 'tell of something lost'—either a lost love, lost opportunity, or loss of childhood dreams. For Shahid Ali, his poetry was on the loss of the beloved, Kashmir, and the loss of his mother. My ghazals were melancholic.

For Shahid Ali, the form must be in couplets, and this was important to me, as I saw this as the basis of the ghazals. One of the definite ways in which the form is recognisable on the page is to observe the couplets of the ghazal. Shahid Ali did insist that there should at least be five couplets in each ghazal, and this I faithfully followed in all my ghazals, except one. He also insisted that each couplet must not be united in any way. My ghazals were a hybrid of Shahid Ali's ghazals particularly in this aspect as the ghazals that I wrote were always connected, one couplet to another couplet. In fact, each subsequent couplet led to the

development of the plot in a ghazal. In ghazals that are food related, as, in Ghazal 70, the first couplet begins with the method of how the rice crepes are prepared, and by the ghazal's end, how best to relish the dish. Consequently, there is a definite sense of development and time-passing unlike that proposed by Shahid Ali.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Portfolio of Ghazals**

In the following pages are 100 Malaysian hybrid ghazals. A glossary of non-English words can be found on the last page of this chapter.

*Ghazal 1*

It will be from the time I rise to the time I lay my head, oh *Elaha*

The throb, at the back of the wrist, in the heart, oh father, oh *Elaha*.

The morning surrenders unto a million memories of tea rose

Against the deepest blue of sapphire, hallowed be Thy name, *Elaha*.

When I called out to you on a rainy afternoon at St Anthony's

You delivered a David of a man, may thy kingdom come, *Oh Elaha*.

They say this name, the name I revere and crave

You're the Beloved, Thy will be done, is for them alone, *Oh Elaha*

You are present in our lives, in our kitchens

In our hospitals, in our hearts, in heaven as it is, has been on Earth, *Elaha*

Give us this day Saviour Lord, beloved, our daily bread

Help me remember the loaves and fishes cerita, *Elaha, Elaha*

When followers claim they have heard the voice

Forgive us our trespasses, our doubts, *Elaha, Elaha*

Take our temptations of doubts and jealousies, burn them.

At the altar of sacrifice, let believers just believe, *Elaha*

9<sup>th</sup> May 2018. Let this day be our new independence

Cleanse our hearts from Bijans, deliver us from all evil, Elaha *Elaha*

*Ghazal 2*

The journey from the then to now, a street of stops  
At hospitals, doctors' rooms, MRIs, CT Scans of fear

The desks are filled with successive reports  
Stacking files on files, building piles of *fear*

We live in pain, our conversations about PAIN.  
We ask each other, what is your level of pain, in *fear*.

Books open tactfully, explaining pain  
Voices hushed, Dickinson's verse stays afloat, *fear*.

Holding each other's hands, trying to still the gnawing.  
One in pain, the other praying for pain, pleading in *fear*.

Mum on a wheelchair, her beauty like a month on a past calendar.  
Withered and lost, blankets of *fear*.

As we ran up the stairs to her ward, running against time.  
Trying to keep her from heaven's door, we were nothing but *fear*.

Scenes of Zermatt capped in her snow-white caprice

Floated amidst itinerary, tickets, fear on *fear*.

The shoulders ache, from the centre to the arm, advancing.

In haematuria, a message leaked into our consciousness, *fear*

That morning's half-spoken words, bursting, meaningful.

Speaking uncomprehensive utterances, doubt upon doubt, unceasing *fear*.

The day before the doctor's X-ray report, dried dead veins across an overwhelmed kidney.

A metathesis of emotions, culminating in *fear*

The highway a labyrinth of veins, red-purple, pulsating

Our car twisting and turning into trauma, fixating *fear*.

The fat file on the doctor's table, the white overcoats walking and talking

Each molecule an agonising weeping astounding *fear*

Faces familiar, offering comfort and presence, seek out tears and fears

The doctor's room walls coughed a phlegm, foul and debilitating *fear*

*Ghazal 3*

Empty carts of all types venture into the grey orange building *Ah Chee*

Baskets, plastic, rollers big and small, roll on the floors *Ah Chee*.

Half a decade ago, the wallets in pockets were thinner

And so were the kittens, small baskets of pink plastic, like yours, *Ah Chee*.

A day ago these dead fish, now lying on the hard cement

Were beautiful creatures, filled with life, like you, were years ago, *Ah Chee*.

Then people behind the counter, Chinese boys in white singlets and shorts.

Now, these are tanned and speak a foreign tongue, *Ah Chee*.

Even the capsicum, one shrivelled and matt, now appear

Like an advertisement, in red, yellow, and green, gleaming even *Ah Chee*.

A seamstress, the egg-seller, and the slipper vendor mull away in their corners

As if waiting for a silent ending, like you *Ah Chee*.

The butcher, the lone sinewy young ‘Salman’ of before, in his place a young woman

Striking the leg of the lamb with a tarrrk tarrrk terror, unsettling *Ah Chee*.

And you, from the stall, your vegetables in organised display  
Withered and spent, a teenager's hairband in your mane, *Ah Chee*.

Something visited with the Indian fishmonger across the aisle  
The kelapa-parut and kerisik ladies kept watch on customers, *Ah Chee*.

Someone whispered something one night and blue light flashed  
Barbed wires grew like mushrooms around the market, *Ah Chee*.

***Ghazal 4***

The season is marked with hurried preparations, *Raya*

Weeks ahead the Malaysian community remembers the phrase, *lepas raya*

The fasting, the praying, the clothes buying,

Tell us the month is fast approaching, thoughts on *lepas raya*

Students appear at lectures freshly bathed, like a fake rose

Wet hair pressed behind the ears, dreaming of the time, *lepas raya*

The government offices, exhausted with the weight of papers on tables,

The heat adding to their thirst, stamps an invisible *lepas raya*

A month passes, the endless cooking has begun

Pak Ciks and Mak ciks stock the stalls for foodies for *lepas raya*

Every highway leading away from the city, now heavy

With traffic every Friday, carrying umis and abahs home for visits, *lepas raya*

The Lazadas and the Zaloras show beautifully crafted

Bajus in shy shades of blue, for wear *lepas raya*

The day of the celebration is finally here, all necessary songs have been sung

Still the government officers lovingly stamp, without thinking *lepas Raya*



The fitted-out Baju over the six pack seem to strain a little, showing a big pack.

The parties have only just begun, *lepas raya*

Finally, the parties are coming to an end, the celebrations have been over for a month...

but but there is one last party to go to, the party *lepas Raya*.

*Ghazal 5*

The church-bell behind the school, beside the hospital, tolls a Yuletide

The shops a kilometre away sprouts conifers, marking *Yuletide*.

Every little cottage, along many small rowdy streets

Strings a tight fish rope from the ceiling to mid-way, the star of *Yuletide*.

These PJ folks, many have been here for almost half a century

The Sta Marias, the Dragons, the Fernandezes, know the *Yuletide*.

And of course the De Cruzes, the Gomes and the Pereiras

They went to the La Salle schools and the Assuntas.

Advent begins when the 6.30 am choir has sung the first carol

Into many homes, the Christmas trees now lay bare, *Yuletide*.

In some hearts, parishioners pray for a new spring of faith

Others dream of families returning to fill the chairs, during the *Yuletide*.

Late into December nights you still hear choir voices

Boys and girls bringing joy into neighbourhood homes, for the *Yuletide*.

That one shop, facing the plastic-shop is a bloom with fairy lights,

All familiar faces from the Assumption parish, looking for goodies for *Yuletide*.

The homes now transform into little Christmas cottages.

White lights adorn every branch, reindeers up on roofs, signalling *Yuletide*

The Christmas FM, Ireland's No 1 Christmas station, fills the home,

Their stories of Christmases all over the world, *Yuletide* time.

The family, the food, the gifts and the homes are now in their proper places.

Jesus Christ is finally born again, and so begins the *Yuletide*.

***Ghazal 6***

If I gave you my bak kut teh, ah Singapore

Can you give me your teachers, *ah*

If I gave you my parks, cities, and Melaka ah Singapore

Can you give me your health system, *ah*

If I gave you all my broken English ah Singapore

Can you give me all the cultured ones in The Arts House, *ah*

If I gave you congested Federal Highway, ah Singapore

Can you loan us the traffic free lanes of Orchard street, *ah*

If I gave you our history books ah Singapore

You might learn to re-write your own version, too, *ah*

If I allowed you to be above us ah Singapore

Can you give us some of your convictions, *ah*

If I gave you two universities and all our lecturers ah Singapore

Can you give us just the NTU, *ah*

If I gave you the twin towers and the man who wanted it ah Singapore

Can you give us half the brains of Mr Lee, *ah*

If I gave you Melaka and all its Nyonya Baba restaurants ah Singapore

Can you teach us some useful education policies, *ah*

If I gave you all the reasons that I can conjure ah Singapore

Can you make my country the best version of yourself, *ah*

*Ghazal 7*

We are building a house in Mars, we are going for a holiday to the moon

But here six strokes of the *cane*

We are a progressive nation, we removed a corrupt government.

A corrupt domineering regime, but we did six strokes of the *cane*

We are a progressive nation, we have for the first time, a female deputy minister

Who says nought about the six strokes of the *cane*

Khairy knows he better say something and he says it.

But his party says this is not his story, the six strokes of the *cane*

These women are 23 and 33, yet they need to ask the powers that be.

Otherwise six strokes of the *cane*

Poor women of Terengganu, with your pretty scarves and lovely bajus

Wizen up to the six strokes of the *cane*

Let the world see your faces, do not cover them.

Show Malaysians how Malaysian you look after the six strokes of the *cane*

One by one, Pahang, Kelantan, Kedah fall like dominoes.

Punishing women, policing us with six strokes of the *cane*

As another of your prophets said so long ago, if you have not watched pornography,  
If you have not desired women, then be the first to strike the six strokes of the *cane*

Malaysian women of all races, maybe you should lead and comfort these women  
Save the rest from the six strokes of the *cane*

For the time has really come, the future of our unborn female babies  
Left in the hands of politicians gleefully tapping the six strokes of their *cane*.

Let us bring forth the Boss ku and gang who plundered  
Yet hold their heads up high, serve them the six strokes of the *cane*.

***Ghazal 8***

The silver spiked kavadi has been uncovered, *vel vel*

There lingers a desperation in every prayer but, *vel vel*.

In this northern state of Kedah, in an ancient province

Thaipusam is coming *vel vel*

Best to tie these tongues, garland the empty bellies

And place them as colored papers, *vel vel*

The Mariappan mamas, the Kartik sitapas

Push their bags into rooms, that house across the hospital, *vel vel*

Their young hands, dreaming of the walk behind the chariots

Dress the kavadis with peacock's feathers, squashing a thought, *vel vel*

It is 6am, the kavadi bearer with thoughts cleansed

Walk to the temple, where pain is a blessing, they may sing, *vel vel*

The kavadi bearers dancing the trance,

wearing the little spikes like a brave soldier, in tantric tempo, *vel vel*



The drummers begin their beat on skin stretched drums.

The kavadi bearer's pain drives him deeper, to that Subramaniam, *vel vel*

The kavadi bearer, the deity for the day,

Family gathers for the day round the table veg for the day, *vel vel*

The house at mid-morning falls to a hush

The Kavadi bearer rest with his bevy of fans, *vel vel*

The garden sits still in the dusk, cousins talking

The best-decorated kavadi is always by the Seelans, *vel vel*

The night kavadis pass in succession the dance, the drumming

Sweethearts touching hands behind the chariot, *vel vel*

The brothers talk in excited tones, their bellies filled with spirits,

In another tantric trance, *vel vel*

*Ghazal 9*

I have been the window for lovers to see through.

If you want to understand this secret garden, the coffee brown against *green*.

The lime plant with its heart shaped bottled green leaves

From a green-lined branch, tossing its foliage green against *green*.

Beneath and beside brilliant green stubs, stand slightly

Above ground the leaves, coiled budlike brilliant, grasshopper green against *green*.

This year's sugar cane stumps stand straight with slender leaves shooting

The sky, an expanse of blue against *green*.

Pots of aloe vera like a man's slender fingers pointing to the sky above.

Its tiny slender thorns, a little paler *green*

The succulent karupooravalli sits grandly in its own space

Waiting to secrete its menthol into his lungs, *green*

The lemon's seed now a robust plant with broad healthy leaves

Squat among these, green on *green*

Yesterday's seeds have sprouted into young baby green leaves.

Tender and gentle in a new bed, *green*.

The fig tree fit in a pit with its silent prickly pins.

Claims a spot under the shade, keeping *green*.

The pretty papaya tree, a two-week seedling.

Blooms. Its leaves with defined edges, a doily of *green*.

The slight fragrance of the tulisi from the front of the home.

Dances through the back-green garden, pinching my nose, *green*.

The kunyit lies bulbous under the light-green slender leaves

Waiting for the New Year to make its appearance, not *green*.

The Karupooravalli, the queen of this garden waits

To be plucked and boiled and strained, a magical *green*.

Green bananas in combs hide under the clouds of green

Like a bride under her scarf, *green*.

This Eden, a frame of delightful green,

our path of delightful *green*.

*Ghazal 10*

Her arrival is signalled by the swish swash of her off-white drape.

The pleats push forward, *the golden border*

Early that morning, the saree it hung amongst the rest

Like an early bloom off-white and fresh, it lay in pleats, *the golden border*.

The high-collared choli caressing the neck, over the breast, around the arms

Like a lover holding her around the back, *the golden border*.

The little clasps close around the front, little clips pulling the cloth over her front.

Bringing the tape over, *the golden border*.

The white underskirt, the same shade of white hugs her hips, falling in measured pleats.

Around her feet, *the golden border*.

She left the mundhu in all its perfect weave

Places it on the floor, gentle tangle at the end of *the golden border*.

To secure the garment, she ties a knot, to be slipped around the waist

Tucked, steady and fast, the tip of *the golden border*.

The white magical weave is then swung twice around the waist

Leaving yards to fall on the ground, some golden border over the shoulder.

She looks like a goddess with those white pleats.

On her and around her, to define her frame, *the golden border*.

She lovingly measures the pleats, around her fingers, one two three

The top pleats and the lower *golden border*.

Taking a deep breath, she sucks and secures the pleats to the front,

the pleats creased vertically *the golden border* horizontally.

The drape almost done, she gently passes the last yard over her breast.

Like a lover's embrace, the *golden border*.

She stretches the cotton over the form of her

A magical wand it comes over her hips, circles her waist, *the golden border*.

To come around her curves, hugging her.

Reaching the left shoulder and down the back, *the golden border*.

*Ghazal 11*

Christmas trees have been packed away, for the annual slumber, *alah,alah*

Trimmings, sleighs, Santa Clauses, in their boxes and gifts, *alah, alah*

And so Lent is upon us, like a slap on the face, Ash Wednesday

Catholics in Ipoh Road looking sullen a pottu on their foreheads, *alah,alah.*

Has the joy of Christmas just left us, the cassettes in the car reads ?

Christmas with the Ray Conniff's, quickly shifted away, *alah,alah*

As teenagers, we were gloomy and brooding at the stations of the cross

Forcing our hearts and our minds to return to the Saviour on the cross, *alah alah*

Keep still, this beating heart, do not look away at the

Chiselled faced altar boy, the one on the right, the grago, *alah alah*

Focus on Jesus's journey to the cross, the weight

Of the cross, unlike the pretty cross you wear around your neck, *alah, alah*

The mind wanders to the casual meeting behind the church

Classroom, the lingering look you caught, and Jesus falls the second time, *alah,alah*

The women parishioners thinking about the chaittiappam that will sit on

The stove tomorrow morning, Jesus meets the women, *alah,alah*

The men, Mr Pereira, Mr Marshall and Mr Gomez

Stand like patriarchs, will Jesus fall the third time, *alah,alah*

The Catechism girl wondered which mall in Chow Kit to choose

For that Easter skirt, Jesus's clothes are taken away, *alah alah*

The sanctuary turns a cruel purple, my brinjal-purple saree a gust of wind

Jesus is nailed to the cross, *alah,alah*.

It's 3 o'clock, the Ipoh Road sky a threatening shade

Aunty Beta says put away the cards, Jesus dies on the cross *alah,alah*

The sun sits behind the hills, bamboo gardens gently awakening to Holy Saturday Midnight

mass, His body taken down from the cross *alah, alah*

The chaittiappam, white and fair, cut and placed on trays for a taste

The walk with the gang of friends from church, Jesus is laid in the tomb, *alah alah*

***Ghazal 12***

Mere children, we held hands to walk to *the new church*

Beside the chocolate brown river to talk, until we reached *the new church*

The neighbour's kids, Jesintha, Lucia and Francis of Ipoh Road

Entrusted to Susie, Lizzy and Cathy, missionaries of *the new church*.

They half Hindus and half Catholics walking briskly

Us the Malayali Catholics, Eurasian looking Malayalis, to *the new church*

They wore their clothes, each week less and less brilliant

We sometimes wore psychedelic green, pink, to *the new church*

They asked us where our parents were, curious and watchful

We wondered too, how come they never came, to *the new church*

We always wondered why we could not go up the aisle

Why communion was not for us until someone allowed us, to *the new church*

We were 10 and 8 and 6 and 5 and 4 and maybe 2

A string of kids, alone and fearful of a wrong move in *the new church*



Snowflakes and red-striped candy sticks as Christmas wrapper make merry

Gentle and warm smiles make the season jolly in *the new church*

Years have passed, we are 15,13,11,10 and 9

Our neighbours no longer follow us, tired waiting, in *the new church*

One of us took a knife to his own long-time absent father

Nobody could change that destiny of these kids, in *the new church*

*Ghazal 13*

Friends appear on the frame, faces from the past, an old *photograph*

If I'm next to you, my arms through yours, in an old *photograph*

The streets we walked, careless of the danger behind every door

Looking at that face, those kiss-less lips, *photographed*

Waiting in church, gathering in that classroom

Thinking if our hands will meet, behind her waist in a *photograph*

The breath, warm and sad at the back of my neck

I sense you, the pores catching every need, *photographed*

Standing at the altar, by the lectern, you and I

My cheeks turn hot as you clasped my hands, in my mind *photographed*

We went to the Stamford dance, the other Cinderellas in passionate kisses,

My eyes raised to your arms, *photographed*

He turned around, sensed in the church bench, the hardwood

Brown and stiff your gentle palm on my hands, *photographed*

You could not still me, in my mind or in my soul

A disturbance, I dreamt of that warmth, I am *photographed*

In my mind the night moon hides behind the trees,

My heart beating as I lean towards you, *photographed*

That night in that slumbering sleep my hands were held

I lay in bed my eyes shut, waiting for that touch on my lips, *photographed*

*Ghazal 14*

The cemented porch of Bamboo Gardens, I *remember*

The thunderstorms pounding at midnight the start of a Lunar New Year, I *remember*

Red, red everywhere, the Buddhist temple sitting like a palace

At the head of the square, in front of the football field, I *remember*

Taking a huge 'land bus' we bits of girls into a remote

Small village, a wooden house the 3 of us, for Ang Pows, I *remember*

Pressing young limbs into a slender bit of a dress

Feeling the air on my legs as the slit slips, I *remember*

Visiting houses at lunch, accustomed to rice and curry

But you served me types of seeds and sweets, I *remember*

Every town being packed with all types of Malaysians

For the CNY hols, Malaysian Indians, Malays and Chinese, I *remember*

Then we remembered the red tops dangling from hangers at Isetan

So, we all bought and wore bright red tops for Ong, I *remember*

Then we went to Chinese restaurants at the Royal Lake Club

To Loh he, Loh He to usher the Brown Earth Dog, I *remember*

Watching the lions spring from their dance lorries

To the roof of our neighbour's house for the red packet, I *remember*

Going up Genting Highlands, those treacherous trails

Lengths of people with batik shirts, bulging pockets, I *remember*

Malaysian of all types now reading labels, details

Looking for meats and treats, scanning, I don't *remember*

*Ghazal 15*

Uncles and sitapas sit on wheelchairs, powdered  
And dressed in Jubahs and veshtis trimmed in gold

Auntys and sittys in bright pinks, blues and purples  
Then Jumkhas catching the light of the memory of lamps

The young lawyers, doctors and their wives carry discerning  
Babies in their arms, coercing them into little dresses

Years ago we were gathered into the SP home, the kitchen's  
Stove by now tired from the unstoppable cooking.

This year we sit at an altar of a lamp and a Deity,  
reminding us of the white tiled SP home altar, decorated with mother's own sequins

The 100 years of prayers this family has offered  
Come down to bless them

The family says a universal prayer offered by Christian tongues  
Who believe in the wonder of this festival

The mornings chatter and muted laughter rise into  
A feverish pitch as they remember Diwalis of the past

Some memories lay heavy on their minds, like  
The heavy mutton curry in their stomachs

Each passing Diwali seem a strain on their shoulders  
Of this changing family, always reflecting, wishing for the past

We sit around eating from plastic bottles,  
The taste of something past, remains

Some bags are re-packed, as the holidays past  
Old hearts beating with a distant fear

We will meet again, with the numbers diminish  
Will we meet again?

***Ghazal 16***

Jln TAR, Jln Ipoh, Jln Pudu.....the waze *maze*

There are the traffic divas of Kuala Lumpur, the morning *maze*

On a Monday the dual roads shake from slumber

Like a sleeping 7 year old, the streets reluctantly get up to the morning *maze*

There on school buses fill their seats one by one

As the numbers on the street swell to thousands the *maze*

The dark morning sky quickly drawing back, revealing an orange sky

It's 8am small streets are chocked, school bus emptied, their wards into schools

Porches, BMWs' shiny sedans now ply the path

Lonely drivers watch their phones as they weave into the morning *maze*

The voice from the radio, avoid the federal Highway

Take alternative routes, cajole as we heedlessly drive into the morning *maze*

The cops in their smart white tops black slacks drive away to hussle a breakfast

From the side Mamak their currency for clearing the morning *maze*



Like clockwork all Myvis find their yellow boxes to rest for a bit

BMW's and Hondas make their way into Plazas away from the morning *maze*

The evening sun hides behind the hills, sending patterns the goreng pisangs,  
the appam baliks line the streets, foods truck in Section 14, the evening *maze*

Jln TAR, Jln Ipoh, Jln Pudu....the haze maze

Roads heavy with traffic, Malaysians set in cars making the Malaysian *maze*

*Ghazal 17*

If you hear them once upon a time in Malaysia  
people delighting in the coloniser's tongue wondering about *Bahasa ke Malaysia?*

The Penangnite and her 'you fi mana' and the KLite's 'you dah makan ke'  
am wondering of our diversity, *Bahasa ke Malaysia?*

Years ago you filled our little bags with Malay books  
so this language, like a plaster on our skin, *Bahasa ke Malaysia?*

Most of us speak work and eat, uttering these ones  
foreign words, but you hackle him, this person of law, *Bahasa ke Malaysia?*

But that man, who allowed his wife to steal the country  
he spoke an elitist English and a Pekan dialect, *Bahasa ke Malaysia?*

Every change in the top hat in education, we saw a joget about the  
National language, we have our credits, *Bahasa ke Malaysia ?*

We have the vernacular and we have the secular mixed  
up to a jolly mix of a rojak, wake up to *Bahasa saja bukan Malaysia ?*

The Chinese woman at the hospital registration counter  
only uttered ‘war foo shu tau... war foo shu tau’ *Bahasa ke Malaysia ?*

Those in Dewan Bahasa and Pustaka raised many red flags  
unawares, unity binds in the heart, *Bahasa ke Malaysia?*

Come down from the pulpit everywhere, hear the Urdu, Manglish,  
at 61 we are close to retirement, *Bahasa Malaysia* is melting.

*Ghazal 18*

Every windy route leads to the green blue waters of *Penang*

Trips to the north, journeying to you, courting *Penang*

In the album a yellowed photo next to the car with the broken axle

Our bellies full after Eden, on Hutton St of *Penang*

Images swipe left to right, left to right

Of bright scarfs on young heads, joy and laughter, on the bridge, *Penang*

Of a kebaya clad lady walking in the middle of a highway at 3 am

The week after Murthi died, our journey from SP to *Penang*

Of the College General of the 70s,

That piece of Paradigm, wooded was once a novice refuge in *Penang*

The place of weddings of brides in white sarees

Jasmine garlands, teasing nostrils whispering whiteness of *Penang*

Of pasombors that make you stay awake

The taste, the colour that could make you walk back North to *Penang*

Of white and pink batik sarongs on lines blowing against the Tanjung Bunga breeze

A younger set of us sitting on the railings on the new bridge to *Penang*

Of relatives who give you a tight hug when you arrive

Bought you the best Hokkien mee from the Tanjung Tokong Market in *Penang*

For a Pearl, across the bridge

A bridge to your dream, *Penang*

***Ghazal 19***

In bamboo round baskets, moist and used the white circular soft dough  
 Beneath gleaming to perfection, *dah makan?*

The sticky rice, white like polished teeth, in a lump bits of bright green pandan  
 Entwined around her, yellowish orange sliced mango, *dah makan?*

Spiced sambal in its corner, nuts on the opposite corner  
 The sambal sotong or prawns, *dah makan?*

The puttu steamer like a sareed matron, on top of the stove  
 With columns of white rice, white grated coconut, *dah makan?*

The silky shiny keow teow lays in a tired box, white and virginal  
 The stall owner picks a file from the heap, *dah makan?*

The aroma drifts drifts, of porridge from the corner stall  
 Busy bugs buzz around until.....

The roti is tossed on a blank black heavy flat skillet  
 The sambar and sambal brewing on the next stove.

***Ghazal 20***

Jalan Ipoh was always heading north from the *interior*

Jalan Bukit Baru was the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia the *interior*

The first bus ride over from Jalan Ipoh towards Jalan Kepong

Our young hearts would swell thinking of the green that was the *interior*

As we approached, Jalan Rahman Ali, a peace settled.

Within, the beautiful mummy and her 3 daughters' journey into *the interior*

We passed the fruit tree Arboretum 1, our hearts racing up

Sprinting from the bottom of that hill to that house, in the *interior*

In a moment we would have gotten off the bus and the

Gang of us would walk past the other homes, little signpost to the *interior*

At times we still walk to the other house, the brick walled house

We were all children and the night wind touched our innocent behinds the *interior*

The elder cousin sitting atop a bench, the Queen of Sheba, stating royally,

The Queen of Sheba wants something from the *interior*

This morning the chatter is soft and inaudible as these four talk about the day ahead  
Dreaming of the laughter that will come, with the trip into the *interior*

We arrive at the junction, brown wooden houses on either side of the hills,  
Green orchards surrounding the home, truly a kampung into the *interior*

We walk under the home of Girri, home of the lovely Aunty with yogurt smooth skin  
And her host of beautiful young sons, Greek Gods of the *interior*

My aunty's home sits majestically alongside this home  
At the centre of little Kerala an oasis of this *interior*

Ferns of every nature line all corners of this Eden  
Filling my mother's heart to the brim, happiness sunning her *interior*

We walk up the wooden steps and approach the main living area  
Family together after breakfast, our hearts warmed by these cousins of the *interior*

We spend the day catching up, my mum with her sister  
Our cousins about school, church and friends on a weekend in the *interior*

By the day's end we trod along down the hill again.  
The Sunday spent shaping the dreams to come, our recharged *interiors*



***Ghazal 21***

A grey-coloured peak, with dark grey fencing, *House of the Bougainville*

Your sharp and pointed green thorns, like a warning, *House of the Bougainville*

The low gate around the home explodes with a rambunctious colour

Rising from every corner, *House of the Bougainville*

The sound of the television in the background

Voices from the box, someone's there in the *House of the Bougainville*

The mighty dogs in their cages waking from their little nap

With brown-orange eyes looking at you in the *Home of Bougainville*

A lone mango tree in the centre of the square garden,

Fashioned , unloved in the *House of the Bougainville*

A cement slab, at one edge of the square garden,

White and solid in the *House of the Bougainville*

In the centre, a fresh plant with slender olive leaves,

Tiny button-shaped fruits, the *kedondong* in the *House of the Bougainville*

Behind the drooping jade plant, a row of bright-carrot orange plants,  
Brilliant like a dream, in the *House of the Bougainville*

To the left of the slab, the lemon tree grows within a netting  
Warning you – keep away in the *House of the Bougainville*

Two cars silent and new, one black, sleek and proud.  
The other red, shy and sassy in the *House of the Bougainville*

The chimes speak different languages, the black on the right with Hindi inscriptions  
The other Italian, a strong sweet treble, in the *House of the Bougainville*

The inflamed red path to the banana trees, these dwarves in glassy green vegetations  
A lusty banana bunch hangs low, in the *House of the Bougainville*

The jasmine beauty with shaped lime leaves, crowning a knotty brown stump  
Spraying white musk on this path, at the *House of the Bougainville*

On the bloodshot red square of the home, your welcome party awaits you.  
Come on in, to the *House of the Bougainville*

*Ghazal 22*

White-chiffon-coloured pink flowers on the saree I wore for you, *guitar man*

Like a candle in the night, through flood waters, gentle the *guitar man*

When the lift opened on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor of the Ming Building

Musical notes fluttered through the pencil, the *guitar man*

Looking through Valentine cards, found a red card embossed with gold

Scanning to the end, looking for Peter, the *guitar man*

Posted an image of a blue aerogram, your hand on it

Somethings dwindle for the *guitar man*

The diaries of 1982 are all about you

Reaching for one, looking for another, *the guitar man*

In a heart-shaped ring of flowers in silver pewter

Sits the love bird, the locket gifted by *the guitar man*

From a plastic bottle of red oozed the oil I applied

My nails were strong and polished glittering, *guitar man*

On the second floor we stood along the wall, in the car park,

Did I dream of being pulled into your arms, *guitar man?*

We walked back through the lonely lanes, behind the church  
Through the catcalls you remained aloof, the *guitar man*

My heartbeat at the Bina College, looking for you  
One hot afternoon, desperate to be in love, the *guitar man*

The phone message, I could not take that night you left  
When Freddie told me, if I meant to go to the airport, for the *guitar man*

You returned a message, late one night, saying it was you  
I was unsure if you were angry, the *guitar man*

We met again after 35 years at Uncle Sam's  
I did not hug you, afraid of what it might say, to the *guitar man*

It once ended in a vague cloud, even without a kiss  
Should it continue on parallel lines into the sunset, *guitar man?*

*Ghazal 23*

The old black telephone at the corner of the hall  
It held all the dreams you had for you, even a *kiss*

The pink roses on your chiffon white saree  
They knew, the touch of first feeling, even a *kiss*

I walked the same routes, from Risen Christ  
Through the long fields, across the shanties, thinking of even a *kiss*

You teased with those womanly eyes  
In those tomboyish jeans, even as I kept thinking of you for a *kiss*

Your lips, they never stayed silent, always moving  
Always talking, sending a jitter, for a *kiss*

You never thought to ask why I never spoke  
For long minutes on our weekly walks, I was thinking, for a *kiss*

In my sleep that night before, that Friday night  
I had met you at the corner of that street, I cried for a *kiss*

But those lips were untouched, I loved the way they smiled

The purest shade, unknowingly inviting for a *kiss*

We came close to one, when I held you in a gentle embrace,

For that song but I could not scare you for a *kiss*

When your friends walked away with the same thoughts on their minds

I sat close to you, thinking of this *kiss*

As distant snow-capped mountains called away

I wanted to plant that on your red lips, for me a *kiss*

When you tilted your cropped head and looked at me

In mock anger at my gentle tease, I could, I could *kiss*

It would be twenty years before I would see you again

Our kisses safely with others, but I thought of our missed *kisses*

At 19, my kiss would have smelt of toothpaste and tobacco

At 55, they would be more urgent and harder, those *kisses*

But the want has waned, Lizzy

I could have sucked the innocence, on that lower lip, in a *kiss*

***Ghazal 24***

I was this big, tough guy, the gentle giant of the recent Christ  
And you were this woman-child, spitting fire, and I tried *loving you*

I was of Portuguese descent, lightly dusted tanned  
and you were a Eurasian-looking Malayali I tried *loving you*

I played the guitar, for the Risen Christ choir  
And you the girl who never sang yet in the choir, and I tried *loving you*

I lost my girlfriend in an accident a year before  
And you were at the horizon, and I tried *loving you*

After Mass and communion, you remained in my thoughts  
You stayed in my consciousness, in holy communion, I tried *loving you*

I wanted to say how lovely it was walking beside you  
And talked away about college, other boys and I tried *loving you*

I went away to Zermatt, learning to cook  
And you stayed behind learning to be yourself, yet I tried *loving you*

Away in the cold Swiss Alps, I thought of you

And you moved to other arms, but I tried *loving you*

I wrote aerograms, blue writing on blue paper

But you sent words, regards and yet *I tried loving you*

I came back looking for you, from a distance

But you blossomed in a new glow of love, still I *tried loving you*



*Ghazal 25*

Let me pull away the years starting *1978*

Go back into my youth, starting from *1978*

Let the first sting of infatuation bleed pink

I want to tear away the scabs, starting from *1978*

When your music touched a chord in December

I want my turmoil to dance to your music, from *1978*

When I knew, the first love I felt in my song

I want to crawl back there and turn the page to *1978*

Too many times I saw myself, walking away from you

I beat my retreat from you, too, to you then in *1978*

You always sat there, holding your guitar

I would boldly take its place, across your lap in *1978*

This sixteen-year-old, with hips hidden in blue jeans and a man's shirt

Will hold you back, look up into your brown eyes back then in *1978*

Let this anguish of forty years vanish into that one embrace

Let me quench this thirst of many years in those arms in *1978*

*Ghazal 26*

It was evening time in the church grounds of St Anthony's, *Tony*

We met again to linger dear heart, *Tony*

Instead of at the altar my teenage eyes looked for you

Always following always trailing, like a cursor, *Tony*

You standing in front of the singing bunch

You leaning against the bench, strumming your guitar, *Tony*

Your guitar across your body, one hand over my face

One arm through the left straddling my upper body, *Tony*

You are every hero in every movie I watch

And I am every lady in every movie, with you, *Tony*.

I am 'Scarlett of O' Hara,' buxom and brave

And you, honey, I give a damn debonair, *Tony*

You turned into the Mamoothy of my Malayalam movies

And I brush against you in my white Mundu, your lover, *Tony*

We kiss and sleep on each other's arms, becoming their story

But I have never met you, ever in a kiss, *Tony*

And so, so many moments of encounters, break open

Elizabeth, dreams on, meeting him in each encounter, at a distance, *Tony*

*Ghazal 27*

At 6.30 am I get into my car, lock myself in, thinking of *MEX*

My journey begins before daybreak, on the *MEX*

From No 4, I drive past Vila's home, briefly looking  
in, all seems sweetly slumbering, on my way to the *MEX*

Then manoeuvring to the left I see the Bangla workers  
Returning home, they walk in groups, oblivious to the *MEX*

Another left turn and I am on to *Jalan Penchala*, my diversion  
To avoid the little school down the lane, on my drive to the *MEX*

The sky now reflects the Hawaiian sea  
darkest blue, blue strokes shimmering, to the *MEX*

Water gushing from the fountain I take the 3 o'clock exit towards  
Assunta, exit past the church to the *MEX*

At 6.58 when on the Kuchai Lama interchange, I remember to look up  
The sky is behind the 4 towers, two strokes of orange, on the *MEX*

I get past the toll gates, speeding cars want to race past the gate

The government coffers clicking 3.50 with every car, spilling into the *MEX*

As you race past the Nirvana Memorial Centre

a landmark filled with a sense of death, a reminder of races on the *MEX*

A windy mix of orange and red and blue and yellow

The artist's canvas swirls as I reach Cyberjaya, still on the *MEX*

Daybreak, the sun is brilliant and new now looming on the horizon

Peeping from behind the tall buildings, playing hide and seek, on the *MEX*

*Ghazal 28*

Those locks on that beautifully bent head, this *man*  
Black in ringlets, is this beautiful *man*.

That small rounded yet manly chin  
Clean-shaven and blessed, oh what a divine *man*.

That sparse moustache never did anything  
For those lips, full and shaped, what a *man*.

That gentle word when he called out ‘*sweetheart*’  
Broke many other hearts with a *break! break!* that *man*.

That little belly, small and rounded at first  
Became what a mass, yet that was the man.

Forty years on the looks have tamed like a baby’s curl  
The moustache is gone yet he is the *man*.

Those ever-present hands they lay firm  
To lift me up at every mistake, that *man*.

I missed you until I was twenty

I will spend the rest of my life missing you, *man*.



*Ghazal 29*

I shall love you in 'eternity,' an old letter says waves  
of blue on white, like the shapes of memories

One wine-coloured rose petal, settled somewhere,  
words whispering, secret somethings

Telling of stolen moments,  
whispered looks slips of verse, scent on every page

Familiar songs come alive, then fiendish hands  
shatter a glass, silencing, whispering

Unzipping, undoing, poking, ripping, touching  
'I's drop their dots, 't's lose their crosses

*Ghazal 30*

Fragrant cubes of tiny ginger stirred, *mouth-watering*

In the wok, dark brown spluttering, *mouth-watering*

The brown payasam with its glass-like diamonds

Of semolina in brown sauce, *mouth-watering*

On a banana leaf the little bit of mango pickle

Red and cubed spiced, *mouth-watering*

A turmeric yellowed curry sits boiling on the stove

A tangy wave whips the kitchen air gurgling, *mouth-watering*

The ball of brown molasses to be eaten with

Raisins, cashew nuts, served like gold, gleaming, *mouth-watering*

Round columns of white puttu lay on the table,

White coconut on its sides, *mouth watering*

Pink meat in a sauce of red chilli and vinegar

Potatoes mixed into a curry, *mouth-watering*

*Ghazal 31*

My uncle, he lay in a small house in PJ, dark and *alone*

My father's brother, the dark Adonis, lay cold and *alone*

The village Romeo once stood youthful, the beautiful Beatrice by his side

Today lies calm and finally in paradise, cancer got him, *alone*

Aunty Girlie the parishioner in that corner of the upper world

Within that beautiful white box lies she, charred and *alone*

All the neighbours gathered like ants to a sweet biscuit

Into L5, Aunty Sosamah's son lay battered and beaten, *alone*

That morning the Risen Christ choir paced into a bus, all thirty-nine of them

The journey ended quick and fast, Raj now drowned, *alone*

The stirring of the Orropom, the household's Easter activity

Aunty Christina's only son was knocked down, *alone*

The beautiful Maria, the lean graceful Mary of the previous pageant

Lay young and spent in her final bed, her coffin came early, *alone*

The young communicant, on her first Holy Communion, lay across the road  
Aunty Sosamah's only daughter, in her white perfect dress, *alone*

The debonair Freddie Miranda stood across the church hall, kicking a ball  
Fell thrice to the ground, Henrietta's face emotionless, Freddie lay *alone*

***Ghazal 32***

We lived in a deep valley kissed by *flood waters*

The Gragos, the Malayalis, Chinese and Indians in *flood waters*

The rains would come incessantly during the evenings

The drains would overflow liquid brown *flood waters*

The neighbours buried barricades inside and outside

To keep the water out, brown fluid, *flood waters*

Scooping the water out again, again we grew exhausted,

Our mummy, too, built walls sometimes, keeping out *flood waters*

Eventually, they succeeded, brown dirty water

Got into our homes, uninvited and smelly, *flood waters*

In anger, the waters invaded and brought

Red plastic bags, bits of rotten fruit with the, *flood waters*

Sometimes seeking revenge for the rubbish, we threw

Into both the rivers, every morning, every day, *flood waters*

So we went to Christie's home

Our choir master's home, to see his, *flood waters*

The next day if the water receded, the work began

Washing and cleaning the stench from our homes, *flood waters*

For many years they came, twice every year

Then they dug the rivers, and they finally ceased, the *flood waters*

*Ghazal 33*

Our home at a corner of the square, *VeeOne*

We came to it from another part of town to *VeeOne*

Three Malayali kids and our parents

It remained our home for very long *VeeOne*

Across the playground on the opposite side of the square

Her mother's brother, Uncle Douglas, lived opposite to *VeeOne*

The children gathered at the playground as the sun rose

We fell and bled, played and swayed at the park of *VeeOne*

Mother's cousins and father's sisters lived around the square

Cousins and second cousins, all relatives of the family at *VeeOne*

A little bridge across the river from the square

Where the Metas and the Vargheses lived *VeeOne*

A Buddhist *Tokong* ruled the playground like a god

Spewing burnt paper into the homes, *Vee One*

***Ghazal 34***

1979 a batch of 1963s were growing up

Sweet sixteen was the game for us all, *growing up*

Our batch at the Catholic school in Sentul

With boyfriends and our stories about *growing up*

The first kiss, the first boyfriend, holding hands

Audrey was our mentor then, on *growing up*

Our heads were full, of the choir boys

The Zuzarteas, the Pereiras, the D'cruzes, *growing up*

The white blouses showed off womanly shapes,

Tucked off, chastised by the light-blue pinafore, *growing up*

Free from exams the 16-year olds dreamt Mills and Boons

Deprived of men we fantasized on the only male teacher, *growing up*

Before assembly sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds

Speaking of Donny Osmond, Peter Select and Elvis, *growing up*



We devoured pages from Jaws and Peyton Place, playing Roney Harrington  
And Betty Anderson's scenes black and white, *growing up*

***Ghazal 35***

The cut fruits are from the Chinese sundry shop, for *a child is born*  
these are finely chopped, soaked with brandy, for *a child is born*

The Eurasian's Aunty's Christmas cakes are moist,  
dark soft and reeking of brandy and rum, for *a child is born*

The Tamilians and Malayalis cannot be sliced  
sometimes cannot be cut, dried, and burnt for *a child is born*

The *murukkus* are fair and crunchy, in little circles  
with bits of green gram in those large earrings *for a child is born*

The pink coconut candy sits like a pretty lass  
sugary and squared the *santan* oozes when bitten, *for a child is born.*

Three rounds of buttery cookies placed in the centre slot,  
baked and perfect, *for a child is born*

*Ghazal 36*

Three teenage girls with a mother and a father, in the 80s

All growing, they lived in V 1, in the 80s

Six doors away on the same row, three boys lived silent and growing

These had the brains, drank and loved in the 80s

On the opposite row lived the cousins beautiful and growing

Radiant smiles weaving beautiful ties, in the 80s

Aunty Uni and her quiet twins lived behind

Cultured and traditional they calmed the neighbours, in the 80s

Their neighbours were a house of Catholics

Pretty siblings fair and Hellenic lived together, in the 80s

David Lean, the sole breadwinner of the home,

Died one day night, crushing Aunty Lean's hopes, in the 80s

Down that row lived my Uncle Douglas, our only uncle

With a young daughter smart and lively, the only child, in the 80s

To the furthest end of the row, K2 lived a solid secret

Of how a mother became a sister, a secret that everyone knew, in the *80s*

And so the square around the playground, neighbourhood

Loved and lived for many years, in the *80s*

*Ghazal 37*

In a school removed from Rome, there was Anne Vincent, Martha and Pius

In a Malaysian convent students jumped, ran and marched for *AVMP*

Uncertain, why these Catholic names were dear to them

But in their first year they were streamed in *AVPM*

And thus for the remaining years from thirteen to seventeen

The girls remained true to their calling of being in houses *AVMP*

They jumped and they ran with the fire burning intense

To bring back the challenge, of being the best house *AVMP*

In the 80s some were supreme, Martha, Martha, Martha

My sisters and I, we belonged to different houses, *AVMP*

And so we looked down and pitied the Pius

Calling out Yellow, yellow dirty fellow behind *AVMP*

The girls in Martha, they were for a very long time, fire band

They jumped higher, ran faster and took the cup, *AVMP*

The march past was a grand affair, thirteen-year-olds trying to please

After a month in the unforgiving sun, we turned a darkish tan for *AVMP*

Our seniors were our idols the house captains who could run

The fastest, jumped the highest, the house captain of *AVMP*

Adored for years, they were celebrities of Convent Sentul

Past the sports day, many gifts were given, for the captains of *AVMP*

***Ghazal 38***

The diary says you asked me for a kiss  
but for long years after, I fell into *an epileptic fit*

The first fall was in a drain at the back of the church  
Loud poundings on my mind that led to *an epileptic fit*

The Eve of New Year was a rite of passage  
The Malayali aunts who turned up with bloody scars *an epileptic fit*

The neighbour's toilet stained with her blood  
Years before she cut her throat in *an epileptic fit*

I often fell to the ground when things pulled  
this feeling of hopelessness wielding in *an epileptic fit*

They looked at me troubled, thinking she needs attention  
widening the gap, drowning me into another *epileptic fit*

My mummy she could not come with me to the doctor  
As he searched my eyes for tumours, she fell into *an epileptic fit*

I could hear them scream as I fell, I could hear them

But the swoon kept me helpless in *an epileptic fit*

The doctors searched for a reason but found none

Some even believed it was fun being in *an epileptic fit*

It would begin in a fear at the pit of my stomach

This tiredness would intensify, making Elizabeth fall into *an epileptic fit*



***Ghazal 39***

The blue sheet remains between the pages saying *I love you*  
thirty-seven years ago the letter brought the message *I love you*

It spoke of how unsuited we were but love  
Was strong and constant like cinnamon *I love you*

It said that you did not know why and how  
But like the durians we loved it *I love you*

Your letter blue sheets of thin crisp sheets  
Speak about trust overflowing because *I love you*

When I read it thirty-seven years ago there was a sadness  
That has not passed the memory of Oropom remains *I love you*

There were times when I wanted to run into your arms and lay my head  
On your bare chest because you said *I love you*

But our quarrels felt like lime pickle soaked in vinegar  
Too long the memory bitter and sour *I love you*

The letter sits framed in an irregular box, jagged

Like biting into a murukku still saying *I love you*

*Ghazal 40*

The names were blue always blue *haunting*  
those squiggly sentences in blue writing *haunting*

Enclosed always private and deeply personal  
What's my name across the page sweetly *haunting*?

They speak of your dreams that would not let you sleep  
of how I had come to you and kept you awake *haunting*

That night you visited in Gethsemane, Cheras  
I lay in a swoon the blood throbbing for you, *haunting*

When you cupped my face to you, quieting the frenzy I  
could have come into your arms *haunting*

Every day of every year since 1982  
I have been looking back replaying our heartbeats *haunting*

Those memories they float from my books each morning  
to break my heart again and again *haunting*

It is as if a young ghost had died with so much life

the emotions were too strong, thirty-seven years too short *haunting*

*Ghazal 41*

He had an angular face, tanned and clean-shaven, *TZ*

A mop of hair, jet-black hair, falling on his forehead, *TZ*

He sometimes wore a red batik shirt

A pair of white, pants, baggy, that was *TZ*

I could only see the man, with his music around him

He played the guitar, for Mass all the time, *TZ*

He spoke with a shake of his head

This boy-man who always admonished me, *TZ*

He spoke about me to his friends

I talked about him in my dreams, in my diary, *TZ*

He tried to steal a kiss that Christmas as he ran around

with a cloth in his hand, kisses on his face, *TZ*

When he played the guitar, he faced bent to the strings

I could not look into his eyes, if the music reached, *TZ*

He left that year when the Christmas lights bloomed

Yes, Elizabeth's heart got lost with *Tony Zuzartee*

***Ghazal 42***

That sweet girl she brought me that letter, not *just another girl*

Written in red smudged with lipstick matter, *just another girl*

Then this teenage heart filled with so much hope

But her matured older self knows better, *just another girl*

She could have told him, the letter sits among others

In a blue beautiful diary, in a teether, *just another girl*

But you did not sign the letter, the poem is unaddressed

And my teenage dreams faltered, with *just another girl*

I was destined, you see, forever to remain

Fixed in that moment, bothered by being *just another girl*

*Ghazal 43*

We met in 1979 you with your guitar and good looks @ the RC

I came to church in my shirt and jeans @the RC

A young love blossomed even with your many girlfriends

I remained infatuated for a long time, dreaming @ RC

We joked and laughed, always ending in an argument

Sometimes in a wild tickler, you touched me @RC

My womanly body glowing under the shirt and jeans

Waiting for that touch, answering to a need @the RC

Every Sunday another pull towards you

Some cords never came undone even when you left RC



*Ghazal 44*

The Christmas trees kick from their boxes since it's *December*

Old memories blink red and white, red and white, since it's *December*

The void I felt at sixteen jabs at my side, like it was yesterday

You had come into my home with a guitar singing carols since it's *December*

Loud shouts of cheer and singing was going on, the background

But my heart was just *ke da ke boom*, since it's *December*

Then the song changed, and the blush rose on my cheeks

You strummed 'the Christmas Pokka' since it's *December*, again

You caught my eyes and tried to say something

But the singing of 'Joy to the World' drowned it out, since it's *December*

When the songs and the greetings were done

You started to leave, I won't be around next year, when it's *December*

My teenage heart split into a jagged half

My diary says, he left that Christmas, since it's *December*

It's still hard today, the pages are tear-stained

And the writing cannot be read, but I've looked at it, since it's *December*

Heartbreaks are always heartbreaks

And Elizabeth remembers it well, since it's *December* again

***Ghazal 45***

The mornings start at 5.45am each morning, Good morning

It was 2014 back then and it still is 2019 Good *morning*

We talk about your daughter and my daughter

Every day something new like a friend, Good *morning*

At times, the conversation gets broken with other conversations

Sometimes the conversation weave with time, Good *morning*

I have said all my girl-crush feelings, these four long years

Safely hidden in my husband's arms, in Good *morning*s

These needed to be said, and how I wept those years

Having no one to hold me tightly, every *morning*

It's been five years' length of conversations

About our families, friends' lives and loves, many *morning*s

We've come a long way, our lives intertwining

We've changed from teenage flames to mature fire, some *morning*s

My phone conversations are filled with good mornings

Between slips of secrets, bits of sweet nothings, these *mornings*

***Ghazal 46***

Your shirt was checked, black and brown innocently *wild*

Your hair short and cut away, you walked innocently *wild*

Your jeans wore you sweet and subtle, woman

Your waist turning from a girl-child, innocently *wild*

A white band caught those jeans in place

I have wanted to hug them, just there innocently, *wild*

Your eyes flashed a mocking anger at the slightest

Your lips quivered for a quick comeback innocently, *wild*

Your head was bowed in prayer, feigning piety

I knew your heart was talking to him, thinking of me, innocently *wild*

You fought back at every meeting, sometimes we touched

But I saw your teenage heart bruised, innocent and *wild*

I caught you one last Christmas, by the church

Asked you for a kiss, you blushed and turned away, innocent and *wild*

Christie and the gang of cousins warned me to stay away

But your brown eyes called out innocent and *wild*

Forty years on we discover the truth of you

You were baby-eyed submissive yet innocently *wild*

Going back I did not see that young sixteen-year-old heart

Burn for me, my beloved, wanting me, innocent and *wild*

***Ghazal 47***

We jumped into baskets seeking *Cappadocia*  
The land of beautiful horses she said of *Cappadocia*

Chasing the sunset we got up at 3am  
His mastery across the sky seeking *Cappadocia*

The fig orange brilliant and beautiful  
Clutching Rumi in my hands looking for *Cappadocia*

Layer and layer of clothes on our back  
The cold freezing us Asian Malaysians into *Cappadocia*

We saw balloons in the sky brilliant balloons  
Guided by the arc of balloons across *Cappadocia*

We watched in wonder at the sunset  
Orange red, blue and silver lining making *Cappadocia*

The Turks carried us into the baskets  
Like aubergines we scrambled into *Cappadocia*

There were aubergines everywhere

On plates for dinner and lunch in *Cappadocia*



***Ghazal 48***

Baby blue full skirt on a slender waist the *dress*,

Draped in white cotton lace what a *dress*

Maroon velvet skirt, with maroon straps that

she wore as her sixteenth birthday *dress*

White as yogurt was the confirmation gown

Sleeves like a princess a pearl-white *dress*

At the cousin's wedding we shopped for gowns

Hers was the colour of 'ashes of roses' a long *dress*

The Pollyanna dresses came to town

And she wore a striped white-waisted *dress*

At seven she wore a puppy suit with puppy colours

Mummy sewed a yellowish puppy *dress*

When she was five and her sister was seven

A green sleeveless satin shift with a single painted rose *dress*

Elizabeth's Easter came with white and red chiffon  
with bows and rushes on *dresses*

*Ghazal 49*

Night has come, like a shadow

Sofia Walk to me because I cannot, Sofia

Come closer because I cannot

Unbutton the clasps because I cannot, Sofia

Let me see you

Show me yourself, Sofia

Now, come come into my bed

Though I cannot, Sofia, Sofia

\*Inspired by the beautiful movie 'Guzaarish'

***Ghazal 50***

All of those times, I wrote and wrote and wrote, *he claimed*  
in every sentence, melody and rhapsody, *he claimed*

Every waking hour, every minute of the hour of the day of the month of the year  
I have been without him, *he claimed*

My kisses, my wishes, even my twitches  
without kissing, without wishing, even without looking, *he claimed*

He claimed me without knowing, without claiming  
He claimed my mind, without minding, *he claimed*

Doing, knowing, speaking, touching, being for 31 years  
without knowing, acknowledging, yet claiming all the same, *he claimed.*

***Ghazal 51***

The nightingale with its colours of orange and blue *El Qanna*

Sit on a wired line in this corner of Petaling Jaya *El Qanna*

The patients in blue, with a heavy head and fever

Sit in isolation wards alone afraid *El Qanna*

The Defence Minister needs to be defended from

The pot-shots first unlikely to defend us *El Qanna*

The hundred who met in your name

My Lord Did not expect to be exposed thus *El Qanna*

The roadblocks making monkeys of women

Driving in cool cars, calling policemen idiots *El Qanna*

Others sit at home, cooking their meals waiting

To be let out in a month, or a few months *El Qanna*

The mosque, the temple and the churches

Have lost their people, your clue is clear, look elsewhere *El Qanna*

And so our lives remain changed, isolated but linked

We zoom with our phones and no longer our cars, *El Qanna*

The runways are for cows, the highways for Panda boys

The world has turned on its head, what have you done *El Qanna*

Elizabeth strains to hear you, sitting in her garden

The silence is deafening the message heard *El Qanna*

***Ghazal 52***

It was a cotton blue Indian dress that I wore, sit *beside me*

The day we met in church just you and I when you said come sit *beside me*

It was late in the evening, when the sun had slipped behind the hills

There was no one home, when you stood there saying come sit *beside me*

It was a room in Cheras when I had that fall

When the world was becoming too much for me you said come sit *beside me*

It was early one morning in my home with the warm red walls

You had come to see me with my diary and said come sit *beside me*

It has been many years since we have changed

The church and the world have changed, and I wish you said come sit *beside me*

We have sat on the pews in that same old church

You, pews away this Sunday but I have come to sit *beside you*

In the hours when my thoughts fall free on my page

And I am thinking about you it is as if you are here *beside me*

As life seems to be coming to a close and we are never bound

To meet again I have felt you have always sat there *beside me*



***Ghazal 53***

You are the balm for my sorrows *Mary my mother*

Sweetest scent of azure *Mary my mother*

We stood at the place of your apparition

Portugal, Portugal, my unbelief I gave you, *Mary my mother*

You came in a silent moment that afternoon by the grotto

Take me home you whispered *Mary my mother*

My own mummy she was our own Marie

Hand clasped in prayer every time *Mary my mother*

You carried our prayers to Him and unburdened us all

Such anguish you bore when they laid Him in your arms *Mary my mother*

This Good Friday the world stops weeping for a year

The tears spent as we send the dead away without farewell, *Mary my mother*

A lone bouquet of roses is offered in empty cathedrals

The priest without his congregation, *Mary my mother*

We are brought to our knees, nothing to do but pray

We call on you, faithless and fearful, *Mary my mother*

Show me your face teach us to be like you

Hail Mary you are full of grace, *Mary my mother*

Elizabeth your cousin recognised the Lord

Be amongst us at the hour of death *Mary my mother*

***Ghazal 54***

So it fascinated the giants of your culture, *Maulana*

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, *Maulana*

That a movement from a foreign land stringed

To the Leaves of Grass tied to the Rumi Story of the Reed, *Maulana*

Jesus the Christ and his disciples have come and gone

That brilliant Reza Aslan called him a zealot, *Maulana*

When they were no more awed by the parting of the sea

Looked for the all-consuming beloved, *Maulana*

We sat in that hall, quiet and still with anticipation

Their hands one heaven-ward and the other to the Earth, *Maulana*

Let me drink that wine, from the cup of the tavern boy

Spin in the delirium that is He, *Maulana*

Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, has lost his madness

Shakespeare was not a man, you are my nightingale *Maulana*

So the seed of transcendentalism was Sufism?

Tropes like a radif, in your ghazal, *Maulana*

Jesus filled the empty jars at the wedding at Cana

I sit in my garden, polishing the mirror, *Maulana*

Elizabeth, evangelised in the garden of books

Looking for you, amongst the red roses, *Maulana*

***Ghazal 55***

Did you send us those rainbows from *paradise*  
Are you restored and free, a spring in your step-in *paradise*

That night in pain, pain ravished your sleep  
Did you dream well last night, without us in *paradise*

Did your master give you a shaving of apples  
Did you shiver in anticipation as you did here in *paradise*

Was your meal light chicken broth, you would not eat  
Or did their angels serve you jambu in *paradise*

Did you make friends with the heavenly hands  
Or did you once miss Hans and Eva, there in *paradise*

Are you making friends with others in your new home  
Or are you spraying the home with your scent in *paradise*

Has the spring returned to those tired hind legs  
Are you restored to your nimble brown self in *paradise*

We know it was you Hurly, sending us that double arches

Signalling you had reached your new *paradise*

***Ghazal 56***

Is it the silence in Gabriel Oak's heart, *is it*  
Or the shape of her face against the dusk, *is it?*

Is the breath of Catherine and Heathcliff  
In the sad moorlands, sitting together, *is it?*

Is Sancar's punishing love for Nare  
Or the essence of Gildiz's quiet waiting, *is it?*

Which is true love, the kohled eyes of Cleopatra  
Or the lion's gait of Mark Anthony, *is it?*

Which is true love, the dervish's dance  
Or the mystic's song, polishing the mirror, *is it?*

Which is it, the Hindu widow about to jump  
or the dead man's love turned to ice, *is it?*

Which is true, Laila bathing in the pool  
or that which turned him into Majnum, *is it?*

Elizabeth, which is true love,? Rumi's Shams

Hanging by the rope, deep in the well, *is it?*



***Ghazal 57***

They called it the Good Friday, *my beloved*

The day He is condemned to die, *my beloved*

Beginning from Sabah to Sarawak and to the peninsula

He carries his cross through every state, *my beloved*

There are mosques and temples and churches

He falls for the first time, *my beloved*

In azure blue she is painted, her heart bleeds wine

He meets his suffering mother, *her beloved*

They take pity on Him and at the Assunta junction

Simon helps carry the cross for *my beloved*

The women in their veils weep for Him

Veronica wipes His face, there the mark of *my beloved*

The Malaysian Meranti wood of the cross is heavy

He falls for the second time, *our beloved*

The robed Sufi women cry

He meets the women of Jerusalem, *my beloved*

Take this cup from me father, he had prayed

He falls for the third time, *my beloved*

The last cloth is removed, naked now His Majesty

He is stripped of every human dignity, *my beloved*

Pain is pain is pain, the moth moves to the candle

ah... He's nailed to the wood, *my beloved*

Death, like a friend at this hour of my lord

And so it comes now and at the hour, *my beloved*

Indeed the darkest hour the world has faced

As they take his broken body down the cross, *my beloved*

A cold slab of stone, his resting place

They laid Him there in the tomb, there *my beloved*

***Ghazal 58***

Just a short note to see how things are, *my love*

Things were alright then those years ago, *my love*

I must tell you not to write for the moment

I wrote you some letters not many I guess, *my love*

But if you must then here is a sort of an address

Some letters are addressed as dear and only one dearest, *my love*

But I sent you two Valentines the colour of wine

Oh yes, that Christmas card and the gift of the locket, *my love*

Because you are someone special who is wonderful to know

But when you left, a hole as big as the ocean filled my heart, *my love*

Because your friendship means much more

We had not started to touch, feel, kiss, *my love*

This Valentine's brings fire-lit thoughts about you and me

Those strings binding you to me fell loose and away, *my love*

And come to tell you once again how much I think of you

My young heart fluttered to another's heart, *my love*

You looked for me everywhere a question

A sense of guilt like an opened tap, *my love*

Our story begins and ends, begins and ends, circulating

A narrative, without a plot, without an end, *my love*

***Ghazal 59***

At the Ramada for *breakfast*

Alone at the club floor for *breakfast*

The half-filled coffee cup

The spoon beside the cup @ *breakfast*

A butter yellow napkin

Laid used on the right @ *breakfast*

Big red daisy with its stem cut, in a glass

My chair a soft beige facing the convergence @ *breakfast*

Elizabeth, looking out the window from the Melaka Ramada

Ancient Melaka looking at me looking at it @ *breakfast*

*Ghazal 60*

Hello, Mr Crow, where is your nest, *Mr Crow*

Are there little children walking, talking without food, *Mr Crow*

Are there baby chicks in your nest

Are those our kids who are without food or school, *Mr Crow*

Did you feed them this morning

Their parents at home, coughing, feverish, *Mr Crow*

I can hear them crying, crying

Have the rice cans been empty and Maggie packets done, *Mr Crow*

Hello, Mr Chow, where is your nest

Are your home trash cans filled with Grab wrappings, *Mr Crow*

Are there baby birds in your nest

Are their stomachs' rumbling, *Mr Crow*

Did you feed them this afternoon

Did we forget the security guards, the families, *Mr Crow*

I can hear them crying, crying

Some sit singing and binge watching, they sit data less, *Mr Crow*

Hello, Mr Crow, where is your nest

Hello, Mr Prime Minister, are we using them and forgetting them, *Mr Crow*

Are there baby birds in your nest the virus might kill thousands,

But millions are walking to their graves, hungry, *Mr Crow*

***Ghazal 61***

The little pup barked so long it barked shrill, *this morning*

I waited in the dark for ghazals to form, *this morning*

The table is strewn with law cases and coloured tags

Pages opened to Agha Shahid Ali, Neruda, Sudoku, *this morning*

A young woman is devastated at the loss of her mother

CNN conjures up blabber about America, *this morning*

The email remains queued despite the Forward

The world hopeless and limp, *this morning*

Outside the sky's a cloudless blue

The road leading out noiseless, grey, *this morning*

At the neighbourhood hospital

Efficiency, kindness, support was surreal, *this morning*

The blonde man there continues to make faces

Cutting the funds to WHO, missing the point, *this morning*



Some of us sitting on wooden garden chairs thinking  
Of travels this time next year, *this morning*

Yet others struggle to find their next meal  
As isolated darlings die by the thousands, *this morning*

***Ghazal 62***

The crooked ridges on the bitter gourd is deep at the *supermarket*

Taufu trays, soft hard or Japanese, all empty at the *supermarket*

Asked for four pearl-white Bawals to be cleaned

He hacked the gills, slashed the stomach at the *supermarket*

Bumped into the same tall customers, once at

the noodles aisle then at the sauces aisle at the *supermarket*

Shoppers were checked at the entrance, details to be signed

Older customers take longer, filling out details at the *supermarket*

Quickly go through the shopping list, missing out

the essentials, trying to do my best at the *supermarket*

***Ghazal 63***

So you visited us in Malaysia, in 1997 say those *letters*  
the third drawer in the filing cabinet held them all, those *letters*

One written on bright yellow  
others neatly typed by your secretary, typewritten *letters*

My replies to you I can only guess at now  
did I reply to each and every one of your *letters*?

The very first one of Sept 30th, 1997 starts with  
'It was the bright spot in a cold autumn day,' your *letter*

Once I started and stopped a letter and threw it out  
Write me a journal instead, of a *letter*

The model of a delightful bookshop  
reading space and a coffee corner, in your *letter*

While I have the time to read three or four books at once  
they are unrelated to each other 'in a natural way', says your *letter*

You moved from non-fiction to fiction

enjoying, essays, poetry and of course, *letters*

I liked your paper from the writing workshop

and the computer illustration, you wrote in that *letter*

I must have written to you of musings while driving

you agreed there's room for thoughts to slip in and roll around, the *letter* said

Elizabeth knows you sat in your garden sipping red wine

listening to wild ducks, songbirds, bees and your fountain, from your *letter*

***Ghazal 64***

Pleased to have your letter in the late morning mail, *I did*

Saved it until I got home and put dinner to cook, *I did*

Glad that you think, I feel and see as a child

Poured a glass of wine, read your letter, *I did*

Wished that I could join you at Diwali

Enjoyed it all the more because your letter was fragmented, *I did*

Happy to know that you'll be doing carolling

Pieces of your life, your creative work therein, *I did*

It is a magical thing, it is, while reading

Your letter, listening to Mikhail Pletnav's Sonatas, *I am*

Today I came home early, greeting the sun in the garden

Distracted by the children dressed in Halloween, *I will*

Plant bulb seeds are great wonders to me

Enjoyed it and had the feeling of privilege in being 'in on', *I did*

Scarlatti sparkles in the air, Jack wrote

You might write that, but not in the first person, I feel

Something in Slvas, make them feel what is between, the notes

More than 'memories' are involved, Elizabeth, I think.

Based on the letter of 31st October 1997

***Ghazal 65***

Christmas in my house, was dull, *Elizabeth*

I did not want to leave my mother, *Elizabeth*

Will probably not show up in Malaysia this year

The weather has begun to bother me these days, *Elizabeth*

Almost spring-like here in Valparaiso

A thick layer of ice has fallen on the lake, *Elizabeth*

Have been cleaning and filling the bird feeders

When blue skies darken with snow, the birds will be secure, *Elizabeth*

Thank you for the explanation of your name

Fascinating, a Malaysian has such a surname, *Elizabeth*

When I lived in Malaysia, I read a lot about Malaysia

And now I am reading a lot on China, *Elizabeth*

Have sent you some books through Matthew

But remember, only read what you like, *Elizabeth*

Wonder in the new year 1998, you will do

Something different, will you write a short story, *Elizabeth*

Have bought a second copy of a book that I like about

Teaching poetry, I think you will like it too, *Elizabeth*

It's a quiet evening and the lake is calm, dust, pollen

Fall on the surface and a lone fisherman in his boat, *Elizabeth*

Am drinking Earl Grey Tea and can never make up

My mind whether I like it or not, *Elizabeth*



*Ghazal 66*

I died because you infected me *Corona*

Your turned humanity into a heart-eating monster *Corona*

You appeared like a phantom from a faraway land

Travelled in a swift flight to Italy *Corona*

Visited wards at unwelcomed hours

Hissed at the white coats making them die *Corona*

Danced on the empty highways and drove poverty

Into the vacant stomachs of the migrants *Corona*

Tore the human heart and spluttered the veins,

Refusing a final resting bed oh *Corona*

Drove folks mad with fear and forgetting

To wipe the tears of the grieving yes *Corona*

American and China and India all taking positions

Each aimed, cocked to missile, despicable *Corona*

The only effective Trump is a card, open the Quran, the Bible

Love thy neighbour, the *Corona* way.

***Ghazal 67***

I am watching her watching you through the mirror, *mirror mirror*

She in a red gown, with auburn hair, *mirror mirror*

You were the figure of a man at twice its natural size

She, like Woolf, the women with that magic to reflect, *mirror mirror*

You were starting with the man in the mirror,

Michael Sylvia was waiting for her lot to change, *mirror mirror*

Since you never liked the colour of the man

We saw a tanned man with a white heart *mirror, mirror*

You were always the wizards in our narratives

She was always the witch, *mirror mirror*

You do that thing to us and you shame us ‘raped’

She is damned again, by marrying you, *mirror, mirror*

***Ghazal 68***

Alone and scared with a baby in my arms I called you, *Mr Iyer*  
Tormented by the blood, clashes and death I became a *Mrs Iyer*

You seemed so cold, amazingly single and debonair, Mr Iyer  
In my saree and my Tamil-English accent I was an odd *Mrs Iyer*

Our world was encrusted in ice, north and south Mr Iyer  
Only this journey like a little stream diverging, we were Mr & *Mrs Iyer*

I scorned your face till I saw the throat slit, oozing blood  
Then you became my arm, and I slept next to you, *Mr Iyer*

Are you going alone? Meenakshi asked, to our honeymoon  
Unless you come with me, *Mrs Iyer*

***Ghazal 69***

When you live in Petaling Jaya

How do you mourn a man like *Ifran*?

When your soul understands someone has left

How do you mourn a man like *Ifran*?

When you know he doesn't belong to you

How do you mourn a man like *Ifran*?

When you know those bedroom eyes will never open

How do you mourn a man like *Ifran*?

When his '*lunchbox*' is all you want

How do you mourn a man like *Ifran*?

When you live in a cabin car like Jaya in Qarib Qarib Singlle

How do you mourn a man like *Ifran*?

When you have lost all your words

How do you mourn a man like *Ifran*?

When you know this sadness doesn't belong to you

How do you mourn a man like *Ifran*?

When this ghazal wants to go on and on

How do you mourn a man like *Ifran*?

How do you mourn a man like Ifran

Elizabeth, how do you even begin to mourn, *Ifran Khan*?

***Ghazal 70***

Rice grains and ural dahl are soaked and blended for *breakfast*  
to make a frothy mixture, to be poured on a skillet for *breakfast*

An orange-coloured chutney with oil spluttered  
dried red chillies, onions and curry leaves for *breakfast*

Or whitish coconut ground smooth with fresh finger-like  
green chillies, on the side for *breakfast*

Sometimes a bevy of seeds, sesame and mustard seeds and  
tamarind juice is ground to a delight for *breakfast*

Maybe add a Malaysian dash of a sambal *ikan bilis*  
to zinc the spiciness of your meal for *breakfast*

Sometimes the thosai is a lovely pancake of white small in  
diameter, like a veethe thosai, for *breakfast*

At other times it is a delectable flat spread of *rava*  
with delicate holes on the surface, for *breakfast*

Malaysians eat their thosai, plain, crisp and lightly browned with a  
divinely scented dollop of ghee for *breakfast*

A piping glass of Nescafe tarik to wash down this  
plate of South Indian fare for *breakfast*



***Ghazal 71***

The land is bountiful, the people of Malaysia beautiful, ini *Negaraku*

Iban, Kadazan, Murut and others begini *Negaraku*

*Tawarikh* a subject we learnt in convent schools

Centuries of history condensed, page 19, page 20, kemaskini *Negaraku*

May 13th is present within every narrative

Those born after cringe but never ask, *Negaraku*

Contact lens ads bring to the boil

You hate my culture and my skin texture, *Negaraku*

Facebook and Instagram spill hate everywhere

Oozing pus, yellow and red, *Negaraku*

Every dead motorist on the road is a prophet

That dark drink driver behind the wheel, *Negaraku*

They dealt a hand at cards, the trick backfired

The wrong man drove to the palace, *Negaraku*

We eat Nasi Lemak with sambal belacan

We eat Thosai on banana leaves here in *Negaraku*

We shared our food once a upon a time

Now we look at each other's plates wondering, *Negaraku*

***Ghazal 72***

Ebony legs stumbled out of ships, *klung kling*

Brides from Tamil Nadu to Malaya, *klung kling*

Ebony legs to lonely, distant rubber estates

Tapping rubber, white snakes into coconut cups, *klung kling*

They secretly marry demure Salmah next door

Sinister hands claim them in death, *klung kling*

This *ikan pari* plundered and raped

For this he is selected senator this *klung kling*

This Kasthuri stands up in Parliament and they say

Put some powder on we cannot see you, *klung kling*

Your temples under every tree

We pull them down, hammering heads, *klung kling*

Robber, drunk driver and gangster

You die quickly in custody, *klung kling*

Malaysians in Merdeka ads, that's another story

We all dance to different tunes, *kling kling*

***Ghazal 73***

The Noritake, on the shelf below, *it does not matter*

That it is from Sri Lanka, white and bone China, perhaps *it does not matter*

The clock face with a mane of the sunflower

Does not breathe with a tick, tick, claps *it does not matter*

The glass piece, artwork by an American artist

Stacked behind, grandeur-less scraps, *it does not matter*

Little Santa swings his broken legs back and forth

He must be in pain, forwards, backwards, flaps, *it does not matter*

Crystal wine goblets cut to catch the light sparkle

Stand behind the odd missing decanter, snaps, *it does not matter*

Family photograph, younger faces, leans to the right

We cannot tell one from the other, relax, *it does not matter*

A white adapter, chargers plugged, on and red

Like a life support, always on, slacks, *it does not matter*

Glass and ceramic and crystal

Individually pretty, together a mess, crack, *it does not matter*

Elizabeth's cupboard with collectibles

Irrelevant to each other, facts, *it does not matter*

***Ghazal 74***

Red chillies, two small onions, one sprig of curry leaf, *on the ammi kaale*

One Malay baby, one Indian, one Chinese, *on the on the ammi kaale*

A length of *lengkuas*, with a touch of turmeric

Bits of black pepper and a Chinese herb, *on the on the ammi kaale*

A yellow star, a yellow crescent, blowing in the wind

Thirteen stripes whipping against the wind, *on the on the ammi kaale*

Fried *kacang* burnt brown and skinned, tanned

Crushed bits, the stone up and down, *on the on the ammi kaale*

Spiced *sambal*, ten dried red chillies, spurting

Seeds into the eyes, crushing, squashing, *on the ammi kaale*

*Pandan* leaves with a sheen of green

*Bunga kantan*, pink and sheer, *on the ammi kaale*

Tiny shrimps sprinkled with sea salt

Fermented frequently into *belacan*, *on the ammi kaale*

***Ghazal 75***

If we needed just one man, that must be you

Obama, strong, clever, dependable, *serendipity*.

If we needed just a Malaysian, that could be you

Anas, loving God, kind and gentle, *serendipity*.

If I needed just one American role model that could be you

Michelle, solid, steadfast and magical, *serendipity*.

If I wanted a song that sang to my soul, that could be you

Blake, suave, chiselled and chaste, *serendipity*.

If I could have you forever on my stage, that could be you

Ifran, unassuming, unknowingly handsome, *serendipity*.

If I wanted another song to love me tender, that would be you

Elvis, rock star extraordinaire, *serendipity*.

If I wanted a story to go on infinitely – The Museum of Innocence

Orhan, deft, brilliant and absorbing, *serendipity*.

If Elizabeth wanted an academic guide, then that must be you

Edwin, steadfast, dependable and kind, *serendipity*.



***Ghazal 76***

Aunties and Ammas seated smiling at the veranda @ tea

Uncles with ankles in slippers sitting on yellow chairs @tea

Directors, doctors, air-line fellows, little cousins in

Bouncy locks smocks watching swallows @tea

Mutton, the shaggy French poodle scampers

Through the low tables upsetting fellows @tea

The grey automatic door opens and closes

Letting through sisters and cousins with jello @tea

In planter boxes, brown and white, jasmine, *thulasi*

Open in tiny buds, conversations follow @tea

Curry puffs, fried banana fritters in large brown balls

Next to yellow pudding tossed in coconut also @tea

Shiny red cars line the little street in front

No 4, a Peugeot, a Honda and a Mazda auto @tea

Dusk chorus begins by the trill of

Magpies, twitter in vibrato, time to go from tea

*Ghazal 77*

He came to bed at midnight, silent night, *yesterday*

Radiotherapy zapped into his shoulder, like knife-sharp, *yesterday*

7.31 am, everyone got into the black Honda

Journeying through the MEX, driven by his wife, *yesterday*

The bird bath sputtered with the sun's raze

Sparrows angled their beaks for life, *yesterday*

Mr Alex came with his booming voice, like a gentle Christ

Senthi sat transfigured listening to him, *yesterday*

The *Rastali* was sour-ish, like a man's hand hooked

For the evening, the comb lay flat and ripe, *yesterday*

The tree shrew scampered around the cement planters

Hissing at each other, unusually hostile, *yesterday*

The aroma of Thannisar frolicked in the air

Green cooked sayur manis floated in yellow, *yesterday*

Students appeared online at 4 pm, restless

Reluctant to speak, looking away, eyes averted, *yesterday*

***Ghazal 78***

Shakespeare, Yeats and Wilde, top left of the *bookshelf*

T. S. Eliot, Elvis cannot be reached on the *bookshelf*

Elective everything from Plath's *The Colossus* and other poems

Slanting sleepily towards Gibran's on the *bookshelf*

The rogue 'Muttons' settled at my feet sweetly

Rumi's love hangs by the rope swinging on the *bookshelf*

*Wind Flowers, Contemporary Malayalam short fiction*

Borrowed from Vila twenty-five years ago still on my *bookshelf*

The white wooden calendar on the one side

March 2020 on display, to the left of my *bookshelf*

Jesus lays on his mother's lap, dead and damned

On the right of the window, opposite the *bookshelf*

Audible books scratch and speak their existence

A rogue button might silence the *bookshelf*

Elizabeth's audible will take on the books

Slitting your throat of words, emptying the *bookshelf*

***Ghazal 79***

Patients ride on wheeled chairs, Disneyland in *IKN*

Carers wear happy masks in this land, in *IKN*

IV tubes hang from u-shaped silver metals

Medicines like incense, vaping hands, in *IKN*

Car and automobiles trail routes here

On a Sunday these disappear, banned in *IKN*

Medicine zapped patients walk to and fro

Leaking life on the way home from *IKN*

Doctors like human Gods walk like divas

Juniors hang on every word, spilled in *IKN*

Patients arrive in cars as early as 7 am in the mornings

Their faces long with worry, what else from *IKN*

Some walk in with trolley bags, clothes, Milo and fruits

It's like going on a vacation, except this is to *IKN*

These days caregivers are not allowed

They can be seen sitting in cars and parks around *IKN*

The ambulance zooms around both the hospitals

Racing the heartbeats of those saying a silent prayer at *IKN*

For Elizabeth, this is a second home now

Planting a garden where lovebirds roam, in *IKN*

***Ghazal 80***

We used to fill out the class, not *online*

As the lecturers walked in before, not *online*

We watched the pretty ones walk

Past the lecturers, through the little glass, not *online*

The path to the lecture theatre

Walking together, in batches to class, not *online*

Our phones silently beeped our thoughts

Connected forever, to each other, *online*

Corona frightened us out of campus

Facing out laptops into our homes, *online*

Now we sit together in our home clothes

Our breath smelling of sleep, *online*

Days turned to weeks and weeks to months

Yet we are still in our rooms studying, *online*

They call it screen-fatigue now

Studying and working and playing and shopping, *online*

We liked it much when our lives were normal

Now I feel like a character in a game, *online*

May the day dawn, when matters ease

To walk back, in clans to class, not *online*

***Ghazal 81***

Who was her mother, *Ammachi*?

And what did she call her, *Ammachi*?

Did she play by the sea?

And what did she eat, *Ammachi*?

Did she dream about distant lands?

And did she ride in Indian cars, *Ammachi*?

Did she watch television in the evenings?

And did she have a favourite Disney character, *Ammachi*?

Did she have a 'kindred-spirit' friend?

And did they tell each other secrets, *Ammachi*?

Did she have friends?

And did she go to school, *Ammachi*?

Did she learn how to write?

And did she need books, *Ammachi*?

Did she have a dark complexion?

And what did she wear, *Ammachi*?



Did she fall in love

And does she remember her wedding day, *Ammachi*?

Did she cry herself to sleep

When my mummy left that day, *Ammachi*?

***Ghazal 82***

Are you the Francis we prayed for, *Francis*?

Will you carry the cross you wear, round your neck, *Francis*?

Are you the Head of the smallest country

Should you give away all the gold, what the heck, *Francis*?

Are you going to support a change in Papacy

Will there ever be an Obama-like speck, *Francis*?

Aren't your coffers filled to the brim

When will you stop the arms taking, cheques, *Francis*?

Are you the rock upon which the church was built

When will you notice the flock, left, *Francis*?

Are you still writing eloquent letters

When we do not go to mass, deft, *Francis*?

Are you leader of those priests

Who sex-slaved altar boys and nuns, *Francis*?

Are you going to stary cloistered in that fortress

When many of the flock have lost their homes, *Francis* ?

Are you going to make that change and give

When we need food on our table, not statues in empty churches, *Francis* ?

Are you going to be the shepherd, you were meant to be

Will you continue to walk with your staff, sheep-less, *Francis* ?

***Ghazal 83***

What does it matter that she wore a *lehenga* and you called it a saree?

*Just busy being roses*

What does it matter that we didn't know about appropriation?

*Just busy being roses*

What does it matter if one appropriates or appreciates?

*Just busy being roses*

What does it matter that you don't know who is Tamil, Malayali?

*Just busy being roses*

What does it matter that you read into all sorts of ideas?

*Just busy being roses*

What does it matter where our fore-mothers came from

*Just busy being roses*

What does it matter that you have taken the rakyat's money

*Just busy being roses*

What does it matter that the chicken was slaughtered this way?

*Just busy being roses*

What does it matter that you become the leader of this country?

*Just busy being roses*

What does it matter who I am except that this is my country?

*Just busy being roses*

***Ghazal 84***

The mailbox is an envelope you click like magic, on the screen

The address is @gmail *on the screen*

Fingers run across the keys in 100-meter races

Blank page stares silently, *on the screen*

The mouse sits on my table blue-toothed

Sending silent signals to the keyboard, *on the screen*

Often, I forget the password created

To spend hours re-creating a password, *on the screen*

How I wish Corona was an antivirus

That my kaspersky can isolate and quarantine, *on the screen*

That a worm is just that brown red things that make you squirm

Not one that snakes through your contacts, *on the screen*

When huge files comes in coloured stacked squares tiny

One may un-zip, like the back of a dress, opening all, *on the screen*

That when the pop-up says will you accept cookies

A tray of fresh baked cookies appear, *on the screen*

That Java is like the coffee beans it is named after

Not a language that computers speak to us in, *on the screen*

The anti-virus stalls Elizabeth's computer, 5 am

Creating a firewall, my winking cursor, *on the screen*

***Ghazal 85***

Homes are lit, golden and bright, lit lights

The smell of carbine permeated before, lit *lights*

Little children walk along at night

Swinging lanterns, distant chatter, moonlit *lights*

Rooftops are a fairyland of various sparks

Strings of stars golden yellow and red, bright *lights*

Saraswathy sits on a lotus flower

On either side hands outstretched palms, *lights*

The Rosary of prayers enters the ears

Mother Mary in the centre, surrounded by *lights*

We used to obey them, passing for green

Slowing down for orange, stopping for red *lights*

The young south-Indian bride is a symbol

Illuminating her new home, light of *lights*

In our homes, the darkness of late evenings

Are dispelled before the sun sets with *lights*



The young south-Indian bride is a symbol

Illuminating her new home, light of *lights*

*Ghazal 86*

The dark hour brushed against my heart, for my *Mother*  
Closing of a chapter, present everywhere, for my *Mother*

I remember, you remembering how alone you were  
Looking at your mum, she was cold you said, my *Mother*

Evenings at the park where little children played swing  
Friends sat on low stools chatting with my *Mother*

She never sat in front of the telly watching Malayalam drama  
Always on the yellow tiled floor, like in India, *my Mother*

She wore a deep coloured purple saree on Sunday  
Fine hair framed her freckled face, my Malayali *Mother*

She only ate the neck and the bones in the chicken curry  
Keeping the best for him and us, my Indian *Mother*

She never worked in an office like she wanted us to  
But I remember her scooping salt into packets my *Mother*

She never finished school in that remote part of Trivandrum  
But became the voice in our heads, my Catholic *Mother*

We girls, never far away from her but on that final hour

She knew each, like herself, my fading *Mother*

***Ghazal 87***

The ahluroo smelt of rotten everything in *Bamboo Gardens*

Biawaks lived with us in *Bamboo Gardens*

Muslim women draped in red sarongs, wore white blouses

Covered their head speaking rapid Tamil in *Bamboo Gardens*

The shop on the slope served spicy *roti canai*

Steaming Nescafe panas early every morning in *Bamboo Gardens*

The milo-coloured river snaked through this *taman*

Carried waters from strange kitchens in *Bamboo Gardens*

The chatter that used to be Malayalam stirred with English

Now speak something strange in *Bamboo Gardens*

Sunday mornings saw Catholics dressed in best sarees

Carry their confessions to church, living in *Bamboo Gardens*

Others lived among the Malaysians, the Chettys, and the Chinese

And that lone Malay family, at the top of the valley in *Bamboo Gardens*

Big lorries travelled passed our small homes carrying sand

Dust like snow settled everywhere around the homes in *Bamboo Gardens*

In November the Monsoons brought the rains down this valley

Families did nothing but stop and stare at this invasion in *Bamboo Gardens*

Evening time saw the rakyat gather in little circles, telling stories

Of sambars cooked with salted-fish for lunch in little kitchens in *Bamboo Gardens*

***Ghazal 88***

Black grey among white and rust red, *stones*

Polished with varnish next to each other, *stones*

Mutton hopped and jumped over the barricade

Into the garden and grabbed the black *stone*

The monitor lizard walked near the birds of paradise

Everyone screamed but for the grey-white *stones*

In the front porch, half circles were created

Then a lorry-load of grey-ish gems, *stones*

The magpies we called Louisa and Martin

Worked every hour twig by twig, above the *stones*

The bougainvillea flowered day after day

Bright and brilliant red, lilac and lavender, next to the *stones*

When the rains came water stagnated above

For a while they became a pond, white and black grey *stones*

Among them soil and dog hair have gathered

Wild weeds have sprung to life among these *stones*

The potted Bushida stands erect on this plot

Bird seeds like Edinburgh summer rain on these *stones*

Elizabeth, at the settee spilling secrets

Knowing no one hears it here, except *stones*

***Ghazal 89***

At house No 2 there is a gang of dogs, at *Lorong 4/48C*

Bella the black new rotti with her group, on *Lorong 4/48C*

House No 4, there are almost as many dogs as family

With Muttons the newbie puppy, Don, of *Lorong 4/48C*

House No 6 there are a number of shortees

Who loves a shit all along on *Lorong 4/48C*

House No 8, there are kids who zoom in bicycles

Setting all the dogs in a frenzy when they ride along *Lorong 4/48C*

House No 10 there are two rogue terrors, who roam without a leash

Who the neighbours dislike all along *Lorong 4/48C*

Just yesterday one black and one brown, abandoned and alone

Were caught on camera bonking at the entrance of *Lorong 4/48C*

House No 2 on Jalan Tandang, lives the Ban dog

Aslan, whose bark rattles the gates all along *Lorong 4/48C*

A recent addition to House No 2 has come to be

Kaiser, a pup born on Christmas 2020 has come to *Lorong 4/48C*



All along this lane, neighbours know each other by their dogs

The bane of the grab driver and the poslaju person often at *Lorong 4/48C*

***Ghazal 90***

In an empty church with a single candle, *silence?*

In your own head when you first awake, *silence?*

In the space between one wave and another

And the beach is falling asleep, *silence?*

When the last customer has left and the tables

Are clean and cash register is shut, *silence?*

When the actors have played their parts

And the director shouts his last cut, *silence?*

When the dogs are out on their guard

And the family goes to bed, the lights out, *silence?*

When the body is laid to rest in its best

And the crying exhausted, the coffin closed, *silence?*

When the last drop of water drips from the tap

And you are tired of always being afraid, *silence?*

When the clear oil in the black wok remains still

And the fish has turned the perfect shade, *silence?*

When you have finished, twenty thousand words

And know it is done, the screen blank, *silence*?

When everything that needs to be said has been said

And nothing changes, there is nothing but *silence*.

***Ghazal 91***

The kitchen, a make-shift, roughly put *space*  
Remember you were always happiest in this *space*

Memories were always nice here  
Except for the day he hammered you, in this *space*

But I will never ever recall this again  
For you loved your room, you called your *space*

You sliced and cut all the little bits  
We bought from the market to cook, in your *space*

To feed, to keep our tummies full  
Salted fish and Sambar, aromatic in your *space*

Aunties used to come by your kitchen  
Delighting in your curries and pickles, in this *space*

For me, you are always here busily  
Working the pressure cooker, steaming the *space*

Your darling brother would come to the backdoor

Every morning to see your smile, believing you are happy in this *space*

Each of us had to eat ten peddies, rice and curry and some veg

Sitting on the floor in a circle, before we could leave this *space*

In my mind you are always there

Among your 'ever-silver' with *Mooru* and limes, in your *space*

***Ghazal 92***

Click the app, if food is what you want, *grab*

Tap on the app, if a driver, you want, *grab*

Yesterday, the *Agong* checked into IJN

Mahathir, Anwar and the lot, in a *grab*

On every ride around the roundabout

Like bullets from a M-16, the drivers for *grab*

During a Pandemic, we were confused

Trying to make sense, losing the grip, on *grab*

Like a virus quickening fever

You gotta grab food, grab car and pay *grab*

The black pup runs to the gate, tail wagging

He thinks Uncle grab is here, barks, *grab! grab!*

Elizabeth's statement is on repeat payment

Every item on the list, paid to *grab*

*Ghazal 93*

Little bits of fish curry and a little bit of another curry, at the *Mamak's*  
 Malaysians we dress-code in T-shirts, shorts and slippers, at the *Mamak's*

You used to speak another tongue when you first  
 Appeared at these shores, but now are you that *Mamak*?

Once they called you other names, Hey Keling!  
 Hey Chulia, Hey Jawi Peranakan, but hey *Mamak*!

Thinking of Nasi Kandar, thinking of Pasombor  
 When your little corner shack appears in my dream, *Mamak*

We know your look, we see it in your eboniness  
 You hide that blood and deny you are a *Mamak*

The canai is more crucial to us, than the GE15  
 Teh tarik is crucial, at the *Mamak's*

Some of these have become hard to tell  
 They have grown so large and posh unlike a *Mamak*

Every roti canai cheese and roti canai banjir started here  
 Kopi O panas brewed to perfection unlike any other but at the Mamak's

The big bellied boss with the stained checked sarong  
Has now morphed into a suave 40-something *Mamak*

He speaks only in Bahasa Malaysia, loud and clear  
Behind the counter, a bejewelled Santhanam smelling beauty, for the *Mamak*



***Ghazal 94***

What if Parameswara never came to *Malaya*?

What if Sabah and Sarawak never became *Malaya*?

What if my mother and your mother

Never left China and never thought about *Malaya*?

What if Penang never separated from

Peninsular like a finger to *Malaya*?

What if the British never came and the Portuguese

Never came and Indonesia claimed *Malaya*?

What if we were never colonised

By the Portuguese or the British or the Japanese in *Malaysia*?

What if that opposition dance of celebration

Never happened to us, that darkest day in *Malaysia*?

What if Isa never drove the evil spirit

Into the pigs, still banned in *Malaysia*?

What if we were re-cast as mono-chrome

And our brains re-set, re-booted as *Malaysians*?

What if we all awoke one morning

To find ourselves as refugees in Singapore, *Malaysians?*

What if Corona came and went

And we did not learn anything from it, *Malaysians?*

***Ghazal 95***

Mornings are always the same *with promise*

Singing magpies, the sky paints its brilliance, *with promise*

Greedy politicians like orangutans jump up and down

Yet the postman completes his job *with promise*

The prime minister, prime primate, tries to hold on

Yet the doctor sees the patients, *with promise*

The man of the hour hides away in IJN

While his guards stand alert, *with promise*

The CEOs of the GLCs zip around changing sides

Yet the manager sends messages, *with promise*

The elite buzz around the stink

Yet Malaysians, cog the wheel, *with promise*

The MPs roam the world with special license

The garbage collectors' visit every tong, in this heat *with promise*

Politicians dance every tune to their convenience

Malaysians work every minute on-line, off-line and phone-lines *with promise*

Education Minister do not know who and what to educate

Students exams are scheduled for next week, *with promise?*

**Ghazal 96**

The headline says, 'Let's pretend 2020 did not happen.'

Where will all our lessons go *if we pretend 2020 did not happen*

The millions that perished because many believed they knew everything

Will we realise there is a bigger stronger power *if we pretend 2020 did not happen*

The babies that we made when you became worried

Stole in between my arms *if we pretend 2020 did not happen*

The Almighty is everywhere, in the sick, the hungry and the Panda drivers

When going to church is just part of the motion, *if we pretend 2020 did not happen*

World leaders who were not leaders but liars

Would not be confirmed liars *if we pretend 2020 did not happen*

Malaysian would not understand that despite it all we belong here

Patients in quarantine centres without politicians *if we pretend 2020 did not happen*

Teachers would not miss their students as they do now

Having lost the faces of little ones *if we pretend 2020 did not happen*

Our gardens that were yellow with neglect and mealy bugs then

Growing from mere shoots to larger bigger plants *if we pretend 2020 did not happen*

God would not be God, we would believe

We are divine *if we pretend 2020 did not happen*

That weddings were not marriages, the dress the party and the food and show

Need not be colour matched, coordinated, *if we pretend 2020 did not happen*

***Ghazal 97***

Choose the kind of rice for your *banana leaf*

Here in 'Pure Sivam' for your *banana leaf*

The walls of white bleach our spirit

To devour rice, sambar-soaked, on *banana leaf*

Many English-speaking Petaling Jaya patrons

For breakfast, for lunch, for tea for *banana leaf*

We come back each day for this invigorating

Energy, brown bru coffee with ghee thosai on *banana leaf*

Your doors opened in the quiet of the Covid

The line of customers starting at the bank for *banana leaf*

Familiar faces from the temporarily shut Lotus Family Restaurant

Return utensils to the whitewashed bins after a *banana leaf*

Thus the mangoes, lady fingers and pumpkins

In this white spaced heaven calmly vegetarian on a *banana leaf*

The orange coconut chutney served in circular little bowls

Malaysian English murmur table to table waiting for a *banana leaf*

The mantras dance whirls of air, softly placidly

Around the shell-liked ears of its patrons contemplating a *banana leaf*

Some leave with their cutlery and used plates uncleared

Waiters roll their eyes in irritation at some patrons of this *banana leaf*



***Ghazal 98***

You hold many of my payasam *sweet memory*  
Hundred ghazals to store my payasam *sweet memory*

In the garden in Banting, holding hands  
To see my baby sister, payasam *sweet memory*

We are in our mummy and girls' room laughing hard  
Because we would otherwise cry, payasam *sweet memory*

When our darlings were born, Chelsea, Kamu, Ally and Nigel  
Our hearts like balloons, our payasam *sweet memory*

When our mummy's sufferings were over  
When she returned to her mother, payasam *sweet memory*

Realisation that there is a better world  
More lasting with my saviour, payasam *sweet memory*

Acknowledging, in my heart, that faith is all I need  
To war away my fears, payasam *sweet memory*

When I place the pieces of tenggeri into the vessel  
The eversilver pot you cherished, I remember your delight, payasam *sweet memory*

When I drape the white mundu around myself

All the years fade away, I am once more in our home, *payasam sweet memory*

You mummy have passed from this life a mortal

Remained entrenched in our minds, like a raisin in our *payasam sweet memory*

*Ghazal 99*

A thunderous splutter and a start of the Gogal *generator*

Chinese opera in open spaces, with painted faces, high pitched language *generator*

My mind wakes up to images of street food, pots of boiling soup, gurgling lard

Fish balls on sticks, sour shavings of green mangoes, pickle *generator*

Folks in Sungai Petani know that the fun for the holidays has begun

Cantonese Drama with the clanking of cymbals at every scene, the din *generator*

Walked our cousins there when they visited, our home entertainment

In Cantonese folklore, with a critical analysis to this paralysis *generator*

Waited for Murthi brother to take us there, we helped him empty his wallet

Carrying bags of hot soup, sour pickles, stretched cuttlefish, food *generator*

In other Malaysian tamans, similar scenarios play out during the season

When our playgrounds and turned into viewing fields with a *generator*

For two weeks we follow the din from this Chinese drama

The children go back home from play with the start of the *generator*

For two weeks the children go to sleep when the show ends

The machine is shut off, kids of the taman know it's time to sleep like the *generator*

One year the celebration was different with suckling pigs on tables

A grand dinner feast at the start of the evening show, indeed a double noise *generator*

At our home, when we had enough of this Chinese kuttu, as we called it

We skipped with joy to see the vacant spot now, where it was, the *generator*

*Ghazal 100*

Perched on the bushida, keeping watch over the *kedondong pickers*

They sometimes strolled and sought us, those *kedondong pickers*

Sitting together, holding hands as if lately married

Drinking Indian tea out of Portmeirion ceramic, these two *kedondong pickers*

Muttons runs out with a white slipper between his puppy white teeth

And soon there is a run and chase around the garden for one *kedondong picker*

The thermometer threatens with its blinking eye, reading 38.4

I have many more countries to go to says one *kedondong picker*

The alien air of the emergency room quickens the heartbeat

Disinfectant chills like ice, panic foreshadows, this *kedondong picker*

Senthi, pick the fruits on the top of the tree please

I cannot Lizzy, my stiff hands won't reach over for this *kedondong picker*

The bird bath stands erect, almost in the centre of the green

Sending spurts of water in a spray, surprising the *kedondong pickers*

The magpies are back in the garden singing

Watching from their perch, eyeing the *kedondong pickers*

The sun has retreated, the azan fills the air

What shall we have for dinner, asked the *kedondong pickers*

Another set of magpies are building a nest on the red palm tree

It has been a year the previous set did the same, recalls the *kedondong pickers*

### Glossary

Nos	Terms	Ghazal Nos	Explanation
1	9th May 2018	1	The day that the Malaysian media labelled as “the day that shook Malaysia” and one that will be etched in the minds of Malaysians. It was Polling Day of Malaysia’s 18 <sup>th</sup> Elections. The 18 <sup>th</sup> Elections witnessed the formation of a new government showing the exit to the ruling party of 60 years.
2	cerita	1	Means “story” in the Malay language.
3	Elaha	1	Of Persian origin meaning “God.”
4	Ah Chee	3	A term of endearment for an elderly Chinese woman commonly used in Malaysia.
5	kelapa-parut	3	“Grated coconut” in the Malay language.
6	kerisik	3	“Roasted grated coconut” a popular ingredient in Malaysian cooking.
7	Baju	4	“Clothes” in the Malay language.
8	lepas raya	4	“After Hari Raya Aidilfitri” (Eid-Mubarak) celebrations.
9	Mak ciks	4	“Aunties” in the Malay language.
10	Pak Ciks	4	“Uncles” in in the Malay language.
11	Raya	4	Raya in the Malay Language means “celebrations.” Raya usually refers to Hari Raya Aidilfitri (Eid Mubarak) which marks the end of the Muslim Holy month of Ramadan. This significant celebration is considered the festival of gratitude to God and is celebrated with families and loved ones. In Malaysia Raya is the time of feasts, homecoming, contemplation, forgiveness, and reconciliation.
12	umis	4	Refers to “"mother” as used by children in Malay homes in Malaysia.
13	Zaloras	4	Refers to an international fashion house in Malaysia.
14	ah	6	An idiocentric expression; to ask a question.

15	bak kut teh	6	In the Hokkien (Chinese) dialect Bak Kut Teh means “Meat Bone Tea.” It is a pork ribs broth cooked with a variety of spices and served with rice. In Malaysia, it is eaten during breakfast, lunch dinner and late-night supper.
16	NTU	6	Nanyang Technology University in Singapore.
17	The Arts House	6	The Old Parliament house in Singapore which has been converted into a multi-disciplinary arts venue. The Arts House plays host to art exhibitions and concerts.
18	Khairy	7	Khairy Jamaluddin is a Malaysian politician. He is the current Minister of Science Technology and Innovation (2021).
19	ku	7	Means “me” in the Malay language.
20	Pahang, Kelantan and Kedah	7	States in Malaysia.
21	kavadi	8	A term in the Tamil language that means “carrying a weight or burden on the shoulder. It is a contraption that is designed to be carried by Hindu devotees to fulfil a vow made to the Hindu deity, Lord Muruga.” In Malaysia it is common for Hindu devotees to carry the “Kavadi” during “Thaipusam” (see below).
22	Mariappan	8	A South Indian name.
23	Seelans	8	A South Indian name.
24	sitapas	8	Means uncles in the Tamil language.
25	Subramaniam	8	Refers to a Hindu deity Lord Subramaniam. This deity is also known as “Lord Muruga.” Subramaniam is a very common south Indian name.
26	Thaipusam	8	A Hindu festival celebrated on the first day of the Hindu month “Thai.” This religious Hindu festival is celebrated in honour of the Hindu deity Lord Muruga or Lord Subramaniam. Thaipusam is observed by Hindus all over Malaysia.



27	vel vel	8	A Hindu chant in honour of Lord Muruga or Lord Subramaniam. This chant is commonly heard during the Thaipusam celebrations.
28	karupooravalli	9	The Tamil name for the herbal plant “Thick Leaf Lavender” ( <i>Anisochilus carnosus</i> ).
29	kunyit	9	Turmeric in the Malay language.
30	tulisi	9	“Holy Basil” ( <i>Ocimum tenuiflorum</i> ) in the Tamil language.
31	mundhu	10	A garment worn around the waist in the South Indian state of Kerala. This apparel is similar to the sarong or dhoti worn by males. The Mundu Saree is worn by women in the state of Kerala.
32	alah, alah	11	A Turkish expression similar to the English expression “good grief.”
33	chaittiappam	11	A sweetmeat cooked by the Keralites on special occasions.
34	Ang Pows	11	A gift of money usually in a red packet. Ang pows are usually given out during the Chinese Lunar Year. The colour red is a symbol of good luck. Traditionally Ang pows are given by elders and married couples to children, teenagers and unmarried adults.
35	Loh he	11	The act of “tossing up good fortune” This is a practice amongst the Chinese is the highlight during the Chinese Lunar Year celebrations. To facilitate the tossing of good fortune, Yee Sang, a Chinese delicacy is used.
36	pottu	11	A colored dot worn at the center of the forehead, originally by Hindus and Jains. Hindu and Jain women who are married will use the red dot.
37	Diwalis	14	Diwali or Deepavali is the Festival of Lights celebrated by Hindus, Jains, and Sikhs.
38	Jubahs	14	“Robes” in the Malay language.
39	Jumkhas	15	A type of earrings worn by Indian women.
40	sittys	15	Means “Aunties” in the Tamil language.

41	SP	15	Refers to Sungei Petani, a town in the state of Kedah in Malaysia.
42	veshtis	15	Another term for Dhotis that is worn by Indian men.
43	appam baliks	15	A sweet Malaysian “turnover pancake” made with flour, peanuts, sugar, and margarine.
44	goreng pisangs	15	“Banana fritters” in the Malay language.
45	Jalan	16	Means “road” in the Malay language.
46	Jalan Gasing	16	Gasing Road is one of the main roads in Petaling Jaya city in the state of Selangor Malaysia.
47	Jln Tar, Jln Ipoh, Jln Pudu	16	Tunku Abdul Rahman Road (Jln Tar) is one of the main roads in Kuala Lumpur Malaysia, named after its first Prime Minister.
48	Myvis	16	A popular Malaysian made car.
49	Bahasa ke Malaysia	16	My coinage, playing on the term Bahasa Malaysia, the Malay Language. Written in this manner to ask, is Malay a language?
50	ke	16	Means “to” in the Malay language.
51	Bahasa saja bukan Malaysia	17	My coinage, meaning “only language, not Malaysia.”
52	war foo shu tau	17	Means “I do not know” in the Chinese language.
53	Hokkien	17	A Chinese dialect originating from the Fujian Province in Southern China.
54	pasombors	17	A Malaysian salad consisting of shredded cucumber, turnips, prawn fritters, potatoes, and boiled egg topped with peanut sauce.
55	Tanjung Bunga	18	A premier residential area located in the state of Penang in Malaysia.
56	Tanjung Tokong	18	A coastal town located in the state of Penang in Malaysia.
57	dah makan?	18	Means “have you eaten” in the Malay language.

58	keuy teow	18	A flat noodle made from rice flour.
59	pandan	19	Screw pine leaves.
60	roti	19	Bread in the Malay language.
61	sambal	19	A spicy condiment made from chillies, onions, garlic, and ginger and ground to a paste. This sambal forms the base ingredient for many Malaysian dishes.
62	sambal sotong	19	Squid cooked in sambal.
63	Queen of Sheba	19	A game.
64	Mamoothy	19	A popular actor from the Kerala, India.
65	Mundu	20	A garment worn around the waist in the South Indian state of Kerala. This apparel is similar to the sarong or dhoti worn by males. The Mundu Saree is worn by women in the state of Kerala.
66	Bangla	26	A term used in Malaysia referring to Bangladeshis.
67	Jalan Penchala	26	Penchala Road is one of the main roads in the city of Petaling Jaya located in the state of Selangor, Malaysia.
68	MEX	27	A highway in Kuala Lumpur.
69	payasam	27	A kind of sweet pudding from the Indian sub-continent. It is made with rice or vermicelli, sugar and milk.
70	Orrapum	27	A snack from Kerala made with flour and coconut.
71	Tokong	30	“Temple” in the Malay language.
72	Oropom	31	A snack from Kerala made with flour and coconut.
73	RC	33	Risen Christ.
74	El Qanna	39	Exodus 34.14
75	Reza Aslan	43	Reza Aslan is an Iranian-American scholar of religious studies, writer, and television host.
76	jambu	51	Guava fruit.

77	Gildiz's	54	Name of a character from the Turkish drama, <i>The Ambassador's Daughter</i> .
78	Majnum	56	A stock character from Urdu literature. The melancholic lover.
79	Sancar'	56	Name of the male lead from the Turkish drama <i>The Ambassador's Daughter</i> .
80	Bawals	56	"Pomfret Fish" in the Malay language.
81	Taufu	56	"Bean curd" in the Malay language.
82	Qarib Qarib Single	62	Title of a Hindi movie.
83	ikan bilis	62	"Anchovies" in the Malay language.
84	ural dahl	69	Split black lentils.
85	veethe thosai	70	Homemade dosas.
86	kemaskini	70	Means "update" in the Malay language.
87	Negaraku	70	The national anthem of Malaysia.
88	Tawarikh	71	"History" in the Malay language.
89	ikan pari	71	Stingray fish in the Malay language.
90	Kasthuri	71	South Indian female name.
91	kling kling	72	The sound of bells.
92	ammi kaale	72	A rectangular shaped rough unpolished stone with a cylindrical, movable stone on top that is used to make wet/dry masalas and chutneys in Indian households.
93	Ammas	72	Mothers.
94	sayur manis	74	Sweet vegetable ( <i>Sauropus androgynus</i> ).
95	IKN	76	The National Cancer Institute of Malaysia.
96	Ammachi	77	Aunty in Malayalam (language of Kerala).
97	rakyat's	79	Means "people" in the Malay language.
98	Saraswathy	81	Goddess of Knowledge revered by Hindus. It is also a popular South Indian female name.
99	ahluuroo	83	This term is used by Malaysians of South Indian origin and refers to the "drain" that is built around houses. The term "ahluuroo" is

			adapted from the Malay term for drain “alur.”
100	Biawaks	85	Monitor lizards.
101	Chettys	87	A clan from South India renown for being astute moneylenders.
102	panas	87	“Hot” in the Malay language.
103	rakyat	87	People.
104	Bushida	87	a Japanese moral code concerning Samurai attitudes, behaviour, and lifestyle.
105	poslaju	87	The postal service in Malaysia.
106	peddies	88	Short form for pedicure.
107	Agong	89	Refers to the King in Malaysia.
108	IJN	91	The National Heart Institute of Malaysia.
109	canai	92	An Indian-influenced flatbread which is popular in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Brunei.
110	Chulia	92	A street in the Penang Island, Malaysia.
111	Jawi Peranakan	93	Refers to locally born, Malay-speaking Muslims of mixed Indian and Malay ancestry. Over time, this has grown to include people with Arab ancestry as well. They are an ethnic group found primarily within the Malaysian state of Penang and in Singapore, both regions were part of the historical Straits Settlements ruled by the British.
112	Keling	93	Keling or Kling is a word used in parts of Southeast Asia to denote a person originating from the Indian subcontinent. Nowadays it is considered offensive to refer to Indians as Keling.
113	Mamak’s	93	Persons who are of Indian Muslim decent or origin living in Malaysia or Singapore. The Mamaks are famous for their food stalls/restaurants.
114	Nasi Kandar	93	A popular northern Malaysian dish, which originates from Penang. It was popularised by Indian Muslim traders (Mamaks). It is a

			meal of steamed rice paired with a variety of meat curries and side dishes.
115	Pasembur	93	A Malaysian salad consisting of shredded cucumber, turnips, prawn fritters, potatoes and boiled egg topped with peanut sauce.
116	Teh tarik	93	The English translation of teh tarik is “pulled tea.” This popular hot milk tea beverage is most commonly found in restaurants, outdoor stalls and cafes in Malaysia and Singapore. Its name is derived from the pouring process of "pulling" the tea during preparation.
117	eversilver	93	Household items made of stainless steel and imported from India. When these products were introduced into the Malaysian market, they were termed “ever sliver” due to their permanent silvery shine.
118	taman	93	Garden or Park.
119	Portmeirion	100	English tableware.

## Chapter 4

### Reflection On Ghazals

#### *Introduction*

In this chapter, the reflection is structured thus: the first section deals with themes, in which 18 ghazals are specifically discussed under the heading, teenage years. In the following section, I reflect on the ghazals that deal with Malaysian festivals and celebrations, in an attempt to recount the impetus for crafting ghazals that were sometimes referred to as *anti-ghazals*. Then, followed by sections on my reflections of how Malaysian food, language, and socio-cultural allusions are embedded within these ghazals. The final segment includes reflections on the deliberate use of Catholic imagery as a form of appropriation of this traditionally Muslim construct. These ghazals also embody the challenges and struggles I faced as a Catholic-Malaysian woman of Indian origin. Finally, the reflective essay deals with how the structure of the English ghazal was the best suited structural home for my poems. I discover that the rules in *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English* allowed a sense of certainty to my craft. In writing the ghazals, I endeavoured to adhere to all the basic structural rules but owing to various constraints, I achieved different degrees of success.

In this way, I hybridised the English ghazal. Secondly, I created ghazals that are multi-toned and thirdly, I used a predominantly Sufi-Muslim construct to house biblical metaphors and allusions. The Malaysian hybrid ghazals I wrote were polyglots because they were not exclusively written in English as when I penned the ghazals, I also used Malay, Tamil, Malayalam, Arabic as well as English. Consequently, to fruitfully decipher the meanings of these ghazals, it is necessary for the reader to understand the nuances of these languages. For instance, in Ghazal 3 from Chapter 3 of this thesis, the refrain is “Ah Chee”

which is a Malaysian term of endearment commonly used by the Chinese community amongst themselves. Later, it became common for people of other races to address older womenfolk of Chinese or Indian ancestry with the term “Ah Chee.” This is one example of how non-English words were incorporated into the ghazals to add a Malaysian flavour to the ghazals I wrote.

Other instances when words from other Malaysian languages are incorporated are found in Ghazals 4, Ghazal 6, Ghazal 8, Ghazal 11, Ghazal 16, Ghazal 17, and Ghazal 19 (*see* Chapter 3). The ghazal’s origins was from a non-English, non-Western domain and infusing it with non-English words was an additional step in claiming the form. In this way, my aim for this thesis is to problematise the main language of the ghazal (English) to include the various rhythms of the other vernacular languages to invoke the spirit of the ghazal. I also wanted to accommodate ghazals written in English but with code-mixing, to reflect a post-colonial Malaysian construct. In summary, my Malaysian ghazals are further hybridised by the inclusion of other languages such as Malay, Tamil, Malayalam, and Arabic.

Secondly, I crafted ghazals with melancholic and nostalgic tones. A relatively high percentage of the ghazals are love poems; a longing for lost opportunities; melancholic poems that fit well within the ghazal form. This is in keeping with the practice of the traditional ghazals, which were written by the Sufis to express this longing for the beloved, be it divine or human. In this manner the Malaysian hybrid ghazals I crafted followed the craft of the Sufis to some extent. However, the celebratory poems (Christmas, Raya, and Thaipusam) are also included as subject matter. More importantly, these celebrations were connected to Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, which are a few of the predominant religions practised by Malaysians. Under the subsection, *Influence of Sufist Imagery on the Ghazal* in Chapter Two, reference is made to Sufism and the ghazal. In summary, that section explains how the



ghazals were “infused with mystical thought.” In a similar manner, I attempted to connect my Malaysian ghazals with the practice of Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. However, I worked more with the practice of the religion and less with the theology. Although Shahid Ali insisted that the ghazals must have a melancholic tone and most of the 100 ghazals followed this requirement, a small percentage of the ghazals I wrote were happy ghazals. For instance, the food poems such as Ghazal 30 is a poem of seven couplets, each one a description of a type of Indian food that Malaysians are generally accustomed to. As such, the tone in this poem is joyful rather than melancholic, for most Malaysians take pleasure in eating, which is a favourite pastime (Duruz & Khoo, 2015). Granted that the ghazal form is best suited for melancholic subjects such as death and illness, yet it can also be the site for celebration, contrasting tones of melancholy and joy within a Malaysian ghazal.

Finally, I used a traditionally Sufi-Muslim construct (metaphors and allusions in traditional ghazals were Muslim-centric) to house my Malaysian-Catholic concerns. For example, Ghazal 11—which was essentially about the Passion of Christ in general, and Good Friday in particular—was an attempt to push the limits of what a ghazal might discuss. The refrain “Allah, Allah”—an incantation of the Muslim God—was used as a site for appropriation of the form to hint at the precarious Malaysian position on religious inclusivity. This was an attempt to widen the use of the ghazal form to encapsulate the real concerns of religious inflexibility and allow it to speak for multi-religiosity. This was done by appropriating a Sufi-Muslim construct such as the ghazal to encapsulate various non-Muslim concerns such as Jesus Christ’s Passion and Thaipusam. Fundamentally, the literary intention is to permit non-Muslim concerns, allusions, and metaphors to be used within the ghazal, intentionally to open the traditional form of the ghazals and to allow broader Malaysian concerns to be framed within these new, hybridised ghazals.

The ghazals in Chapter 3 are organised chronologically. I started writing these ghazals in 2018 and titled them accordingly. Ghazal 1 was the first ghazal written, while ghazal 100 the last. Therefore, these ghazals are arranged chronologically according to the date they were written. One reason for this was to keep with the tenets of the traditional ghazals that they ghazals are titled as they appear. Furthermore, ghazals are traditionally multi-themed, there is an acute sense of dissonance within the ghazal form which resists any re-organisation of the ghazals according to themes as is the norm. Even so, my attempt to classify them into broad categories as reflected in column four did no justice to the spirit of the ghazal. At the centre of ghazal is the idea of mysticism which is discussed in Chapter two. Ideas and themes within a ghazal might remain mysterious and ambiguous. Some of the ghazals remained outside this attempt to categorise them.

In the following sections, I will discuss in detail the ghazals categorised as teenage years. Most of the 100 ghazals belong to this broad category. There are 36 ghazals that fall within this category and these fundamentally are personal experiences that I encountered in my childhood from the age of five. Many of these ghazals are set in 4th Mile, Ipoh Road in a neighbourhood called Bamboo Gardens. They refer to my personal experiences and recollections of living there from the 1970s until the late 1990s.

The table consists of four columns which lists the ghazal titles, which are enumerated as they were written. This means that Ghazal 13 on row one is the earliest written ghazal in this group, within the theme of teenage years. The column with the heading, “Refrain” is important as a point of recall as naturally, it is difficult to remember what the ghazal was about unless reference is made to the refrain. When I wrote the ghazals, the refrain was most times the inspiration I needed to write a ghazal. In trying to recall the thematic strand of each ghazal, I normally looked for the refrain as a trigger to recall the ghazal.

The traditional ghazal is one that may go on and on and have no end, yet Shahid Ali did prescribe that the couplets should generally have between five to 15 couplets. Column four, with the heading “Themes” helps in this reflection as a means of contemplating on my own favourite subject. This table clearly indicates that within these 100 ghazals, memories of my teenage years were the inspiration behind most of the ghazals. This motif is relevant to my writing as it can be found in the earliest ghazals, starting from Ghazal 13, through to Ghazal 50 and even towards the end, in Ghazal 99.

**Table 1***Ghazals by Themes*

Ghazal	No	Refrain	Themes
Ghazal 15	1	Divali	Celebration
Ghazal 35	2	Child Is Born	Celebration
Ghazal 4	3	Lepas Raya	Celebration
Ghazal 5	4	Yuletide	Celebration
Ghazal 8	5	Vel Vel	Celebration
Ghazal 85	6	Lights	Celebration
Ghazal 10	7	Golden Border	Celebration
Ghazal 100	1	Kedondong pickers	Family
Ghazal 21	2	House of the Bougainville	Family
Ghazal 33	3	Vee One	Family
Ghazal 36	4	80s	Family
Ghazal 76	5	@tea	Family
Ghazal 79	6	IKN	Family
Ghazal 81	7	Ammachi	Family
Ghazal 86	8	My mother	Family
Ghazal 88	9	Stones	Family
Ghazal 89	10	Lorong 4/48C	Family
Ghazal 9	11	Green	Family
Ghazal 91	12	Space	Family
Ghazal 98	13	Sweetest Memory	Family
Ghazal 55	14	Paradise	Family
Ghazal 2	15	Fear	Family
Ghazal 19	1	Dah Makan	Food
Ghazal 30	2	Mouth Watering	Food
Ghazal 70	3	breakfast	Food
Ghazal 74	4	On the grinding stone	Food
Ghazal 97	5	Banana Leaf (food)	Food
Ghazal 59	6	At breakfast	Food
Ghazal 16	1	Maze	Malaysia
Ghazal 17	2	Bahasa Ke Malaysia	Malaysia

Ghazal 18	3	Pearl	Malaysia
Ghazal 27	4	MEX	Malaysia
Ghazal 51	5	El Qanna	Malaysia
Ghazal 6	6	Ah	Malaysia
Ghazal 61	7	This morning	Malaysia
Ghazal 62	8	Supermarket	Malaysia
Ghazal 66	9	Corona	Malaysia
Ghazal 67	10	Mirror Mirror	Malaysia
Ghazal 7	11	Strokes of the Cane	Malaysia
Ghazal 71	12	Negaraku	Malaysia
Ghazal 72	13	Kling Kling	Malaysia
Ghazal 80	14	Online	Malaysia
Ghazal 83	15	We are Just busy being roses	Malaysia
Ghazal 84	16	On the screen	Malaysia
Ghazal 92	17	Grab	Malaysia
Ghazal 93	18	Mamak	Malaysia
Ghazal 94	19	Malaya	Malaysia
Ghazal 95	20	With Promise	Malaysia
Ghazal 96	21	2020 did not happen	Malaysia
Ghazal 3	22	Ah Chee	Malaysia
Ghazal 11	1	Alah Alah	Spirituality
Ghazal 1	2	Elaha	Spirituality
Ghazal 12	3	New Church	Spirituality
Ghazal 53	4	Hail Mary	Spirituality
Ghazal 54	5	Maulana	Spirituality
Ghazal 57	6	My Beloved	Spirituality
Ghazal 82	7	Francis	Spirituality
Ghazal 13	1	Photographed	Teenage years
Ghazal 14	2	I Remember	Teenage years
Ghazal 20	3	The Interior	Teenage years
Ghazal 22	4	Guitar Man	Teenage years
Ghazal 23	5	Even a Kiss	Teenage years
Ghazal 24	6	I Tried Loving you	Teenage years
Ghazal 25	7	1978	Teenage years
Ghazal 26	8	Tony	Teenage years
Ghazal 28	9	Man	Teenage years
Ghazal 29	10	Old Letter	Teenage years
Ghazal 31	11	Alone	Teenage years
Ghazal 32	12	Flood Waters	Teenage years
Ghazal 34	13	Growing up	Teenage years
Ghazal 37	14	Anne Vincent Martha and Pius	Teenage years
Ghazal 38	15	Diary	Teenage years
Ghazal 39	16	I Love You	Teenage years
Ghazal 40	17	Haunting	Teenage years
Ghazal 41	18	TZ	Teenage years
Ghazal 42	19	Just Another Girl	Teenage years
Ghazal 43	20	@ RC	Teenage years
Ghazal 44	21	December	Teenage years
Ghazal 45	22	Good Morning	Teenage years
Ghazal 46	23	Innocently Wild	Teenage years

Ghazal 48 -	24	Baby Blue	Teenage years
Ghazal 50	25	Claimed	Teenage years
Ghazal 52	26	Beside me	Teenage years
Ghazal 56	27	Is it	Teenage years
Ghazal 58	28	My love	Teenage years
Ghazal 60	29	Mr Crow	Teenage years
Ghazal 63	30	Letters	Teenage years
Ghazal 64	31	I did	Teenage years
Ghazal 65	32	Elizabeth	Teenage years
Ghazal 75	33	Serendipity	Teenage years
Ghazal 77	34	Yesterday	Teenage years
Ghazal 87	35	Bamboo Gardens	Teenage years
Ghazal 99	36	Generator	Teenage years
Ghazal 47	1	Cappadocia	Various
Ghazal 49	2	Sofia	Various
Ghazal 68	3	Mr Iyer	Various
Ghazal 69	4	Ifran	Various
Ghazal 73	5	It does not matter	Various
Ghazal 78	6	Bookshelf	Various
Ghazal 90	7	Silence	Various

### *Themes*

The trigger for Ghazal 13 was an old photograph sent to me by an old flame. It was a photograph of a gang of choir members (almost all of whom were teenagers), taken outside a friend's house in Bamboo Gardens in the 1980s. I used the photographs as a means to recall some memories of tender moments I had shared with some close friends. It is a cluster of moments in a single ghazal. The need to re-live those carefree days leads to a melancholic tone:

The breath, warm and sad at the back of my neck

I sense you, the pores sensing your need, photographed.

This ghazal is a collection of a few small images that I would like to remember, and it is fragmentary in nature; snippets of small moments over a period of about 10 years. It must be said that the moments were not shared with everyone present but between two specific persons only. The eye of the camera in the refrain, “photographed” is watchful and sensitive. The fact that at all the heightened moments —climactic moments—the camera's eye captures

the image for the reader. The setting is given and the lines are descriptive:

Standing by the altar, by the lectern, you and I

My cheeks turn as you clasped my hands, in my mind, photographed.

The culmination at the end of each couplet is the image caught and maybe, captured.

The energy in the poem also mimics the quick culmination of the images taken.

Similarly, Ghazal 14 is based on a young and innocent relationship. Each couplet tells the story of the courtship. Some sentimental images such as the flowers on the saree and the colour of the flowers on the saree are included to add to the romantic tone of the piece. The refrain, “the guitar man” is the only characteristic of the partner: that he plays the guitar. Letters and cards play an important part of remembering. Over the years, I have collected many boxes of such memorabilia, and this is mentioned here. The red card embossed with gold is an image that adds to the romantic nuance of the piece. The letters that are exchanged, the blue aerogram, the diaries and the context of the diary are also given as hints. The gift of a locket and a small bottle of oil (that classical guitarists use) are also indicated here. Personally, this ghazal is written to help me remember the details of this relationship.

Other couplets reminisce brief meetings at a carpark and walks after church. The tone of melancholy is apparent when we reach the final couplet of the ghazal, when the reader is made aware of the parting of these more-than-close-friends. The guitar man remains silent during the entire ghazal and we get to see his generosity by the gifts he presents. The first couplet indicates that the relationship was a rather young bond that was never allowed to develop, and that there was an absence of a physical dimension to their relationship. The persona seems to want to resume the relationship. However, that remains uncertain, as the ghazal ends with a question.

Ghazal 20 describes a regular Sunday visit to the persona’s aunt’s home located in a

remote part of the city. Ghazal 21, on the other hand, describes the scene at someone's home, without the specifics of place and location. All the lines in both the ghazals are connected to the Sunday trip, as well as the home. English ghazals are supposed to have couplets that can stand on their own and be self-contained. Adding the name of the poet to the last couplet could be found in the ghazal tradition, and many poets deftly included the takhalus into their ghazals, adding to the nuance of their masterpieces.

Comparatively, Ghazal 23 is from the perspective of the guitar man. In the previous ghazal, the same guitar man remains silent. This fictional piece of work allowed me to include interesting details to bait the reader, and so this piece is experimental. To explain further, most ghazals are written from multiple perspectives. However, the entire ghazal here is from same guitar man from Ghazal 22.

Fundamentally, Ghazal 23 is a love poem of unrealised wishes. I want to portray the gentleness of the persona by focusing on his want of the kiss, but I kept the melancholic tone throughout the poem by his inability to obtain his wish. I liked the refrain "kiss" since that was the focus of the poem. My intention of focusing on the eyes and the jeans was to include a certain sexual tension in the poem. Although every couplet tells of a missed opportunity, the intention was to heighten the sensuality of the piece and portray the girlfriend as a playful, inexperienced girl, unaccustomed to any kind of physical show of love. On the other hand, I intended for the guitar man to be a more experienced lover and gave him all the sexual energy while the girlfriend remained an innocent, playful, and inexperienced tomboy. This teenage love obviously came to naught. The final couplet does say that want has waned, but the final line describes a sensuous kiss that adds a degree of confusion as to whether the love has really waned or if it still exists. Although traditional ghazals were written to recount the mystery of love, this Malaysian ghazal uses the form to speak of human love. Most Malaysian poets use

the free verse to recount such themes and rarely write in traditional forms. In this ghazal of 10 couplets, the matlaq of the first couplet has the radif only in the second line, which is required in a traditional ghazal. However, the radif, “I tried loving you” is repeated in the subsequent couplets.

Ghazal 24 continues with the same theme as Ghazal 23. All the lines are not enjambed as they ought to be in a traditional ghazal, each couplet being a small piece of the couple’s personal history. It starts with the meeting point, being the church. The second couplet gives information on the ethnicity of the individuals. The subsequent couplets describe their roles in the church. Despite the couplets being flashes of information, the reader will be able to follow the narrative that moves beyond the line. The ghazal paints a picture of constant love from the “big tough guy” while the young lady was still learning to be herself. Ultimately, the reader is most likely to empathise with the young man as we learn that “Elizabeth,” as she is referred to in the takhalus, is unfaithful. The heart-breaking end of the young man returning and looking for his girlfriend but discovering that she has moved on adds to the melancholic tone of the ghazal. The lines are lengthy, and do not make equal lines in this poem. However, the concise language aids the readers to make sense of this difficult courtship. Unlike the language used in some ghazals, this ghazal is written entirely in English, which allows a sense of ease in understanding the poem. The Nobel Prize winner for Literature Pablo Neruda’s poem, *Tonight I Can Write the Saddest Lines*, was the poem that influenced the melancholy tone of this ghazal. When I sat down to write this ghazal, I wanted to show the sadness and solitude of the speaker in Neruda’s verse.

However, Ghazal 25 is a slightly shorter ghazal compared to Ghazal 24. This ghazal only has eight couplets. The preferred length of the ghazal is between five to 15 couplets. The traditional ghazals can go on to be very lengthy or continuous. The refrain of Ghazal 25 refers



to the year 1978, when the persona is about 16 years old and has a preoccupation with guitarists. In this ghazal, she hoped to take the place of the guitar:

You always sat there, holding your guitar  
I would boldly take its place, across your lap in 1978

The guitar is strong in this couplet may stand for the female body, similar as they are in physical shape. For this reason, the juxtaposition of the persona with this musical symbol is significant, in so much as it brings a certain amount of sexual energy into the ghazal. The Sufi poets employed the love and erotic images of the ghazal to express their love for the (Kashani, 2014, p. 51) and this symbol of the guitar is an extension of that usage. The traditional ghazal form was meant to be ambiguous, but in this Malaysian form, there is an attempt to communicate with a clear and direct message. Although the refrain, “1978” might seem unclear, the ghazal hints from the start that it mentions a year (1978) in the distant past of the persona.

One gets a sense of the agony the persona endured by the imagery of the “bleeding pink” wound and an attempt to pull away at the scab. Knowing this tomboyish 16-year-old in “blue jeans and man’s shirt” gives a limited image of the persona, which helps in amplifying the emotion of regret. The reader is given lesser information about the object of the persona’s love, as we only know that he probably plays a musical instrument and that he has “brown eyes.” The point of the ghazal was the persona’s trauma.

The melancholic tone is amplified by the realisation that the regret of having lost the opportunity she had when she was younger cannot be reclaimed. The strong last couplet lays bare this truth:

Let this anguish of forty years vanish into that one embrace  
Let me quench this thirst of many years in those arms in 1978

In my mind, I call Ghazal 26 and similar ghazals as the Tony poems and they are termed as such for a few reasons. The beloved—Tony, in this case—is based on a real character named Tony. For those who were present and growing up in the neighbourhood in the parish of the Church of the Risen Christ, this individual represented a stock character in Catholic churches in and around Kuala Lumpur. In fact, I do believe these types were present in the Peninsular too, namely in Penang and Melaka. They were Eurasian in race and had similar characteristics. Chiefly, they were of Portuguese ancestry and had origins in Malacca. They were often good-looking, as this Tony was. Tony, in fact, belonged to a family of exceptionally good-looking young men. They had very fine bone structures and were tall and lean young boys who stood out among the other parishioners who were slightly darker and generally, a little shorter. Interestingly, most of these families had very musically inclined children. They could almost always play one or more musical instruments and could sing well, too. Thus, these individuals played for the choir. Incidentally, the Risen Christ choir of the 1970s and 1980s were peopled by such individuals who also belonged to devout Catholic families. Thus, Tony and the likes of him were the favourites among the young teenage girls who were growing up with the tunes of the Osmonds, Michael Jackson, and so on. He was seen as a heartbreaker because of the number of girls who were infatuated with him. Tony was also tasked with teaching guitar to a group of us, in order to get a young group of musicians ready. In my mind, the handsome ones were mere heartbreakers, and not young men to get serious about. This ghazal recounts my meeting with Tony after he had moved to another neighbourhood after his SPM. His presence at the Risen Christ parish became less frequent until he stopped coming at all. It recounts my shock of seeing him during the Feast of St Anthony after about two or three years. Much of what I remember is from my journal that notes the difficulty I had in re-connecting with Tony.

My teenage eyes looked for you instead of at the altar

Always following, always trailing, like a cursor, Tony.

The above couplet with the metaphor of the cursor was to show how a teenage mind sometimes works—obsessively, in this case. Its intention is to focus on the blinking cursor—silent but consistent with a beating heart. I think it is a successful cursor as it has an invisible tail with an unstoppable heartbeat. Our relationship was rather one-sided. Although we were both interested in each other, this interest was never professed, but for endless teasing, which ended in petty quarrels. This poem attempts to bring these two individuals together in an imaginary embrace. The sight of communion is shown in the body of the guitar. Although these young persons were never able to communicate their attraction to each other, the persona wills herself into the position of a guitar, putting herself into his embrace as if to quench the longing of many years.

Ghazal 26 alludes to the characters from the movie *Gone With The Wind*, when the persona assumes herself as Scarlett O’Hara and directly addresses “Tony” as Rhett Butler in the following couplet:

I am ‘Scarlett O’ Hara,’ buxom and brave  
And you, honey, ‘I give a damn debonair’, Tony

Similarly, in the following couplet, “Tony” is given the characteristic of a Malayali actor from South-Indian cinema:

You turned into the \*Mamoothy of my Malayalam movies  
And I brush against you in white \*\*Mundu, your lover, Tony

This amalgamation of characteristics from the characters of movies of the West and the East points towards a “Tony” who is possibly larger than life. This is probably why the entire ghazal seems to have a dream-like quality and the reader might encounter a sense of disbelief when they arrive at the following couplet:

We kiss and sleep in each other's arms, becoming their story  
 But I have never met you, ever in a kiss, Tony

On further reflection, the image of Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler is from the poster that I have hanging on my office wall, in which Scarlett is depicted in a swoon in Butler's arms. By contrast, the persona's depiction of herself in a Malayali white drape brushing against her lover might send confusing signals to the reader.

The ghazal attempts to speak to a certain category of readers who might have watched the classic movie, *Gone With The Wind*, and to Malayalam readers who understand Malayalam and who can understand the nuances of both the allusions more accurately.

Structurally, Ghazal 28 is written in eight short couplets that describe a man. In this ghazal, the couplets can be re-arranged, except for the matla and the maqta, and it will still remain a ghazal. One of the characteristics of a ghazal is that it should withstand a re-arrangement of the bayt without upsetting the understanding of the poet. This ghazal is written with this poetic dictum in mind. If the matla of the first couplet and the maqta remain in their positions, and other couplets are moved around, the focus will still be the man:

Those locks on that beautifully bent head, this man  
 Black and locked in locks, is this beautiful man.

That small rounded yet manly chin  
 Clean-shaven and blessed, oh what a divine man.

That sparse moustache never did anything  
 For those lips, full and shaped, what a man.

That gentle word when he called out 'sweetheart'  
 Broke many other hearts with a break! break! that man.

That little belly small and rounded at first  
 Became what a mass, yet that was the man.

Forty years on the looks have tamed like a baby's curl  
 The moustache is gone yet he is the man.

Those ever-present hands they lay firm  
 To help me at every mistake, that man.

I missed you until I was twenty  
 I will spend the rest of my life missing you, man.

In subsequent revisions, the maqta was revised to mention the takhalus. Thus, instead of "I missed you until I was twenty," it now reads:

Elizabeth, missed you until she was twenty  
 She will spend the rest of her life missing you, man

Death is the central motif in Ghazal 31. It is a melancholic, personal/community ghazal as it recalls the death of members of the family as well as the larger Catholic community. As a Catholic, the incidence of death is experienced as a community. In writing this ghazal, I looked to achieve an image that I had carried in my head from Frank McCourt's nonfiction book, *Angela's Ashes*, when the Catholic priest looks out of the window on a good winter morning and observes the coffins arranged on the white snow. I wanted to incorporate into this ghazal the sense of desperation and isolation as etched in my memory. Even in death, the dead could not be buried as the ground was frozen. In that scene there is an acute sense of isolation, as compared to the ghazal which hangs on to the emotion of loss. The ghazal form of no enjambment allows for each couplet to be devoted to one member of the community, which starts with the matla on my own uncle and the maqta on the sudden death

of a cousin.

A reader once remarked that the names in the ghazal were overwhelming. For the American reader, “beautiful Beatrice,” “Aunty Girlie,” “Aunty Sosamah,” “Raj,” Aunty Christina,” “beautiful Maria,” and so on were foreign and distracting. She could not unpack the significance of each name as members of the community could and that contributed to her sense of alienation towards this ghazal. On reflecting on what I wanted to achieve with this ghazal, I know that this is a deeply personal poem. As much as my intention is to write for the readers, I do often write for myself and in this instance, for my community. Most readers from the community will correctly unpack the allusions I make with each name, whereas other readers will not, and any form of annotation and explanation can only help so much. Thus, this issue of impenetrability will remain in such ghazals, which I believe adds texture to the piece. Texture in a piece of artwork does not necessarily have to be logically understood and it might just be apparent from the piece that something more than what we understand is present. Another comment I received was that the imagery in the first line from the following couplet is interesting:

All the neighbours gathered like ants to a sweet biscuit

Into L5, Aunty Sosamah’s son lay nattered and beaten, alone

This may be because the simile is surprising and unexpected in a ghazal that is mostly about death; such a food-related allusion may surprise the reader.

Thematically, Ghazal 32, while belonging to the category of teen years, falls into the sub-category of hardships. Comparatively this ghazal differs from Ghazal 31 in an important way, that is in the enjambments. To explain further, the non-enjambments in the previous ghazal helps relate the deaths of many people within the community. It becomes the thread that holds the ghazal together as it narrates disparate incidences of death within the Catholic community. In this way, the ghazal form is suitable for use in framing such stories.

Comparatively, Ghazal 32 relates the incidences of floods that used to plague the low-lying areas along the Klang Valley. It is written sequentially and this arrangement of couplets follow logically. To explain further, while it is possible to change the order of the couplets in Ghazal 31 as the couplets are stand-alone, the same cannot be done for Ghazal 32 as these couplets become fragmented and incomprehensible if the order of the lines are reversed or changed. To illustrate this point, I have included the ghazal here and reversed the order of the couplets:

Couplet No	Couplet
	We lived in a deep valley kissed by flood waters The Gragos, the Malayalis, Chinese and Indians in flood waters
2	The rains would come incessantly during the evenings The drains would overflow liquid brown flood waters
3	The neighbours buried barricades inside and outside To keep the water out, brown fluid, flood waters
4	Scooping the water out again, again we grew exhausted, Our mummy, too, built walls sometimes, keeping out flood waters
5	Eventually, they succeeded, brown dirty water Got into our homes, uninvited and smelly, flood waters
6	In anger, the waters invaded and brought Red plastic bags, bits of rotten fruit with the, flood waters
7	Sometimes seeking revenge for the rubbish, we threw Into both the rivers, every morning, every day, flood waters
8	So we went to Christie's home Our choir master's home, to see his, flood waters
9	The next day if the water receded, the work began Washing and cleaning the stench from our homes, flood waters

10	For many years they came, twice every year Then they dug the rivers, and they finally ceased, the flood waters
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Reversing the order of the couplets in this manner disrupts the flow of the narrative in what actually happens during a flood.

I have used the ghazal form to recollect the hardships that we faced as a community during the 1970s, when Kuala Lumpur faced one of the most devastating floods in memory. This experiment shows this Malaysian ghazal cannot withstand the re-arrangement of the couplets. In this instance, the couplets must keep their original sequential structure for the readers to experience what happens to the lives of the people who were affected by the floods.

I had indicated in my personal notes that I should consider the usage of the Malay word *banjir*, as the radif instead of the phrase “flood waters.” Although I think it is a better word in terms of diction, I felt the auditory and rhythmic sound of the word “banjir” would not suit the tone of the ghazal. The word “banjir” is a double-stressed word (please see the table above), as compared to “flood waters,” which scans as stress, unstress in “flood” and stress, unstress in “waters.” This is illustrated in the below:

\		\
Ban	jir	
\	ú	\
Fl	ood	wa
		ters

To my ear, “flood waters” scans as rhythmically soothing, for this community ghazal.

The couplet’s order is reversed, as traditional ghazals can be, and the meaning in traditional ghazals should not be altered, as required by Shahid Ali. However, for this Malaysian ghazal, the order must remain as they appear in the original Ghazal 32. If the



couplets are reversed, as they are in the table below, then the events will be confusing to the reader, as the events no longer appear chronologically.

Couplet No	Couplet
	We lived in a deep valley kissed by flood waters The Gragos, the Malayalis, Chinese and Indians in flood waters
9	The next day if the water receded, the work began Washing and cleaning the stench from our homes, flood waters
8	So we went to Christie's home Our choir master's home, to see his, flood waters
7	Sometimes seeking revenge for the rubbish, we threw Into both the rivers, every morning, every day, flood waters
6	In anger, the waters invaded and brought Red plastic bags, bits of rotten fruit with the, flood waters
5	Eventually, they succeeded, brown dirty water Got into our homes, uninvited and smelly, flood waters
4	Scooping the water out again, again we grew exhausted, Our mummy, too, built walls sometimes, keeping out flood waters
3	The neighbours buried barricades inside and outside To keep the water out, brown fluid, flood waters
2	The rains would come incessantly during the evenings The drains would overflow liquid brown flood waters
	For many years they came, twice every year Then they dug the rivers, and they finally ceased, the flood waters

The themes for the next two Ghazals 34 and Ghazal 37 are teenage years that reflect on the school years. This is a brief diversion from the theme of teenage years, Young Love. This eighth-couplet ghazal is written entirely in English, with allusions to American television shows and British books. Most contemporary readers who grew up in the 1960s–1980s would be able to make out the allusions accurately. Mills & Boon is a romance imprint

of the British publisher, Harlequin UK Ltd. It was founded in 1908 by Gerald Rusgrove Mills and Charles Boon as general publishers. The company moved towards escapist fiction for women in the 1930s. By the 1970s, in urban schools around the Klang Valley, teenage girls gravitated to this kind of reading. The female persona was always helpless and in need of a male protector who inevitably came in the shape of a tall, dark, and handsome hero. The inclusion of the detail on Mills & Boons adds texture and specificity to the ghazal.

To build further on this allusion, the name of the teenage singer Donny Osmond was included. His song, *Puppy Love* was a song that teenagers listened to at a time when the parents were more conservative. This disconnect was yet another strand in the ghazal that I wanted to include in the fabric of the ghazal. The same intention is conveyed by the inclusion of the actor Peter Select and singer Elvis Presley. By the year 1979, Elvis had been dead for about 2 years, yet his music and movies continued to be influential. As for the reference to Peter Select, I realise that I had mis-remembered the name of the actual American television actor. As part of the reflection for this ghazal, it was necessary to re-look at the handwritten drafts of the ghazal. The draft copy of the ghazal also had the name “Peter Select,” To refresh my memory of what image I might have had at the point of drafting, I tried researching similar names but failed to find a satisfactory answer. This triggered a contemplation on the validity of my recollections and the awareness that memories and events can be remembered so differently or even worse can be based on falsely remembered details.

The article in *The Atlantic* entitled *How Many of Your Memories are Fake* by Erika Hayasaki discusses the authenticity of the human memory. It speaks of research published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)* conducted with people who have phenomenal memory and the findings suggest that even such individuals are susceptible to “false memories” reporting that “memory distortions are basic and widespread in humans and

it may be unlikely that anyone is immune” (Hayasaki, 2013)

On reflection, much of what I had written is confessional and one of the main impulses behind confessional poetry, for me, is to preserve memories of my childhood. However this impulse becomes problematic as the article suggests that what is recalled might not be entirely true, more so as much of what I write or have included in these ghazal are based on experiences that I have gleaned from my diaries that have been preserved from the time I was 14. Naturally, it is disconcerting to realise that the events in the ghazals might not be absolutely true (going by the findings of the said article) especially since the important reason for writing is to preserve a memory. The article acknowledges the fact that writers and non-fiction writers might find all of this unnerving. Therefore, some pertinent questions that might be asked are what becomes of the truth behind accounts of childhood hardship that propelled some to persevere?; the merit behind meaningful moments that caused life’s pivots? The emotional experiences that shaped personalities and belief system? These questions from the article are useful points of reflection as much as they remain disturbing as they can shake the foundations of why, how, and what one decides to write. One takeaway from the article is how memories can become contaminated with people remembering vividly and confidently events that never happened.

This reflection throws up more questions than it offers answers as to how accurate one’s memory of an event or incident is. The awareness and acceptance that memory is coloured with bits of life experiences and that when people recall memories, they are in fact reconstructing, does not mean such memories are totally false. It is comforting to read that in telling stories about oneself, memoirists are integrating events remembered in detail, along with things that are generally true. The article ends with the wisdom that “a true story is always filtered through the teller’s take on it.”

The intention was to emulate a scene from the movie *To Sir With Love*. The tension in the ghazal was meant to be palpable; a certain awakening simmering at the surface, trying to break free. The overall use of the allusions was to push these ideas to the fore. This is a personal poem as it deals with teenage years, yet it is personal to a particular batch of Fourth Formers in a convent school in Sentul, Kuala Lumpur.

I am averse to the idea of making explicit all allusions in the poetry I wrote. Take for exam the ghazal *Greased* which appears in my self-published collection, *Sexing Kofhee*. Using this ghazal I explain how I became attuned to my own sensibility of writing ghazals:

#### Greased

My chills are multiplying and I'm losing control  
The worlds and sounds that get us all greased.

The electrifying images of Sandy and Zuco  
In their silhouettes of black totally greased.

We wanted to shape up to those sounds  
Romping up and down the dance floor greased.

Finding men, young boys to croon like Zuco  
You better shape up, you better understand, greased.

By the song's end you're the one that I want  
You are the one I want ho ho ho honey, found us greased.

(Marshall, 2014, p. 46)

My mentor for that final creative-writing thesis had urged that I make allusions in that poem to be more specific in allowing others who might not know of the movie, to understand

a little more than I was allowing them to. She suggested that I allow more into the poem than I was already doing; to have everything explained. Upon reworking my poems, I realised that my sensibilities were different in that I wanted some questions in my ghazals to remain unanswered. The American mentors always raised questions when they came across allusions or references that they could not unpack. To some extent, they are right to do so. Then I became conscious of my own resistance to this need to have everything explained. On thinking deeper, I realised that some experiences could not be unpacked accurately. Rather than risk an experience being translated and its cultural significance stripped, I just pushed back. My resistance to translating all Malaysian experiences into English was becoming part of my poetic sensibility.

Ghazal 34 alludes to American pop culture, yet it is also significant in different ways. A Malaysian ghazal will be understood differently when it is read by Malaysians, as compared to others. In trying to trace a similarity in the setting of the convent school depicted in this ghazal, I tried to read various essays on Malaysian women writers who wrote about Malaysian lives. In Bernice Chauly's *Writing a Life Back into the World*, one reads about the tragedy of her father's drowning and how that started her need to write. In this essay, Chauly writes herself back into her country's narrative. One reads her back story, of how she acquired a foreign accent, of who her parents were, who taught her literature and how she went to Canada, and there, why she found herself writing. Reading her essay was like a walk in the garden, knowing the nooks and corners of her life in Ipoh, encountering the thorny issues of death and her mother's heartbreak. Although I was researching a convent-school setting, around the same time that I was in secondary school (the early 1980s), what I discovered here was a personal history that was very fascinating. The personal is always more interesting, especially if it written in such a matter-of-fact fashion and sentimentality is kept to the bare minimum. It simply starts with "my father's untimely and tragic death when I was four made

me a writer” (Chauly, 2016, p. 69). As a fellow Malaysian reading a confessional piece such as this, the book completely drew me in. I was looking for similar all-girl convent-school experiences, but instead, I discovered a precious gem of personal history.

In my head before I wrote the ghazal, I was trying to re-create the excitement in an all-girls’ convent school in Sentul, a suburb of Kuala Lumpur. This ghazal does not conform to Shahid Ali’s rule of having the melancholic; in fact, it is rather celebratory in nature. Sporting events in schools tended to be big grand affairs, with sports houses hoping to become the champion house of the year. In retrospect, a pantun would have suited the theme better than a ghazal, since the poem recounts happy teenage memories more than anything deeply melancholic.

The ghazal, however does bring back memories of the school. When this ghazal was shared in a Whatsapp group, it did bring back memories of school days to the members in the chat group, with more than half of the ex-school mates responding by recounting to which sports houses they belonged. When I reflected on this piece, I realised that I hoped to emulate a scene from the movie based on the book by Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. In this film, there is a certain sense of tension and excitement between the teachers and students that I wanted embedded in my ghazal. Honestly, it is difficult to envision if this is obvious to the readers. Other writers such as Shirley Geok-Lin Lim and Hilary Tham also wrote about their school days, but I have not come across any work that specifically engages with their schooling days. I also read the anthology *Malchin Testament: Malaysian Poems*, edited by Malachi Edwin Vethamani, yet I did not come across any poem of similar subject matter. This might suggest that Malaysian poets rarely write on this subject matter.

On the other hand, Ghazal 38 deals with the realities of living in a predominantly Malayali community in which violence towards women, particularly towards wives, was a

norm. This ghazal took courage to write, which also involved remembering events that still leaves me traumatised. It is included in this section, as it belonged to the same timeframe as my teenage years.

As it should be in a ghazal, each couplet is end-stopped, with different issues running through the ghazal. The first line is what I would consider as a “false start,” in so much as it reads like a love poem but that ends by the first couplet. The following couplets have imagery that are rather unsettling and, in some instances, not anticipated. The following two couplets hold the most violent imagery that has the ability to slowly creep up on the reader, all the time its brutality meets the reader full on, without prior notice:

The eve of New Year was a rite of passage

The Malayali aunts who turned up with bloody scars an epileptic fit

The neighbour's toilet stained with her blood

Years before she cut her throat in an epileptic fit

The shock possibly is compounded by the fact that the start of the poem shows no indication that the ghazal would be dealing with issues of domestic violence and suicide.

In this reflection, I am comparing Ghazal 41 with a poem by Tania De Rozario from her collection, *Tender Delirium*. In my estimation, Ghazal 41 and *Crush*, which is the title of De Rozario's poem, deal with the same theme, of a school-girl crush. Both the ghazal and the poem are written in eight stanzas. However, *Crush* has almost double the word count of the ghazal as each stanza has four lines. Both the poems are similar in terms of the theme and structure, yet they are very dissimilar work. Both poems are compared in the table below:

Ghazal 41	Crush
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<p>He had an angular face, tanned and clean-shaven, TZ A mop of hair, jet-black hair, falling</p>	<p>It's primal, this tension your attention stirs;  One look and I'm thirteen years old and waiting for just the right time to walk by your classroom to find you asleep. It's shallow, I know. I like</p>
<p>He sometimes wore a red batik shirt A pair of white pants, baggy, that was TZ</p>	<p>How you look over coffee and toast, reading  The papers and laughing at headlines, I'm dumb with desire. You grin at my silence  I'm reading Darwin and starting to think</p>
<p>I could only see the man, with his music around him He played the guitar, for Mass all the time, TZ</p>	<p>That natural selection is what draw me to you,  body lithe like a flower. Attraction dictates  that you and I could have beautiful babies  despite two wombs and my loathing of kids</p>
<p>He spoke with a shake of his head This boy-man who always admonished me, TZ</p>	<p>and procreation. Between mirrored genitals,  we could make good. Between two people  who've been cast out, we could create  a universe separate from all the rules</p>
<p>He spoke about me to his friends I talked about him in my dreams, in my diary, TZ</p>	<p>we were taught as children. It's crazy  this crush, but it's not like I'm cheating</p>



	<p>Just by looking. It can't possibly be a sin</p> <p>to blush at the brush of your jeans</p>
<p>He tried to steal a kiss that Christmas as he ran around</p> <p>With a cloth in his hand, kisses on his face, TZ</p>	<p>against my calve. I've squint at your smile</p> <p>You get on my nerves, the way you enjoy</p> <p>rolling your eyes at all my jokes, the way</p> <p>You accuse me of ditsy behaviour</p>
<p>When he played the guitar, he faced bent to the strings</p> <p>I could not look into his eyes, if the music reached, TZ</p>	<p>By saying it's cute. Fuck. I'd like to</p> <p>Make you, break you, stake you, take</p> <p>You, shake you by your ponytail</p> <p>For parts of me that went limp</p>
<p>He left that year when the Christmas lights blinked</p> <p>Yes, Elizabeth's heart got lost with Tony Zuzartee</p>	<p>With bliss at that insult. I fold. I'm out.</p> <p>You win. Go home. Leave me alone.</p> <p>I hate to lose. But not to you. Don't look</p> <p>So smug. This will be over. Soon</p>

Ghazal 41 deals with a heterosexual relationship, while *Crush* deals with lesbian romance. This fact of the kind of relationship is clearly evident in each poem. In the ghazal the takhalus give away the gender of the writer in the last couplet in the line, "Yes, Elizabeth's

heart got lost with Tony Zuzartee.” This is a simple act of making clear the type of relationship is a boy-girl courtship. The point of the ghazal was to give voice to the loss of the beloved ironically during Christmas time. We get to see Tony only from the outside, his physical beauty and that he plays the guitar for Mass. Therefore, when a comparison is made with *Crush*, one misses these alliterative moments that can be found in *Crush*: “It’s crazy, this crush...It can’t possibly be a sin to blush at the brush of your jeans against my calve. I squint at your smile.” The use of alliteration increases the melody of the piece, allowing the words to roll off the tongue with ease, permitting the reader to smooth over the stanzas, possibly also making the reader’s heartbeat go faster as one arrives at the penultimate stanza that is erotic and musical:

...by saying its cute. Fuck. I’d like to  
 make you, break you, stake you, take  
 you, shake you by your ponytail  
 for parts of me that went limp

(De Rozario, 2013)

The above stanza is very strong because of the internal rhyme that is present. The increased musicality afforded by the internal rhymes in lines two and three amplify the feelings of the persona many times over. The sexual innuendoes are almost explicit in this stanza. In contrast, Ghazal 41 reads like a simple narrative of loss by a young teenager. The kiss is the only reference to any suggestion of a physical contact: “He tried to steal a kiss that Christmas as he ran around/ with a cloth in his hand, kisses on his face, TZ.”

This cluster of Ghazals 42- 46, and 50 are reflected on collectively as they have many similarities. Firstly, all of them are teenage love poems that were written based on notes and memories that came from journal entries from the years 1978–1982.

As with most of the ghazals in this collection, they generally comply with the

requirement of including a radif; they are also melancholic in tone and sentiment. Moreover, the number of couplets in this cluster of ghazals ranges from five to ten couplets. Half of those discussed here were written in five couplets, while the remaining three are longer poems, between eight to ten couplets. Ghazal 46 is the longest in this cluster, with 10 couplets. The radif and number of couplets in each of the ghazals in this cluster are listed in the table below:

Ghazal No	Radif	No of Couplets
42	Just another girl	5
43	@ RC	5
44	It's December	9
45	Good morning	8
46	wild	10
50	claimed	5

All the lines in this group of poems are enjambed, as required by the form. However, these do refer to the same subject. Take, for example, Ghazal 42, where all the lines of the ghazal refer to the persona's despair of remaining "just another girl." For Shahid Ali, in order for a poem to embody the spirit of the ghazal, each couplet must be able to shine on its own like a gem in a pearl necklace. Together, they will have a collective beauty, yet they will also have a similar lustre on and of their own. In this sense, all the ghazals in this cluster do not make the mark of a traditional ghazal. However, they are representative of a hybrid English ghazal that does place importance on logic in so far as it requires all the couplets to add meaning to the overall narrative of the poem.

Generally, in ghazals, one couplet may stand out as compared to other ghazals and it can be found either in the first or the last couplet. In the following paragraphs, I will focus

on my favourite couplets in each of the ghazals above. These couplets are listed in the table below:

Ghazal No	Favourite Couplet	Couplet No
42	Then this teenage heart filled with so such hope But her matured older self knows better, just another girl	2
43	Every Sunday another pull towards you Some cords never came undone even when you left RC	5
44	My teenage heart split into a jagged half My diary says, he left that Christmas, since it's December	7
45	We've come a long way, our lives intertwining We've changed from teenage flames to mature fire, some mornings	7
46	Forty years on we discover the truth of you You were baby-eyed submissive yet innocently wild	9
50	All of those times, I wrote and wrote and wrote, he claimed In every sentence, melody and rhapsody, he claimed	1

When reflecting on the position of my favourite couplet, I noticed that the lines I think are the strongest tend to appear towards the end of the ghazal rather than at the beginning of the ghazal. As can be seen by the above table, in four out of the six ghazals grouped here, the strongest lines appear toward the latter half of the ghazal. This could be because the ghazals were written once the radifs had been established, with a high degree of spontaneity. Once a ghazal had been completed, it was later edited to make the language clearer. However, it is not often that the couplets were rearranged, as the ghazals were supposed to be fragmentary and not meant to follow any sort of a narrative.

Some reasons why I prefer these lines as compared to the others are because the persona seems to be speaking to her younger self. For example, in Ghazal 42, it feels like the older self has learned some lessons about being in relationships and is consoling her younger

self about the nature of teenage relationships. Moreover, in Ghazal 43, although it might not be apparent, the use of the word “cord” in “Some cords never came undone even when you left RC” adds another layer of meaning to this couplet as the persona’s love interest was a choir guitarist and the use of the word “cord” seems like an intended pun. One reference is to the chords that guitarists use to strum the tune of the hymns in church, while the other is the cords of young love that bound both these teenagers together.

“My teenage heart split into a jagged half”—I find this image endearing because it brings to mind an animation of a red heart that cracks into a “jagged half.” Upon further reflection, this image is rather simplistic and even juvenile, yet charming. In the same couplet is a reference to December; it is, of course, the refrain of the ghazal too, and an invocation of this month brings about many other splendid memories, which is another reason that I find this couplet particularly rich.

“We have changed from teenage flames to mature fire, some mornings”—in Ghazal 45 the whole point of the ghazal seems to rest in the phrase “teenage flames to mature fire.” One of the aesthetics of the ghazal form is the use of the metaphors. Some metaphors that can be found in the traditional ghazals are the rose, the nightingale, the vine, the tavern boy, the mirror, and the candle. This is one of the ghazals in which I have tried to use similar metaphors to those used by the masters. The Islamic Sufi scholar Annemarie Schimmel explains the use of the metaphor of the flame: the mystics have seen love as a flame that burns everything down, except that of the beloved. She further explains that the classical definition of love that leads to true *tauhid* (extinguishing and consuming everything that is other than God) is expressed in poetical language that was used by Muslim poets writing in Persian, Turkish, or Urdu. She concludes that the fire symbolism that abounds in Ghalib’s corpus originated from this concept of absolute love (Schimmel, 1975, p. 294). In Ghalib’s Ghazal 1, in the last

couplet he uses the metaphor of the candle:

Asad, what can cure the grief of existence, except dying?  
The candle is obliged to burn before extinguishing at dawn

This comparison between Ghalib's ghazal and mine is merely to show one instance of how the symbol of fire is present in ghazals. As stock metaphors are part of the tradition of ghazal writing, I consciously made use of such metaphors to try to keep with this custom.

Ghazal 46 is different from the rest of the ghazals, particularly in terms of the perspective. The perspective of this group of teenage love poems is from the viewpoint of a persona towards her love interest. However, in Ghazal 46, the gaze of the lover is turned towards the persona. Essentially, the gaze is male, as the perspective is rather superficial—the way a camera might look at a female, from top to bottom:

Your shirt was checked, black and brown innocently wild  
Your hair short and cut away, you walked innocently wild

Your jeans wore you sweet and subtle, woman  
Your waist turning from a girl-child, innocently wild

A white band caught those jeans in place  
I have wanted to hug them, just there innocently wild

As can be observed by the lines above, all the lines describe the beloved outwardly, just as a camera might capture the body of a woman, starting from the head, moving downwards to the bottom, here moving from "Your shirt" to "Your jeans." The first three couplets of the ghazal quickly capture the exterior of this "girl-child" and the next three couplets dwell within the persona's body:

Your eyes flashed a mocking anger at the slightest  
 Your lips quired for a quick comeback innocently, wild

Your head was bowed in prayer, feigning piety  
 I knew your heart was talking to him, thinking of me, innocently wild

You fought back at every meeting, sometimes we touched  
 But I saw your teenage heart bruised, innocently wild

The perspective of the persona is one of omnipotence as he exerts his power over the actions of the beloved. In the lines above, the persona tells us of the behaviour of the beloved in trying to be tough, yet he reads it as being “innocently wild.” Similarly, although we get a picture of the beloved, one might ultimately settle for the persona’s perspective of the beloved, as it seems to be coming from a place of authority.

In Ghazal 2, there are 14 couplets and every couplet seems to be speaking for a moment in the persona’s life that is or was difficult. The repetition of the word “fear” does not follow the conventions of the ghazal as the first couplet, first stanza, does not end with the refrain “fear”; only the second stanza does. Although the theme is fear with the word “pain” repeated and appearing rather consistently, each couplet seems to be dealing with some news in reference to someone’s health. Certain couplets describe the doctor’s room:

The desks are filled with successive reports,  
 stacking files on files, building piles of fear

But the apprehension of the moment, which is fear, is disturbing. The tone of the poem is foreboding and the loss of the persona’s mother at this point in the poem is strategic, since it increases the desperation of the grave situation. There remains an acute sense of desperation in these lines:

Holding each other's hand, trying to still the gnawing  
 One in pain, the other praying for pain, praying in fear

In the second line (as stated above) the level of desperation is clear, as someone dear is in pain and the persona is probably attempting to deal with the loved one's pain by asking for pain onto herself. These emotions then collapse into fear. The language of this poem is rather clinical. "MRIs, CT scans, hematoma, x-ray reports, trauma, phlegm," are all mentioned in this ghazal, and instead of the direct melancholic cry of the ghazal, this ghazal seems like a cry for comfort. All the clinical reports and the factual situations repeat a grim situation. Some vivid imagery helps set the tone: the doctor's desks stacked with reports; the mother in a wheelchair, possibly in her own pain. "Dried dead veins across an overwhelmed kidney" is a specific and troubling image. But there are also moments of support with the presence of family and friends. However, the final line still ends with deep concern, with a gripping fear.

Ghazal 4 is a mockery of the annual ritual and behaviour of all Malaysians. The refrain refers to the concept of "after the fasting period." It is indeed a loaded metaphor as the government servants particularly like to work according to this timeline. The ghazal recounts the start of the slowdown of the working pace of the civil service. Although the religion teaches Muslims to work just as hard despite the fast, a slowdown is inevitable. The situation gets worse when work piles up and there is no other excuse given except for applications to be processed after the break of the fast. Other couplets recount the weeks leading to the actual end of Ramadhan, with carloads of family members returning home every weekend to villages to help aging parents prepare for the coming of *shawal*. One couplet describes the recent phenomenon of online shopping by referencing the delivery packages from "Lazadas and Zaloras," the recent city behaviour of urban Malaysians. The last couplets make fun of the behaviour of Malaysians together with all their friends who overeat because of the *Raya*



bazaars and, instead of moderation, end up overeating and sometimes putting on weight. The final couplet laments how although a new month has dawned, the celebrations show no sign of ending but seem to continue ironically into a post-Raya party.

### ***Multi-toned Ghazals—Celebration***

Although Shahid Ali insisted that the ghazals must have a melancholic tone and most of the 100 ghazals followed this requirement, a small percentage of the ghazals I wrote were happy ghazals. For instance, the food poems such as Ghazal 30 is a poem of seven couplets, each one a description of a type of Indian food that Malaysians are generally accustomed to. As such, the tone in this poem is joyful rather than melancholic, for most Malaysians take pleasure in eating (Duruz & Khoo, 2015). Granted that the ghazal form is best suited for melancholic subjects such as death and illness, yet it can also be the site for celebration, contrasting the tones of melancholy and joy within a Malaysian ghazal.

Under this section, my reflections will be focused on Ghazals 5, 8, 10, 14, 18, and 35. In including the theme of celebration, I attempted to break from the real English ghazals of Shahid Ali. As previously mentioned, for Shahid Ali, ghazals need to be melancholic. My Malaysian ghazals have incorporated the essence of the Malaysian life, which I know to be its festivals and celebrations.

Ghazal 8 narrates the celebration of Thaipusam, which is the Hindu festival celebrating faith, endurance, and penance. Thaipusam is a time for Hindus of all castes and cultures to say thank you and show their appreciation to Lord Murugan. Thaipusam was brought to Malaysia in the 1800s, when Indian immigrants started to work on the Malaysian rubber estates and the government offices. It was first celebrated at the Batu Caves in 1888. Since then, it has become an important expression of cultural and religious identity to

Malaysians of Tamil Indian origin, and it is now the largest and most significant Hindu public display in the country. In this ghazal, the refrain is “*Vel Vel*” which is the chant the devotees carrying the *kavadi* repeat all along the walk from the temple.

Best to tie these tongues, garland the empty bellies  
And place them as coloured papers vel vel

In the above couplet, the ghazal speaks about the sacrifice the devotees have to undergo in order to give thanks for the blessings they have received. Most devotees who carry the *kavadi* would have started this process of sacrifice weeks ahead of the festival, mostly beginning by becoming vegetarians in the weeks leading up to the festival. Hence, the couplet makes references to the “tied-tongues and empty stomachs” as many of them also fast as part of their preparation. The image of tongues and stomachs as sacrificial is very symbolic and stark and lends to the overall tone of sacrifice and pain. The remainder of the ghazal recounts the events inside of the home of a devout Hindu family. The mood lightens with the return of the *kavadi*-bearer having completed his duty. The break of fast begins with the first meal of the day and the home “falls to a hull” as the early morning events culminate in a “happy satisfaction.” The ghazal now explains the scene outside the home in a town in Kedah. The mood is triumphant as the night procession of the chariot passes the family home. The ghazal ends in a sarcastic tone as the poet suggests the intoxication of the brothers by another spirit.

The brothers talk in excited tones, their bellies filled with spirits,  
In another tantric trance, vel vel

I consider Ghazal 10 my most sensual attempt. The woman’s body and the act of draping the saree is the central activity. However, it is also clear that there are other layers found in the poem. The description of the act of draping has sexual innuendoes such as in the following couplet:

The high-collared choli, caressing neck, over the breast, around the arms  
 Like a lover holding her around the back, the golden border.

The focus is not just on the wearer or the art of drapery, but on the contact of the saree to the skin of the wearer, often mentioning the wearer's body. This adds a hint of sensuality to this ghazal. In writing this ghazal, I was interested in re-creating a scene from a Tamil movie where the persona or heroine of the movie does not know how to drape a saree. She appears in her *choli* and underskirt and the saree is draped by her acknowledged lover. In essence, it is an act of drapery, but for a South Indian, it might be an intimate moment as well.

Ghazal 14 is written in 11 couplets with the refrain, "I remember." I tried to recall how Chinese New Year was celebrated in the 1980s and 1990s. Once again, the setting is Bamboo Gardens: a little neighbourhood about four kilometres away from Kuala Lumpur city. Among neighbours, this locality is often referred to as 4th Mile, Ipoh Road. It was a suburb on a very long stretch of road leading to the northern town of Ipoh, called Ipoh Road. I tried to recount a visit to a faraway village, my elder sister's friend's grandmother's home. Visiting Chinese neighbours was not always allowed in my family (who preferred to confine the movements of the children within the community and the church) and as such, it was one of our first experiences going to such a foreign household. It tells of our preparation of going on that visit:

Pressing young limbs into a slender bit of a dress  
 Feeling the air on my legs as the slit slips, I remember

As time passed and we became young ladies, our involvement in the celebrations involved wearing red, as part of drawing good luck to ourselves. After 10–15 years, as we became couples and had our own families, we celebrated by eating and *lo-hei-ing* as the Chinese do. This we did at the family club, The Royal Lake Club. The final couplet has an unusual twist, where I hint at the growing suspicion of Malaysians who tend to look closely

at the food ingredients of other Malaysians with suspect. This is a rather mildly happy ghazal with a rather disturbing ending.

Christmas is always a season of merry making with family activities such as lunch, dinner, going to Mass, making cookies, and decorating the house. My house is always decorated with many-colored lights by the 20th of December each year. These are taken down after the Feast of the Epiphany the following year. In writing this poem, I tried to describe the scene in the home after the festivities. In a walk through my house, I describe the red poinsettias that are no longer there as they have been wrapped away, but the rich colours of the red and gold of these flowers add to that sense of something brilliant that has passed for a time. The mention of gifts that lay uncollected is also a yearly occurrence when we do not get to meet some family members during this season and gifts remain in my house to be given away sometime after Christmas. In peeling away the decorations, the home is finally revealed in its simple existence. There is a sense of the melancholic for the passing of the season, but because this event occurs yearly, the sense of hope prevails.

Ghazal 35 is an experimental short piece on the celebration of Christmas in Malaysia. Fundamentally, it is a description of the cookie tray that Malaysians greet their visitors with when they visit homes during the festivals. The effect I had in mind was like the odes of poets like Pablo Neruda. His odes are his direct, uncensored dialogues with nature. Aside from being meditations on nature and objects, these odes are also politically charged. The English odes produced by Keats, Dryden, Coleridge, and Shelley streamlined the structure, making it less formal. Neruda took that simplicity even further by democratising the ode, using it to celebrate the mundane like a chair, an onion, a pair of shoes, a train station, the dictionary, a village theatre, and a lover's hands. In other words, he championed the significance of insignificance; the beauty of the common and the ordinary.

The cookie tray is significant in Malaysia. Each section of the cookie tray carries a different delicacy: the fruit cake, the *murukus*, the pink coconut candy and buttery cookies. They signify the influences of the various food cultures on the Malaysian palate. The idea behind the poem was that in food, we as Malaysians are more accepting, and easily include various ethnic flavours into our own food, as depicted by the cookie tray, yet we resist the assimilation of other similar values into one's own culture. I am unsure how successful this ghazal is in signalling these ideas behind the cookie tray. Charlene Rajendran's *Mangosteen Crumble* was the collection of poems that was present in my mind when I wrote such pieces.

The entire Ghazal 9 is a vivid description of the back garden of my house. It traces a footpath from the back of the house, along the side to the front porch of the house. It begins with the description of the lime plant, the sugarcane, and the aloe vera; a description of a tropical herb garden. This poem with its short refrain "green" colours the poem deeply. With each couplet ending with the colour "green," I hoped to paint the tropical herb garden with different shades of green: the lime tree green, the sugarcane green, and the aloe vera green. I planned to invoke a sense of spring and new life or regrowth by the use of words such as "secret," "robust," and "sprouted blooms." This was particularly important to change the tone of the ghazal to one with a jubilant message rather than one of longing; a tropical herb garden as a source of good health and healing. The alliteration in the line, "This year's sugar cane stumps stand straight with slender" also enhances the melodic effect of the entire ghazal. Finally, I hoped the colour green with its emphatic stress would pervade the poems. I also hoped it added a certain musicality to enhance certain lines such as lines in the above couplet, which is also a half-rhyme.

In Kashmir and other places where the ghazal writers used to perform, the audience would be a participatory crowd, eager to know what the refrain was going to be and would complete the refrain with the poet. In writing this ghazal, I envisaged such a crowd who would

understand the picture of a Malaysian tropical herb garden as a source of healing comfort to the Malaysian home.

### ***Food, Language, and Culture***

Food is central to the experience of being Malaysian. As it is a multicultural society, there are many types of food from the variety of cultures that are present here. In writing this Ghazal 19, I was interested in giving a visual image of the types of food available.

In the first couplet, there is a reference to Malaysians' favourite, *nasi lemak*. The refrain, "dah makan" is what one normally hears most Malaysians ask each other casually. Eating is a favourite pastime, given the many types of food available. Colleagues returning from lunch might just as easily greet each other with the same question, "*dah makan?*" which translates to "have you eaten?" Although the question is about food, it can be inferred to inquire about the general state of a person, not unlike the Western "how you doing?" Similarly, one might not be looking for a complete answer, and would simply mean the phrase as a greeting.

In each couplet, there is a description of each type of favourite breakfast. The first is the favourite *bao*, which was introduced by the Chinese but is now available from Malay-Muslim restaurants for breakfast, tea, and supper. Inside the soft dough would be a rich red bean paste or a variety of other fillings. The second couplet describes the sticky rice with ripe mango. The glutinous rice is cooked with *santan* (coconut milk) and eaten with ripe yellow mango. This dish is available in the north of the Peninsular compared to any other part of the country, particularly because of its Thai influence.

Couplet five is a description of *puttu*. The couplet describes the steamer as a "sareed-matron," denoting that the breakfast is of South Indian influence. Although this breakfast dish

is rather uncommon in eateries in most restaurants, it is a delight in many homes, particularly in Malaysian homes with South-Indian roots. Puttu is often eaten with sugar, banana, and coconut. In fact, puttu has a Malaysian variety, known locally as *putu piring*. Translated from Malay, it means “puttu in a saucer,” which identifies the method in which the flour is steamed (in this case, in a saucer rather than the original method where it is steamed in a cylindric steamer). Putu piring can be found in most night markets in Malaysia and even in Indonesia.

Couplet six describes the famous fried *keow teow*. Malaysians favour this at any time of the day—breakfast, lunch, or dinner. It is of Chinese influence and has become a Malaysian favourite. White sheets of ground rice are sliced into long strips which are fried with bean sprouts and egg. The final couplet is the staple diet of every Malaysian, *roti canai*. Translated literally, it means “bread that is kneaded.” True to its name, roti canai is made from a rubbery dough of wheat flour, eggs, and milk. It is readily available at every corner stall. It is believed to have hailed from India and has been localised; a staple Malaysian meal often eaten with curried dahl and *sambal ikan bilis*. In writing this ghazal, I wanted to capture the truly Malaysian experience of locals calling out “dah makan?” to a friend, family or colleague as well as to describe some of our favourite foods.

Charlene Rajendran’s slim book of Malaysian poems, *Mangosteen Crumble*, has had a profound influence on my work. When I first encountered her work, the Indian Malaysian woman’s voice was authentic and refreshing. During my first master’s degree at University Malaya, I researched and interviewed the poet in Singapore. As the title suggests, food and hybridity had the answers to the Malaysian issues of continued polarisation. As simplistic as this notion was, I was drawn to the possibility of closing the race and religious divide taking hold of the country by celebrating Malaysians’ love of food. This trope continued in my work in the MFA when I decided to title my first collection of poems as *Sexing Koffee*. If

Rajendran's book and title refers to a food fusion, I hoped to complete and compliment that collection with my own work. *Sexing Kofhee* deliberately uses a non-English standard spelling for the word 'coffee' by introducing the Malaysian "kofhee."

This ghazal is an attempt to try to emulate her *Teh Tarik Tempo*. In this first stanza of 11 descriptive lines, of which the first line reads "Just how fast" and ends with "is a secret" makes one visualise a tall slender glass of *teh tarik*:

Just how fast –  
 to swing the strainer  
 swish the koleh  
 twist the tin  
 stir the stuff  
 clink the glass  
 stretch the brew  
 let it froth  
 fill to brim  
 slice the spill  
 - Is a secret

(Rajendran, 2000)

It was an eye-opener to discover how a simple act of making a glass of teh tarik could be so succinctly captured. The poem deeply resonated with me.

From then on, creating something Malaysian always had to do with making allusions to food. In Ghazal 30, each couplet had an item from Malaysian-Indian cuisine. The intention was to describe each item with appetising imagery such as "cubes of tiny ginger," "glass like diamonds of semolina," and "little bit of mango pickle." Professor Emeritus Marilyn Chin from San Diego State University, my mentor during my study for the MFA at the City University of Hong Kong, used to encourage these food poems remarking that she never tires



of my Asian food tropes. During my recent discussion with my supervisor, Professor Danton Remoto, he remarked that the food ghazals in this collection of ghazals made him crave for Malaysian food now that he was back in the Philippines.

Food imagery is also prevalent in contemporary Malaysian writers of fiction such as in Karim Raslan's short-story collection, *Heroes and Other Stories*.

Upon reflection, the best line in Ghazal 39 is the last couplet or what the ghazal practitioners called the matlaq. The couplet goes like this:

The letter sits framed in an irregular box, jagged  
Like biting into a murukku still saying I love you

The ghazal is supposed to be melancholic and this ghazal is sad as the persona does not seem to have enjoyed the courtship which might have started by the declaration of love "I love you". However, the inclusion of food imagery such as "cinnamon," "durians," "Oropom," "lime pickle" and "murukku" adds a certain sense of the lightness that does not allow this sense of loss of opportunity to love or even a sad memory to pervade the entire poem.

Malaysians tend to use food in all their writing—in short stories and in poetry as well as the novels and creative non-fiction. And they use it to all kinds of effect. Here, the use of food imagery is used to trivialise the feeling of sadness in this poem. In the first couplet, it is established that this was a love of the past, possibly a teenage love. But the fact that it had remained in the consciousness of the persona for many decades points to a love that was impactful. Coupled with the uncommon food imagery, it offers a certain relief to the denseness of loss. Cinnamon is not typically a Malaysian condiment yet its quality of being a superfood brings with it qualities of healing and positivity into this poem. On the other hand, the often-loved durian is as Malaysian as any food can get. It is either loved

passionately by Malaysians or disliked for its almost stench-like smell by some other Malaysians. So, adding these food imageries into the poem unsettles the ghazal, which has traditionally been seen as a staple for melancholy.

Ghazals 19, 30 and 39 follow the structure of the English hybrid ghazals in that they are primarily written in couplets. They are also titled simply as ‘Ghazals 19, Ghazal 30 and Ghazal 39’. These ghazals also have the refrain repeated as it is traditionally written in such ghazals. However, these Malaysian hybrid ghazals have significantly evolved from Shahid Ali’s hybrid ghazal as these make references to Malaysian food compared to references from the Koran. Furthermore, all three ghazals (19,30 & 39) do not include the name of the poet (the takhalus). More significantly these ghazals are not melancholic in tone except for Ghazal 39. which even then remains less sad because of the use of food imagery as similes. In structuring the Malaysian hybrid ghazals after the English hybrid ghazal, I have adopted many of the formal requirement of the ghazal at the same time experimenting with the form in a way that allows Malaysian hybrid ghazals to borrow many of the formal characteristics of the ghazal to remain, at the same time to evolve into a new form of a ghazal.

As my final reflection among the food ghazals, I will be contrasting Ghazal 70 with a poem written by poet and lecturer Paul Gnanselvam that appeared in the online literary magazine, *Eksentrika*. Both the poems are placed in the table below in order to see at once the differences in form and length of both pieces. It is reproduced in full for ease of discussion. Ghazal 70 and Gnanselvam’s poem, *A Good Breakfast* are reproduced hereunder:

Ghazal 70	A Good Breakfast
Rice grains and ural dahl are soaked and blended for breakfast to make a frothy mixture, to be poured on a skillet for breakfast	A good breakfast, is one had to a heart’s content,

An orange-coloured chutney with oil spluttered  
dried red chillies, onions and curry leaves for breakfast

Or whitish coconut ground smooth with fresh  
finger-like green chillies, on the side for breakfast

Sometimes a bevy of seeds, sesame and mustard seeds  
and tamarind juice is ground to a delight for breakfast

Maybe add a Malaysian dash of a sambal ikan bilis  
to zinc the spiciness of your meal for breakfast

Sometimes the thosai is a lovely pancake of white  
small in diameter, like a veethe thosai, for breakfast

At other times it is a delectable flat spread of rava  
with delicate holes on the surface, for breakfast

Malaysians eat their thosai, plain, crisp and lightly browned  
with a divinely scented dollop of ghee for breakfast

A piping glass of Nescafe tarik to wash down  
this plate of South Indian fare for breakfast

hot creamy Nescafe,  
poured from one tumbler into  
another

and cooled to the right  
temperature.

A bowl of left-over fish and  
chicken curry, heated

into a thick, rich concoction

and coconut and mint chutney  
for a tangy scoop.

A large ever-silver plate before  
you,

waits for the thosai to assail  
from the kitchen

and into the dining room.

Drumming your fingers lightly,

‘Amma’, you call out  
impatiently, for

the sizzling thosai in gingelly  
oil

that infuses the fresh morning  
air,

livenes your senses,

an you quiver with

hu hunger.

The first thosai arrives,

complemented by a second,  
third

and fourth, or even a fifth

before you are three quarters  
done

on the earlier serving.

And then, when

there is no more coffee to go  
around, and

Amma shouts out from the

	kitchen, you've had enough thosais – you sit back and smile, a good breakfast, is one, had to a heart's content. (Gnanaselvam, 2021)
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Both poems deal with a South Indian breakfast that is very popular in many Malaysian-Indian homes in Malaysia. Gnanaselvam's poem relates the experience of the persona sitting at the table eating his breakfast of *thosai*, with the complementary "hot creamy Nescafe." Comparatively, in Ghazal 70, the piece starts with the making of the batter for thosai. One reading might be that the gender of the poets has come to bear on the perspective of the persona—it is interesting to note that Gnanaselvam's verse depicts the persona at the table waiting to be served his thosai by his "amma." Ghazal 70, on the other hand, describes how it is made.

In terms of similarity, both pieces indicate the favourite Malaysian brew, Nescafe, as an important complement to thosai. In *A Good Breakfast*, the poem starts by indicating what the necessary accompaniments are for the breakfast, such as the "hot creamy Nescafe," "bowl of left-over fish and chicken curry," and "coconut and mint chutney" on an "ever-silver plate." Although both mention Nescafe, one mentions it at the beginning of the poem while the other in the last couplet. This might not mean anything more than a preference. The relevant portions in both works appear below:

Ghazal 70	A Good Breakfast
A piping glass of Nescafe tarik to wash down this plate of South Indian fare for breakfast	A good breakfast, is one had to a heart's content, hot creamy Nescafe, poured from one tumbler into another and cooled to the right temperature. A bowl of left-over fish and chicken curry, heated into a thick, rich concoction and coconut and mint chutney for a tangy scoop. A large ever-silver plate before you,

Food was never mentioned in traditional ghazals except for the mention of wine. In this Malaysian hybrid ghazal, the thosai is the central theme of Ghazal 70. It is written in nine couplets, with the refrain present twice in the first couplet and then in every second line of each couplet. This emerging form is different from Shahid Ali's ghazals as it refers to food. More importantly it breaks the 'no enjambment rule' as each couplet is strongly connected to the following couplet. It remains a ghazal as it has the refrains ghazal-like. However it is a Malaysian hybrid ghazal primarily as it discusses food in heavy enjambments. The enjambments are necessary in this ghazal to keep the focus on the thosai. This Malaysian hybrid ghazal fill an important rule, in tone. Here it breaks the mould of the traditional ghazal when the tone of the melancholic ghazal is broken by the joyous tone in Ghazal 70. Joyous as there are numerous food related words in this ghazal. Both poems are on the theme of eating a Malaysian breakfast of thosai. However, the Malaysian hybrid ghazal can be differentiated on its technical features of being in couplets, having a refrain and its more than five couplets. Technically, it identifies as a Malaysian hybrid ghazal because its tone is joyful, a pleasurable experience.

*Language*

For Shahid Ali, language is an important tool in his art of claiming back the form. One strategy was to define for the English-speaking world (and the Americans, in particular) how the ghazal should be structured. Another was to incorporate italicised non-English words into an English ghazal and in that manner allowing the “untranslated words which are italicised by the poet offer a wide terrain for English such that intercultural spaces are created in the colonizer’s language” (Kacker, 2021, p. 209). In the following ghazal, *Beyond English* from his posthumous collection *Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals* by Shahid Ali, there are such italicised words:

No language is old—or young—beyond English.  
So what of a common tongue beyond English?

I know some words for war, all of them sharp,  
but the sharpest one is jung—beyond English!

If you wish to know of a king who loved his slave,  
you must learn legends, often sung, beyond English.

Baghdad is sacked and its citizens must watch  
prisoners (now in miniatures) hung beyond English.

Go all the way through jungle from aleph to zenith  
to see English, like monkeys, swung beyond English.

So never send to know for whom the bell tolled,  
for across the earth it has rung beyond English.

If you want your drugs legal you must leave the States,

not just for hashish but one—bhung—beyond English.

Heartbroken, I tottered out "into windless snow,"  
snowflakes on my lips, silence stung beyond English.

When the phrase, "The Mother of all Battles" caught on,  
the surprise was indeed not sprung beyond English.

Could a soul crawl away at last unshriveled which  
to its "own fusing sense" had clung beyond English?

If someone asks where Shahid has disappeared,  
He's waging a war (no jung) beyond English.

When reflecting on the use of non-English words in the ghazals in this portfolio, I must say that the path to the choice has not always been clear or consistent. In some ghazals, I did leave a comment clarifying what I meant, as some names of hospitals in Malaysia sounded similar to each other. In this case, most Malaysians would assume it was the heart hospital instead of it being the cancer hospital. In this Ghazal 79, I felt it was necessary to make the clarification for Malaysians more than for others. So the footnote reads:

\*IKN is the National Cancer Institute

As Shahid Ali was a tricultural poet who was trying to write back from the "centre" to the "periphery," I am negotiating a position of writing from the periphery and looking to particularly Malaysian/South East Asian readers who share a similar background and history.

Ghazal 95

Mornings are always the same with promise

Singing magpies, the sky paints its brilliance, with promise

Greedy politicians like orangutans jump up and down

Yet the postman completes his job with promise

The prime minister, prime primate, tries to hold on

Yet the doctor sees the patients, with promise

The man of the hour hides away in IJN

While his guards stand alert, with promise

The CEOs of the GLCs zip around changing sides

Yet the manager sends messages, with promise

The elite buzz around the stink

Yet Malaysians, cog the wheel with promise

Comparatively, in the ghazal above, I left the IJN untranslated as it was a clue as to who it was that I was referring to. Malaysians and other interested parties who were aware of the situation in Malaysia could make sense of what the real issues are in this poem but others reading this, removed from the politics of the country might not. I was moving away from what Shahid Ali was essentially trying to offer to Americans and the English-speaking world at large. He tried to stretch the ghazal to fit the contemporary issues and included other words to express experiences that the English Language could not, as in the ghazal, *Beyond English*. I tried to appropriate the hybrid English ghazal to use the form to use as many languages that were available to me.

In the case of Ghazal 51, I decided to use a language that was foreign to me, and that was Arabic. The refrain in this ghazal is “El Qanna.” My initial intention was to use the common word for God as “*Allah*” which is a word that many in my generation were familiar



with. In fact, it is not uncommon for these people to exclaim “*Alamak*” instead of “oh dear,” “oh my” or other exclamations commonly used by English speakers. Our assimilation into Malaysian schools, however, has made it common for us to hear “*Alamak*” and eventually use it ourselves in the course of our conversation. However, in recent years the word “Allah” has been claimed by certain quarters as belonging only to Muslims and, therefore, should not be used by non-Muslims.

The Catholic Church in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia was embroiled in an attempt to claim the right to use the word “Allah,” which resulted in a strained relationship between the Church and the State. In October 2014, the BBC reported that the Malaysian court ruled that non-Muslims could not use the word “Allah” to refer to God, even in their own faiths, overturning a 2009 lower court ruling. The court ruled that the term “Allah” must be exclusive to Islam or it could cause “public disorder.” On the other hand, Christians have argued that they have used the word, which was adopted into the Malay language from Arabic, to refer to their God for centuries, and asserted that the ruling violates their right to practise their religion, which is enshrined in the Constitution. The government’s stand was that non-Muslims should use the word “*Tuhan*” instead of the word “Allah.”

Dozens of churches and a few Muslim prayers halls were attacked and burned in the wake of the 2009 ruling, highlighting the intensity of feelings surrounding issues of ethnicity and faith in Malaysia (BBC Asia, 2014). Surprisingly, the court ruling was overturned recently (March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021). The High Court has ruled that the use of the word “Allah” by non-Muslims all over Malaysia is allowed. (Yatim, 2021)

In Ghazal 1, there are nine couplets. The matla has the required refrain which is “Oh Elaha.” In the same way and as required by Shahid Ali, each of the nine couplets has the refrain “Oh Elaha” in the second line of each couplet. There are some similarities between

this ghazal and the Christian prayer, *The Lord's Prayer*. As the footnote explains, *Elaha* is the Arabic word for “God” in Abrahamic religions. In the English language, the word generally refers to God in Islam. The repetition of the word “Elaha” is effective as it is really a cry for help. There are allusions to *The Lord's Prayer* in the following instances:

Allusion	Line number in ghazal
hallowed be thy name, Elaha	4
may the kingdom come, Oh Elaha	6
Thy will be done	8
in heaven as it is	10
Give us this day ... our daily bread	11
forgive us our trespasses	14
deliver us from all evil	18

Besides these allusions, there are also other biblical allusions to David. Apart from these allusions, three words from three languages are present within this ghazal. For instance, in line 12: “Help me remember the loaves and fishes cerita, Elaha, Elaha”. Within this line, there is a reference to the biblical story of the five loaves and two fish, which in the Bible tells the story of how Jesus performed a miracle that fed thousands of people.

In this ghazal, the persona asks to be reminded of this miracle and its power to overcome the impossible. In this line, there are words in English, Bahasa Malaysia, and Arabic—“Elaha.” The word “*cerita*” literally translates to “story.” In a sense, “cerita” has a negative connotation as most Malaysians who use it in their everyday speech would affix a certain degree of flippancy to this sort of a “cerita,” a point that marks a serious paradox in this couplet. This situation becomes apparent when one considers the socio-political situation in Peninsular Malaysia, in 2018. There was a growing divide among the citizens of the country who belonged to many religions and races. Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multireligious, and multiracial country. Looking through this lens, the word “cerita” highlights the disbelief

or intolerance for each other's religion. Furthermore, the use of the Arabic word "Elaha" further complicates this sensitivity when one recalls the issues surrounding the use of the word "Allah." The years before the landmark election in 2018 saw the Church and the government embroiled in court cases. The issue at the centre of this was the ban on importing of Bibles in the Malay language into Peninsular Malaysia. Some agencies were uncomfortable with the Christians' use of the word "Allah" and claimed that only the Muslim God could be referred to as "Allah." By placing words of different languages next to each other, I made an attempt to highlight these issues in a single line of the couplet.

My Malaysian ghazals are written in English but, for the most part, have used various other languages to give it an authentic Malaysian voice. In many of the ghazals, there are words from other languages and cultures, which is a strategy that I deliberately used to hybridise the ghazal and to give it a distinctive Malaysian voice.

As explained in the paragraph above, at times that use of the language is political, a push against the hegemonical constraints that bear upon the work of writers in particular and Malaysian artistes at large. At other times, it is used to allow the voice in my head, as I remember it spoken in my childhood, to emerge and colour the ghazal a distinctive Malaysian hue. Malachi discusses this hybrid language in *Malchin Testament: Malaysian Poems*. According to him, in the 1950s a group of Malaysians attempted to create *Engmalchin*—a hybrid language—but it proved to be problematic and was abandoned:

However, artistic expression in the English language by Malaysian has continued and Malaysian English is now recognised as a new variety of the English language along with other World Englishes. (Vethamani M. E., *Malchin Testament: Malaysian Poems*, 2016, p. xvii)

Hence the language that I used to hear was the English with inflections from the

various other vernacular languages. For this reason, a good number of the non-English words that appear in the hundred ghazals are from the vernacular of the other cultures, particularly from the Malay culture.

I have found the Malay language more poetic than the other languages that I know. At the home front, it was important for us as children of Indian-Malayali parents to master the English language. As explained in Chapter One, we were required to only speak in English, although my parents could speak Malayalam, English, Bahasa Malaysia, and Tamil. As my mother was schooled in India, she spoke Hindi as well. She was taught to silence her other dominant languages so that my sisters and I would learn to speak “proper English,” which was deemed to be advantageous. One must agree that proper English was the ticket to better jobs and opportunities in Malaysia in the 1980s and 1990s. However, the education policy changed the year that I started formal school. In 1970, all subjects in the Government schools were taught in Bahasa Malaysia except, of course for, the English language. Bahasa Malaysia changed from a subject that at first seemed a little odd, to a language that I could recognise with some familiarity as my mother began to learn the language and used it to communicate with our pre-dominantly Malay neighbourhood in Banting, Selangor in the early 1970s. Components of Malay poetry and Literature were made part of the compulsory syllabi we were taught in school, and this further strengthened the people’s proficiency in the Malay language. This exposure eventually endeared the language to me and has since become part of the language that I use when speaking among Malaysian friends.

The table below shows the non-English words that appear in the Malaysian Hybrid ghazals I wrote.

Nos	Terms	Ghazal No
1	9th May 2018	1
2	Cerita	1

3	Elaha	1
4	Ah Chee	3
5	kelapa-parut	3
6	Kerisik	3
7	Baju	4
8	lepas raya	4
9	Mak ciks	4
10	Pak Ciks	4
11	Raya	4
12	Umis	4
13	Zaloras	4
14	Ah	6
15	bak kut the	6
16	NTU	6
17	The Arts House	6
18	Khairy	7
19	ku	7
20	Pahang, Kelantan, Kedah	7
21	kavadi	8
22	Mariappan	8
23	Seelans	8
24	sitapas	8
25	Subramaniam	8
26	Thaipusam	8
27	vel vel	8
28	karupooravalli	9
29	kunyit	9
30	tulisi	9
31	mundhu	10
32	alah,alah	11

33	chaittiappam	11
34	Ang Pows	11
35	Loh he	11
36	pottu	11
37	Diwalis	14
38	Jubahs	14
39	Jumkhas	15
40	sittys	15
41	SP	15
42	veshtis	15
43	appam baliks	15
44	goreng pisangs	15
45	Jalan	16
46	Jalan Gasing	16
47	Jln Tar, Jln Ipoh, Jln Pudu	16
48	Myvis	16
49	Bahasa ke Malaysia	16
50	ke	16
51	saja bukan	17
52	war foo shu tau	17
53	Hokkien	17
54	pasombors	17
55	Tanjung Bunga	18
56	Tanjung Tokong	18
57	dah makan?	18
58	keow teow	18
59	pandan	19
60	roti	19
61	sambal	19
62	sambal sotong	19

63	Queen of Sheba	19
64	Mamoothy	19
65	Mundu	20
66	Bangla	26
67	Jalan Penchala,	26
68	MEX	27
69	payasam	27
70	Orrapum	27
71	Tokong	30
72	Oropom	31
73	RC	33
74	El Qanna	39
75	Reza Aslan	43
76	jambu	51
77	Gildiz's	54
78	Majnum	55
79	Sancar'	56
80	Bawals	56
81	Taufu	56
82	Qarib Qarib Singlle	62
83	ikan bilis	62
84	ural dahl	69
85	veethe thosai	70
86	kemaskini	70
87	Negaraku	70
88	Tawarikh	71
89	ikan pari	71
90	Kasthuri	71
91	kling kling	72
92	ammi kaale	72
93	Ammas	72

94	sayur manis	74
95	IKN	76
96	Ammachi	77
97	rakyat's	79
98	Saraswathy	81
99	ahluuroo	83
100	Biawaks	85
101	Chettys	87
102	panas	87
103	rakyat	87
104	Bushida	87
105	poslaju	87
106	peddies	88
107	Agong	89
108	IJN	91
109	canai	92
110	Chulia	92
111	Jawi Peranakan	93
112	Keling	93
113	Mamak's	93
114	Nasi Kandar	93
115	Pasembur	93
116	Teh tarik:	93
117	eversilver	93
118	taman	93
119	kedondong	100

The italicised words are the Malay words that appear in the ghazals and column number three refers to the ghazal in which these words appear. Among the 119 times that foreign words are used in the ghazal, more than half that number consists of Malay words. Within the context of Malaysian Poetry in English, code-switching is often used to good



effect. In my ghazals, Malay words are used to create a Malaysian setting, i.e., in naming places in Peninsular Malaysia. In other instances, it is used to name food that are particularly Malaysian/Asian in nature. The remaining foreign words were used to indicate the many cultures that influence the self.

The Malaysian culture is a culture of hybridity. We have been receiving the heady influence of different cultures for centuries on account of Malaya being in a strategic geographical position for commerce and trade. The Peranakan, Chetty, and various other cultures have evolved and gifted each other their customs, celebrations, and cuisine. I needed a structure and form that was pliant and supple to encompass this sense of hybridity.

Ghazals, they say, are endless and Ghazal 6, I feel, is one ghazal that other poets can very easily add to. In my collection, this Singapore poem is one of the shorter ghazals as it only has seven couplets. The refrain has Malaysian/Chinese/Singaporean roots. Many Malaysians use the adage “lah” or “meh” or even “ah.” These are used to hybridise the form to show how this Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and English form has now reached extremely new levels of hybridity by adding a typically Malaysian flavour to it. In terms of the ghazal, it is sort of a tongue-in-cheek situation whereby the poet seems to want to exchange all the weaknesses in the Malaysian system with what Singapore has to offer. As we remember the election of 2018, one might recall the deplorable situation Kuala Lumpur had reached in terms of essential socio-economic position. This ghazal starts with a harmless enough request for an exchange on food: to exchange *bak kut teh* for teachers.

The aim of these eight short couplets, in Ghazal 17 was to highlight the issues that Malaysia had about the use of the English language and the problems that came with it. In the first couplet, I reflected on the English language policy that the government previously adopted due to British rule. As in many parts of South East Asia, in Malaya too, English

language was the official language of the then government and remained so for many years after its independence from British rule. In couplet two, there are examples of the pidgin used by Malaysians. I differentiate the language use of the Northern Penangites (from Penang) with that of the urban KL-ite (from Kuala Lumpur). Throughout the ghazal, the poem states the issues that Malaysians face because of the mix of English and Malay. It, however, does not offer a solution. There are references made to the former Attorney General, Tommy Thomas, and his use of English. There is also the reference made to the former Prime Minister and his ability to speak an elitist brand of English. All in all, this is a ghazal that is tinged with political innuendoes from the past 2018 era in Malaysian politics. Furthermore, the refrain, “Bahasa ke Malaysia” is problematic in itself. Bahasa Malaysia refers to the Malay language, but with the adage “ke” in “Bahasa ke Malaysia,” I hoped to ask the question, is language Malaysia? My intention in doing so was to complicate further this question of language, race, and religion and its connection to nationhood.

The use of the Malay language in Ghazal 20 and Ghazal 21 adds to a layering of the ghazal. Words such as “jalan” (road) and “kedondong” (a tropical fruit) help in the setting of the ghazals. Primarily, they give a sense of place to most Malaysian readers who will be able to identify the true-to-life location of these roads in the city of Kuala Lumpur and identify the local fruit. Although this use of the Malay language may be construed as a literary and cultural allusiveness, the ghazal has always had this element of allusiveness because of its non-Western lineage. Some cultural references are not available to the English-speaking world as they might be culture specific. Besides the use of some culture-specific words, the English language used in both the pieces is straightforward and accessible. In Ghazal 21, there are many colour (refer to words in bold) words in the poem:

A **grey** coloured peak comes into view, with **dark grey** fencing

Your sharp and pointed **green** thorns, like a warning, House of the  
Bougainville.

The low gate around the home a pleasant promise of rambunctious colour  
Emerging from every corner, House of the Bougainville.

The mighty dogs in their cages on the far right emerging from their little nap  
With beautiful **brown- orange** eyes look out at you in the Home of  
Bougainville.

A cement slab, at one edge of the of the square garden  
**White** and solid in the House of the Bougainville.

In the centre, a fresh coloured plant with slender **olive** leaves  
Tiny button shaped fruits, the kedondong in the House of the Bougainville.

Behind the dropping **jade** hued plant stands a row of bright-**carrot orange**  
plant  
Brilliant like a defence team, in the House of the Bougainville

The above extract indicates the numerous times words were used in the ghazal to give a joyful sense of colour. For instance, the refrain with its reference to the Bougainville leaves a profound sense of colour in the reader's mind at every couplets' end, with the evocation of the colourful plant. As mentioned previously, the Urdu–Persian ghazals, as well as the ghazals of Shahid Ali, had a sense of melancholy at the heart of their poems. For Shahid Ali, the loss of Kashmir to war was a major focus in much of his work. However, in both the poems previously discussed, there is a subtle sense of a foreboding, which can only be vaguely derived. This will nevertheless require much unpacking before it becomes apparent. On the surface, both the ghazals tell of a contemplation of a peaceful and joyous moment. Ghazals 20 and 21 are ghazals to a certain degree. Even if they are tagged as Ghazal 20 and Ghazal

21, respectively, these are only partially ghazals. The most obvious characteristics of the ghazal that these ghazals emulate are that they are in couplets and that the first couplet has the same refrain. However, the takhalus was not included in Ghazal 20 and Ghazal 21 to keep the subtlety of the pieces as contemplation without the intrusion of the beloved's name. The repetitive use of the refrain in both the ghazals add a sense of musicality and restive peace to both Ghazal 20 and Ghazal 21 unlike the traditional Urdu ghazals, which stress the cumulative intensification of the refrain. As the traditional Urdu–Persian ghazals were normally written to express a deep sense of loss and longing, each refrain added to this sense of loss. In the English ghazals, the repetitive use of the refrain achieves a pleasant evocation, somewhat peaceful and calming rather than adding to the cumulative intensification of the refrain.

### *Experimental*

This 13-couplet poem, Ghazal 15 does not entirely fall into the category of a ghazal. Firstly, the poem does not have a refrain that a ghazal normally requires. The couplets do not rhyme, neither does the ghazal make a reference to me, the persona, in the last couplet. Thematically, it recounts a day during Deepavali, the Hindu celebration of light, in the family house. It reminisces on the memories that the family shared of previous Deepavalis. But some things have changed: prayers of other religions are now also included during this Hindu festival. Although it is a joyous occasion with descriptions of clothes, jewellery, and food, a tone of melancholy prevails throughout the poem, such as in the couplet below:

Some memories lay heavy on the minds, like  
The heavy mutton curry in their stomachs

The memories are like an ornament in the fully decorated home, hanging beautifully in everyone's minds while the essential mutton curry is eaten with much relish. It is a poem

about the present as much as it is about the past. The fear of what may come pervades the poem, and more profoundly in the penultimate couplet, we understand what the fear is: the death of family members. In hindsight, I wanted to preserve the scene at the home of this family: the fun and merry making of the celebrations once held in Sg Petani, Kedah and the underlying fear about diminishing family members.

This short five-couplet ghazal (Ghazal 29) was re-written from a longer free-verse poem. It does not follow the other regular traditional attributes of the ghazal, except that it is written in a couplet and is based on the loss of something. This loss creates the melancholic tone in the ghazal.

Typically, when I begin to write a ghazal, I consider the radif first—some image, or thought or person that would be the focus of the ghazal. Then, I draft the number of couplets I plan to write. When I first began to write these ghazals in 2018, I would plan to write 25 couplets; the number of couplets in subsequent ghazals have since been reduced. I have been advised by both my supervisors to find the right number of couplets to serve my Malaysian ghazals better. The shortest ghazal I have written is in four couplets. In this ghazal, I was unable to arrive at a suitable and satisfactory refrain from any word or image that was already in the free-verse poem, and that is the reason this ghazal does not have a radif.

Ghazal 50 was initially written as a prose poem which was re-fashioned into a ghazal for this portfolio of poems.

Ghazal 50 in its current form is found below:

All of those times, I wrote and wrote and wrote, he claimed  
in every sentence, melody and rhapsody, he claimed

Every waking hour, every minute of the hour of the day  
of the month of the year I have been without him, he claimed

My kisses, my wishes, even my twitches  
without kissing, without wishing, even without looking, he claimed

He claimed me without knowing, without claiming  
He claimed my mind, without minding, he claimed

Doing, knowing, speaking, touching, being for 31 years  
without knowing, acknowledging, yet claiming all the same, he claimed.

In the prose poem, the structure allowed for the stanza to continue for eight-and-a-half lines before a full stop is inserted. However, commas were necessary to allow the readers to pause to catch their breath before reaching the full stop. This unusually long stanza is necessary within the context of the prose poem as the structure helps illustrate, in a way, the long, odious years that the persona endured her condition of being “claimed”: “He claimed my mind for 31 years without knowing, acknowledging, yet claiming all the same.”

When compared with the ghazal, the same line loses its intensity of the “31 years” when placed in the final couplet. The enjambments of the couplets marked by the white space between the couplets disrupts the continuity of the burden of the “31 years.” In this case, the prose poem structure is better for this theme. Yet in the ghazal, the refrain “he claimed” reads more authentic due to its melancholic tone, which Shahid Ali insisted was crucial to the spirit of the ghazal.

The ghazal’s point is to lament the loss of the beloved. When that becomes the case, the ghazal equals to life—one of long suffering, one of enduring the consequences, and less of sequences of happy events. Looking back on my own life and such relationships, I discovered that my thoughts frequently recalled and cherished past relationships that were unreciprocated. Those moments of nervousness, despair, and anguish were treasured for their

bottomless intensity and strength of feeling compared to when a connection received a happier closure. I have always been drawn to the melancholic.

The idea for the prose poem came from the convenor of the first class in poetry during my MFA in Hong Kong. Our convenor was an Indian American academic who requested that we wrote a poem with the word “mine” in it. Readers have had different responses to this poem. One male lawyer in our workshop group mentioned that he found a particular line to contain a sexual innuendo: “He claimed my kisses, my wishes, even my twitches.” At that point, I was taken aback to hear a reader’s interpretation of the phrase, “even my twitches” but have come to realise that there is never one reading of a poem. Every reader’s take on a piece is dependent upon so many variables, some of which are gender, religion, class, race. Such assumptions, of course, are part of the reader-response theory that believes that each reader’s response to a text is different and valid.

This is a deeply private conversation between two people who probably were in love with each other but for some reason did not get to be together. There are confusing references that cannot make sense to readers who are unfamiliar with the locations mentioned in the ghazal, for instance, in the following couplet from Ghazal 40:

That night you visited in Gethsemane, Cheras  
I lay in a swoon the blood throbbing for you, haunting

When reflecting on this ghazal and reviewing if I would need to include some notes on names of places, I decided not to include any other notes. Sometimes allusions and references do not need to be explained. In songs, particularly, listeners tend to accept the lyrics as they are. It is true that the melody of a song allows listeners to enjoy the song even when everything is not understood. In that manner, I decided not to give any further explanation on what the references to Gethsemane and Cheras stand for.

There is an inherent mystery in the religion of Islamic Mysticism as discussed in Chapter 2. Scholars have found it troublesome to come to a definite conclusion on what it means, ambiguity and mystery is an inherent part of the ghazals written by these mystics. In a similar vein a conscious effort was made to add mystery to these experimental ghazals I crafted. Ghazal 40 is a deliberate attempt to imbibe this mystery.

The refrain of this ghazal is less successful. It does feel as if a less obvious verb needs to be in place of the present “haunting.” One of the qualities of the ghazal is that it needs to be ambiguous; not stating the obvious. In this ghazal, the refrain “haunting” seems to want to impose on the reader that the memories have haunted the persona for a long time. Even if that is the case, the repetitive nature of the refrain in this ghazal is less than impactful.

The most powerful sentiment in the ghazal is that this heartbreak has lasted for a long time. Sentimentality is often frowned upon in poetry, yet in this ghazal the persona is allowed to voice her feelings when she says:

Every day of every year since 1982

I have been looking back replaying our heartbeats haunting.

Appropriation is a fine art in the hands of Shahid Ali. He strings together lines from other poets into his own ghazals to show his appreciation of them as well as a type of acknowledgement towards their work. When I wrote Ghazal 83, I was reading Mary Oliver’s *Roses*, and the last line in that poem rang philosophically true.

The roses laughed softly. “Forgive us,” they said. “But as you can see, we are just now entirely busy being roses.”

(Oliver, 2014)

Of course, an answer such as this is ambivalent and requires unpacking. It could just be that the wild roses have found that life is simply too complicated if one needed to answer these questions. It might just not be worth anyone’s time to try to figure out the answers to



questions that have no clear answers or that guessing an answer to such questions might not change them into something else. It was an enlightening subjective indirect retort to a simple question by the persona: would you tell me?

Ghazal 83 was written during the difficult pandemic months of 2020 when as a Malaysian society we had to face some very difficult realities and hard questions. The rhetoric on cultural appropriation seemed insignificant and contra to our lived experience of gifting each other our culture and see it morph into something we can collectively make a claim to. In the face of the challenges the world faced, so many of the questions that this ghazal puts forth seemed as though they needed no definite answer and that arriving at an answer was not as important as “just busy being roses.”

Oliver’s work is interesting and calming; the voice of a sage gently pointing to the universe for answers, as it does in this poem simply entitled *Roses*. I am attempting to emulate Shahid Ali in plucking a phrase from her poem and incorporating it into my ghazal. When this borrowed phrase acts as a refrain, the importance of what it has to say gives it agency. As in the tradition of the Urdu ghazal, it remains ambivalent, yet if the reader cares to work out the wisdom in Oliver’s poem, some concerns in the questions might surface.

### ***Malaysian Allusions***

In this section, I reflect upon four ghazals (3, 16, 27, and 36). These form a cluster of ghazals that all have specific Malaysian allusions. Ghazal 3 tells the tale of an actual woman who, to this day, can be found in the Petaling Jaya Old Town Market. She sits across from her stall, now probably run by her aged daughter and son-in-law. I notice her every time I pass the stall. Her hair is well-groomed, and she sits in her plastic armchair upright, paying attention to the day’s business. She looks like she is in her late eighties. This poem is about

time passing and the persona's eyes are looking backward, making an observation about the changes in the vibrant place such as the market [a comparison deals with two things/ two items]. The "Ah Chee" as the main subject of the poem is now relegated to the position of an elder who is now unable to sell her wares at the stall as she has become too frail for such tasks.

Many images in the poem point to the passing of time: "Half a decade ago, wallets in pockets were thinner," which indicates that those who shop at this market have more money now. In stark contrast to this, about the produce at the market, the fish on the cement slabs are dead—a known fact, except that the contrast between being alive and being dead for human consumption suggests the question of the environment and sustainability. It begs the question: have our fishermen done their work in measured amounts, so as not to over catch fish? In the market, roles have changed as have the race of fishmongers, butchers, and vegetable sellers. These were predominantly Chinese men and women who, today, have moved away to other countries such as Australia and New Zealand, and are now replaced by "young, tanned men" from Bangladesh.

Ghazal 16 is a rather descriptive poem of 11 couplets about Kuala Lumpur traffic. Just like many big cities, Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya become choked with traffic early every morning and at about 5 p.m. every workday evening. The refrain uses the word "maze" to describe the unrelenting traffic, a maze of unceasing traffic.

The first couplet, "Jln TAR Jln Ipoh, Jln Pudu" are the names of some of the busiest major routes in the Klang Valley. Besides the traffic, I thought about the best sunrises I have seen on my journey to work on the Maju Expressway to Cyberjaya. The dark morning sky quickly draws back, revealing an orange sky. The latter half of the poem is a description of the evening traffic and the tea cakes that Malaysian are fond of such as:

The goreng pisang, the appam baliks line the streets,  
Food trucks in Section 4 add to the evening maze

I wanted to remember the phenomenon of a working day in the Klang Valley and added the element of food in the crazy maze of Malaysian life. In repeating the line “Jln Tar, Jln Ipoh, Jln Pudu,” I was interested in showing the life cycle of humans and in this, the human condition of people working, schooling, and living in the Klang Valley.

From the first to the 11th couplet, this Malaysian Ghazal 27 describes the persona’s journey from her home to her place of work. The refrain is the name of one of the newer highways—the Maju Expressway, connecting the Klang Valley to the administrative capital, Putrajaya.

The ghazal form is somewhat suitable for this subject matter, as the radif and couplets allow for snippets of what one encounters on this journey. The tone of the piece is rather matter of fact and is absent from the melancholia present in other poems in this collection. It was as if I heard the voice in the Waze app instructing me on my journey to some destination in Malaysia. However, the reader might get the sense that this is a solitary journey to work, very early in the morning at dawn. In almost every couplet could be found signposts of a locality, landmark, or name of an identifiable street name. There is, however, a sense of foreboding with the presence of the following couplet:

As you race past the Nirvana Memorial Centre  
A landmark filled with a sense of death, a reminder of races on the MEX

One meets the Memorial Centre in a very awkward path of the highway. It almost jumps at you as you enter the Maju Expressway; a stark building, with sinister reminders. A drive on a motorway is hardly the subject matter for poetry, particularly one that has a rich tradition such as the ghazal. Ghazals are normally written with important issues at the heart of their message, yet it can relay the message of a mundane activity such this solitary drive.

It is an invitation to Klang Valley dwellers to partake in this journey to witness the beautiful Malaysian skyline, devoid of skyscrapers:

The sky now reflects the Hawaiian sea  
Darkest blue, blue strokes shimmering, to the Mex

A windy mix of orange and red and blue and yellow  
The artist's canvas swirls as I reach Cyberjaya, still on the Mex

In my ghazals, I used imagery and characters from my community. Names of places, of streets, food, and language are all included to allude to a Malaysian landscape. This is a direct act of emulating the ghazal masters (see the section on Rumi's Ghazal for a discussion on allusions). Stock characters such as the tavern boy, who served wine, and the presence of the moth and the candle were always evident. I attempted to incorporate familiar spaces by using actual street and highway names to fortify my ghazals as Malaysian ghazals. Rumi's ghazals speak of a Sufi's spiritual path—an acknowledged difficult path. Some of my ghazals are journeys from one destination to another—a physical journey through the writer's mindscape.

In Ghazal 36, each couplet is written to describe the persona's neighbourhood, where she lived during the 1980s. There are certain references to individuals who might have special meaning to individuals and could recognise these personalities. However, the deeper meanings of how these individuals are connected to each other beyond the fact that they all lived in the locality might be confusing to readers outside that knowledge. When this ghazal was read by a reader who did not have prior knowledge about these individuals mentioned in the ghazal, she suggested that some explanations could be provided to help readers like her appreciate the ghazal more. For her, the names were confusing.

This ghazal remains without footnotes for two reasons. The footnotes might distract

the reader as they would have been weighty. By that, I mean that the reader's focus might be drawn to the footnotes more than to the ghazal itself. Secondly, merely mentioning who someone is would be merely scratching the surface. The community generally attributed certain characteristics to certain individuals based on their own value systems and an attempt at explaining the relevance of each individual mentioned to this value system might be too tedious and, in my own estimation, counterproductive. As with many of the poems in this collection, this is a community poem which is deeply personal to people who lived in this community.

The line that might appear to be most confusing might be the couplet that reads:

To the furthest end of the row, K2 lived a solid secret

Of how a mother became a sister, a secret that everyone knew, in the 80s

As with most neighbourhood communities, this one had its own secrets. By just letting the readers know that there was a "solid secret" was just merely acknowledging such a secret but allowing that to remain a secret.

The tone of this ghazal is not nostalgic as ghazals should be. It matter-of-factly states, in each couplet, a nugget about each family. There is nothing nostalgic about them or of them having lived there, until one gets to the second last couplet that mentions the "solid secret." Because of the position of this couplet, readers might keep reading the ghazal without much confusion and momentarily stop to re-read this couplet. However, not having any means of getting at the secret, the reader might just go on reading.

On reflection, it might have been useful to change the position of this couplet to either the first or last couplet to increase the sense of mystery in the poem. By moving it to the first couplet, the couplet's sense of mystery might permeate the entire ghazal. Alternatively, moving it just one couplet down might jolt the reader's attention, like arriving at a junction,

and facing a dead end.

Mystery and ambiguity are essential elements of the ghazal, as explained in Chapter Two. Inherently, ghazals are “never one dimensional” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 439) which is most evident in the concept of the beloved. The beloved could be a male or female, human or . An apt example of this is Rumi’s beloved. Many believe that his ghazals were inspired by his love and devotion to Shams-e Tabrizi, while others believe that his diwan was dedicated to God. I found this element of ambiguity very empowering, particularly when using images and characters that are real-life. If one’s community recognises themselves in one’s work, one might be able to shield oneself under this cloud of uncertainty.

Ghazal 7, I feel, is one of the most political poems among this set of ghazals. The context is crucial, and I will discuss this at the beginning. Malaysia was just at this point reeling from the joy of overthrowing the old government. We had just emerged from the tyranny of former Prime Minister Najib Razak and his wife, Rosmah Mansor. Malaysians became aware of the many possibilities Malaysia could evolve into, and so the mood was very positive and expectant. We felt that we could do it all, and women were very much part of the equation that made it happen. Just at this point, the news broke about a couple caught for wrongdoing (*khalwat*) as they were a lesbian couple. In view of the above, the entire ghazal has a very serious tone. For example, the refrain “six strokes of the cane” is repeated in this 12-couplet ghazal. The first couplet sets the tone, comprising the modern-day possibilities of holidaying on the moon, in stark contrast to the punitive punishment of whipping as meted out to grown women here in Malaysia. The second couplet references how women were part of the government that meted out this sentence as the Deputy Minister was also a woman. The ghazal urges the reader to wise up to the beatings. In the ghazal, the persona urges the victim to show up their scars and anger instead of hiding behind their veils

as most Malay women in Kelantan and Terengganu do. References are made to the story in the Bible when Jesus Christ asks the righteous men to be the first to throw a stone at the unchaste woman. This image is a strong one as it sets the background of the unchanged conditions for women since almost 2,000 years ago.

In this ghazal, I used Rich's agency. In Chapter Two of this study, it is stated that Shahid Ali was very specific in his criticism of Rich (see the Literature Review section). She appropriated the form, moving the tone from the "cry of the gazelle" to the angst of women's rights groups and other marginalised peoples such as those who were gay, lesbian, and African American. Taking the cue, from one woman to another, specifically from Rich, I experimented with the ghazal form in Ghazal 7. In the background was the notion that this predominantly, male-Muslim construct had strict rules to adhere to, and for Shahid Ali, the spirit of the ghazal necessitated a melancholic tone. Traditionally, the melancholia originated from the loss of the beloved and for Shahid Ali, the beloved predominantly took the form of Kashmir, his birth country. He was very troubled by the turbulent history of his country and grounded his work in his country and culture. Although I set out to write traditional ghazals on the theme of loss, Ghazal 7 needed to be written as a form of liberation for those who were silenced in Malaysia. At the moment of crafting this ghazal, I felt that Malaysia as a country was moving forward. After all, the political will of the populace caused a huge change in the political landscape of the country, as the results of the 14<sup>th</sup> general election proved. Using the ghazal form, I wrote 12 couplets, with the refrain "six strokes of the cane" which was the punishment meted out for two women who were convicted of attempting to have sex in a car, in 2018. Although there was political pushback from certain groups, these women were caned following a conviction by the Syariah High Court in Terengganu. In light of this case, womanhood seemed like an underrated condition that needed to be cautioned and caned to behave according to certain laws. It felt like the rug was being pulled under our feet after the

success of the general election. Ghazal 7 then was influenced more by Rich's agency of using the ghazal as a mouthpiece to write back against hegemony.

### *Catholic Imagery*

The refrain in Ghazal 11 is influenced by the Turkish dramas I am fond of watching. This ghazal, true to its form, is a collection of couplets that are disjointed; not necessarily painting a wholesome or a context that is easy to understand. The first couplet explains the time after Christmas when trimmings and other things are boxed and returned to their place. Then, Ash Wednesday is upon us, a sudden reality that the most sacred time of the Catholic calendar is now approaching. The following couplets relate to the boredom of Mass and how the concentration would move to other interests. As teenagers, we became sad and brooding at the Stations of the Cross, "forcing our hearts and our minds to return to the Saviour on the cross, alah alah"

More importantly, the couplet was written to emulate the 14 Stations of the Cross that the Catholics recite during the month of Lent. Therefore, each line is constructed with the line after to offer some dark comedy. The persona remembers about some small rendezvous behind the church and contrasts it with Jesus's second fall in the Stations of the Cross, as if to make Jesus pay for the misdeeds of the congregation of the Risen Christ. This humour continues into the next couplet when the women in the community think about the festive food that will be prepared, together with the meeting of Jesus with the women during his final walk to Golgotha.

In this nine-couplet ghazal, Ghazal 12, I tried to recall the journey from our home in Bamboo Gardens to the Risen Christ Church. In the 1970s, a new Catholic church was built, and the congregation then worshipped at the new church located in nearby Rainbow Gardens.



Walking was relatively safe during those times and so my sisters and I took charge of our little neighbours and took them to church with us. We were Catholics, whilst the neighbouring kids came from a bi-religious family. Their mother was Hindu. She had committed suicide soon after her youngest son was born and so the children were left under the care of their grandparents. Their father, the Catholic, had left the home. The children had Catholic names. The tone of the poem is sinister as it suggests that everything was not alright. On the surface was a gang of young children going to church, but questions of where the parents were and why they were not in church arose. These were questions the children could not answer. Moreover, the sacrament of Holy Communion is also brought up. If indeed it was the rite of Communion, why were the children not allowed to participate, as they obviously wanted to interact with the parishioners? The church seemed like a place that was cold and unwelcome as illustrated by this couplet:

We were 10 and 8 and 6 and 5 and maybe 2  
A string of kids, alone and fearful of a wrong move, in the new church

Christmas appears again with its attractions of food and presents, yet the poem appears dark and cold. The game is lost at the end as the children stopped following us to church.

Religion and religious practice are at the core of the practice of ghazal writing. As discussed in Chapter Two, it was the Sufis who were credited for writing the ghazals. The followers of Sufism wrote ghazals to show their unending quest to experience the beloved, who in some instances was believed to be God (see the Literature Review section for definitions of Sufism and a discussion on it). Shahid Ali himself was a Muslim, with Sufi heritage—his mother was believed to have come from a Sufi family. Shahid used references from his culture and religion to infuse the ghazal form with this heritage. He mentions this loyalty to his culture in *Introduction to Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English* where

he states, “of course, I was exercising a Muslim snobbery of the Shiite elan” (see the Literature Review section). Similarly, I have used my own culture and religion to make my ghazals speak to a Malaysian experience. In many of the ghazals I wrote, the Church, the congregation, and practice of Catholicism was at the centre of my Malaysian ghazals.

My poems thematically embodied the challenges and struggles I faced as that of a Catholic-Malaysian woman of Indian origin. In the initial ghazals that were written, Catholicism was the landscape on which the ghazals were projected and the use of Catholic imagery worked as the setting for events that took place during the early, teenage years. The later ghazals, particularly ghazals 53, 57, and 82 further incorporated these aspects of Catholicism into the structure of the ghazal. Ghazals 53 with the refrain “Mary my mother” is in reference both to Jesus’s mother, Mary and the persona’s mother, “Marie.” Much like Ghazal 1, there are references to the Catholic meditation on the Rosary in the following lines:

Show me your face teach us to be like you  
Hail Mary you are full of grace, Mary my mother

Elizabeth your cousin recognised the Lord  
Be amongst us at the hour

By contrast, Ghazal 1 makes references to the Christian *Lord’s Prayer*, incorporating many lines from the prayer into the poem itself. Phrases such as “oh father,” “hallowed be Thy name,” “Thy kingdom come,” “Thy will be done,” and “in heaven as it is.” Thus, while Ghazal 1 has many lines from the Lord’s prayer weaved into it, Ghazal 53 has two lines that makes references to *The Hail Mary*. Ghazal 1 appropriates a prayer from the Christian tradition and uses the traditionally Muslim form to house a plea for a release from the tyranny that has befallen Malaysia.

The use of Catholic symbols and imagery is of course not new, particularly in the

Western tradition. For centuries, Christianity was at the heart of poetry that was written in Anglo-Saxon literature and the Bible was the main source from which metaphors, symbols, and imagery were derived. T. S. Eliot is an “unconscious” influence on the way I use Catholic imagery. What I mean by unconscious needs explanation as I am not in any way suggesting that a luminary such as him can be consigned to such a diminished state of the unconscious. I encountered Eliot’s work during my undergraduate study of English Literature. Although I was aware of his influence, I was not particularly interested in his poetics, except for his use of Anglo-Catholic imagery in his poetry. When I reflected on my use of Catholic imagery and prayer into the ghazals I wrote, I delved deep to remember what prompted the incorporation of such devices into my ghazals.

*Ash Wednesday* was the classic by Eliot that first comes to my mind. The title had struck me most when I first read the poem. Ash Wednesday in the Christian calendar is a holy day of introspection and penitence, which marks the commencement of Lent. Lent is a liturgical period of 40 days of prayers and abstinence that recalls the fasting and temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. As a practising Catholic, the knowledge that infusing Catholic prayer into poetry was acceptable and practised was exciting. In a society that took its religion very seriously, this extraordinary use of prayer needed to be handled with care. At the same time, this method of appropriation of the Christian symbols and prayers had passed into my consciousness.

Barry Spurr in his article *Anglo-Catholic in Religion: T.S. Eliot and Christianity* explains the significant influences on Eliot’s work: ‘religion is the most often misunderstood and misrepresented’ (Spuss, 2021, p. 187). Eliot was an Anglo-Catholic and he was formally committing to a range of beliefs, spiritual and disciplines and liturgical practices deriving from the Catholic tradition of Anglican theology and worship with its historical and cultural

heritage at the centre of life of the society, together with the theology, spirituality, and ritual of the Western Catholic Church at large. This meant that he was a devout, in participation of Mass, in penance (Confession). This participation and its necessary responses are alluded to in *Ash Wednesday*, “Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest enter under my roof; But speak the word only, that my soul shall be healed.” In *Ash Wednesday* too, the phrase “Bless me Father” which is in the final section of Eliot’s most confessional poem. *The Rosary* was an essential and important part of his prayer life.

Going back to what exactly I remembered of these poems, I truthfully cannot ascertain. However, I do believe that this technique of inserting parts of a Christian prayer into poetry must have indirectly come from my experience of Eliot’s poems.

In Shahid Ali’s ghazal *Tonight*, he makes many leaps from one couplet to another—from heaven to hell; from Kashmir to other parts of the world through his use of imagery and allusions. He alludes to the archangel, to God, Elijah, Jezebel, and Ishmael. In doing this, Shahid Ali attempts to transverse the boundaries of space, religion, and culture. When I envisaged Ghazal 57, I was interested to humanise God, as Shahid Ali so successfully managed in his final couplet by writing:

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

The concept of the beloved in Ghazal 57 is aligned to the mystic’s idea of God, which I juxtaposed onto the Catholic devotion during the celebration of the Passion of Christ. The Stations of the Cross is the enactment of Jesus of Nazareth’s final journey to Mount Calvary. There are references to local Malaysian states such as Sabah and Sarawak, and to landmarks in my own locality. In this ghazal, Jesus meets with his mother, Simon, and Veronica, mirroring what is explained in the Gospels. The beloved of this ghazal is unlike the beloved

of Rumi or even Shahid Ali. This beloved points only to Jesus of the Christian faith and couplets 1–14 emulate the beloved’s journey to his crucifixion on Mount Calvary. This ghazal lifts a narrative out of the gospels to appropriate this meditation of Jesus’s final journey and local-colouring it with Malaysia. The cross—a powerful marker of Christianity—in this ghazal is the “Malaysian Meranti” and Jesus is met by “Sufi women.” Further metaphors from the ghazal tradition needed to be incorporated, thus the stock metaphors of the ghazal were introduced such as the wine, the cup, and the image of the moth and the candle.

The Catholic evocation of this memorial is melancholic and sad, enacted every Good Friday in the liturgical calendar of Lent. Although I am a Catholic, and this memorial is considered sacred, yet for a long time now, the violence of this enactment has become more problematic resulting in trauma that has outweighed the sacredness of this communal practice. In the final couplet, “the cold slab of stone” is a reference to Michelangelo’s *Pietà* or *Pity*. *Pietà*, as a theme in Christian art, is a representation of the Virgin Mary supporting the body of the dead Jesus. *Pietà* was widely represented in both painting and sculpture.

The cold slab of stone may bring some readers to this image of *Pietà*. It stands for the immense loss, sadness, and humility in the figures. Jesus in this image is human and God all at once, placed in this manner on his mother’s lap, attesting to the immensity of faith, grace, and love. One hopes that Jesus’s journey to Mount Calvary becomes less violent in its enactment and the final image of *Pietà* and its narrative of hopelessness transfigures into one of hope.

Ghazal 82 is a series of questions that is directed to Pope Francis (Jorge Mario Bergoglio), the current head of the Catholic Church. He is regarded with scant respect unlike what is normally accorded to Catholic popes. Although he is named and his name is the refrain that is repeated at the end of every couplet, the pope is not the beloved of this ghazal,

neither is the tone of the ghazal melancholic. In fact, the tone gets insistent and edgy. The traditional ghazals were marked for their blasphemous treatment of the sacred and this ghazal receives its agency from this custom. Although the pope is not God, yet for Catholics he represents God on earth as there is a direct unbroken lineage from the disciple Peter, the first pope, to Francis the present pope. Although the questions seem like they need answers, they are meant to warn the Catholic Church of what it should be doing in the face of countless coverups by the Vatican on the criminality of many of its priests. The questions allude to the apparent failure of the Catholic Church to be relevant to its sheep. The Catholic Church relies on symbols to make and convey meaning. The pope is looked upon as the shepherd to guide the flock and part of this iconology is the staff that is part of the pope's attire. The last couplet predicts for the church the possibility of its flock being misdirected and rendering Pope Francis sheep-less.

### ***Malaysian Ghazals***

I would like to consider the anti-ghazal aspect of this ghazal. According to Jenna Butler in her thesis, *Writing the Body, Writing the Land: Barbour, Brandt, Webb, and Halfe*, the anti-ghazal is a ghazal with rules that go against some of the tenets of traditional ghazal writing. Butler looked at the work of four Canadian writers (stated above), particularly that of Phyllis Webb, and discovered that like Adrienne Rich, Webb took to the form to give voice to the silences in her poetry. Butler used the term "anti-ghazal" when a pertinent rule of the ghazal was not followed (Butler, 2011, p. 95).

I would like to use this concept of the anti-ghazal to describe some of the poems that I have written in the collection, particularly Ghazal 33. However, as the term anti-ghazal has strong connotations of the negative compared to the positive, I would like to use the same

concept of the anti-ghazal but brand it as a Malaysian hybrid ghazal. The definition of a Malaysian ghazal is based on the tenets espoused by Shahid Ali, in that it is written in couplets, and that it has a refrain. Secondly, the use of multi-languages would define the Malaysian ghazal, as explained in this chapter. Further, idiomatic Malaysian expressions would be a necessary component of the Malaysian ghazal. Important Malaysian themes of fasting, praying, celebrating, and eating should also be included as a crucial element in the Malaysian ghazal. This would call for Malaysian specifics in terms of setting, such as street names and other specifically iconic Malaysian imagery. The ghazals must move from the mono-toned cry of the gazelle as desired by Shahid Ali to one that is multi-toned. Couplets could alternate between sad and happy couplets to an entire piece being sad or celebratory. Although the hybrid English ghazals of Shahid Ali used metaphors that were traditionally Muslim, such as the Karbala, Malaysian ghazals could include allusions to the culture and religion of all Malaysians.

In this personal/community poem, the intention was to draw an oral map of the family home in relation to other community members living in the vicinity. The area described is basically a squared block of homes, the centre of which was a children's playground, which the poem points out. Names of families who lived around the square are mentioned and in true Malaysian style, a Chinese *tokong* in the centre of that square. The poem does nothing more than this—a description of the location of one home to the other.

This is referred to as an anti-ghazal as the tone of the poem borders on almost a happy poem. If the ghazal needs to be melancholic, as espoused by Shahid Ali, this poem does not reflect this. At best, it is nostalgic, looking with a backward glance of what it was half a century ago. The refrain further adds to the flippant and playful tone of the poem, playing with the sound of the house number, V1.

## *Conclusion*

In conclusion, this reflective chapter discusses an overview of the process of writing the 100 Malaysian ghazals. Initially, it was a challenge to fix on one suitable method to approach this process, as ghazals are not meant to be categorised by themes. Each couplet is supposed to reflect a single gem in a necklace—a pearl within a string of gems. However, for those of us schooled in the Western tradition, working through motifs proofed to be an unconscious fundamental diagnostic framework. Thus, after much thought, the ghazals were grouped into broad categories. A small number of my ghazals remained outside of these broad categories of teenage years, family, Malaysia, celebration, spirituality, and food.

Some tropes emerged across the ghazals, like a silver thread in a fabric of verse. The use of multi languages was one significant pattern; over 80% of the ghazals I wrote included words from the Malay language. In a similar vein, words and expressions from other languages crept into the ghazals including Tamil, Malayalam, Chinese, Hindi, and Arabic. In this form, I hoped to have contributed to the ghazal form, to offer Malaysian ghazals that extend the ambit of traditional ghazals by incorporating multiple languages into the English language ghazals. Furthermore, although the traditional ghazals were melancholic, primarily lamenting the beloved, the Malaysian ghazals I wrote incorporated both the melancholic and the celebratory, for the Malaysian experience is a paradox of both sadness and joy.

Just as crucial was the use of Catholic-Christian imagery, metaphors, and allusions that were included in many of the Malaysian ghazals I wrote for this portfolio of ghazals. It was fascinating to stretch this traditional form, with its inherent Sufi-inspired figurative language, to include Catholic-Christian poetic language. I am in no way suggesting that the Catholic religion was at the heart of the ghazals I wrote. In fact, the church, its location, and the parishioners appear as an important social landscape for many of the juvenile experiences



that the persona experienced. The sense of deeper Christian piety was not always allowed to float to the surface.

Finally, contemplating on a genre of Malaysian ghazal, I believe that I offered a definition of a Malaysian ghazal. The definition of a Malaysian ghazal is based on the tenets espoused by Shahid Ali. It includes the use of multi-languages that would define the Malaysian ghazal. Furthermore, idiomatic Malaysian expressions would be a necessary component of the Malaysian ghazal and the Malaysian themes of fasting, praying, celebrating, and eating should also be included as vital components in the Malaysian ghazal. This would call for specifically Malaysian details in terms of setting, such as street names and other specifically iconic Malaysian imagery. The ghazals must move from the mono-toned cry of the gazelle as desired by Shahid Ali to one that is multi-toned to mirror a multilingual and multicultural Malaysia. Couplets could alternate between unhappy and happy couplets to an entire piece being melancholic or celebratory.

## Chapter 5

### Summary, Contribution to the Form and Conclusions

This chapter is divided into three sections: the summary of the thesis, my contribution to the ghazal form, and lastly, the conclusion. My interest in the ghazal form started during my MFA days when I was introduced to the English ghazal through Shahid Ali's anthology. My attraction for the ghazal was sealed when I learnt that melancholia is an essential element in the ghazal, thereby sealing my love for this form. Further, the recurring motif of loss in my work created an awareness that Shahid Ali's invocation of the ghazal was a suitable home for the lament of lost relationships, the old Malaysia of the 1970s and 1980s, and other such tropes. Needless to say, the Urdu ghazal's Indian DNA was a serious pull factor that gave this Malaysian-Malayali the license to appropriate the form. After years of using Western forms, writing ghazals as envisaged by Shahid Ali was empowering, to say the least. Building on Shahid Ali's hybrid ghazals, I wrote Malaysian hybrid ghazals that were multi-toned polyglots, using a traditional Muslim construct to carry Catholic concerns of piety. Importantly, I offer a new definition for the Malaysian ghazal. Using the idea of the anti-ghazal, Malaysian characteristics are incorporated in making a Malaysian ghazal.

### *Summary*

Shahid Ali was a practitioner of the ancient Urdu ghazal, who popularised the English ghazal's art form, in the United States. For him, the ghazal was tied to the notion of melancholia and loss. He laid a claim on the ghazal, editing a seminal anthology—the first of its kind—offering a guide to American poets to write English ghazals according to its traditional Urdu/Persian form. He was angered by the appropriation of the form by some American poets, particularly Rich who used the form to include her brand of lesbian feminism

which he felt was not in keeping with the spirit of the Urdu ghazal. My interest in the ghazal began when I was introduced to his anthology, *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*.

Melancholia in any art form is interesting to me. I cherished the melancholia in the works of Victorian writers such as Emily Bronte and Thomas Hardy. In the same way, the ghazal with its inherent pining for the beloved is a refreshing find; a treasure trove of fresh writers to discover. Furthermore, locating Rumi in the map of the history of the Urdu ghazal sealed my love for the ghazal form; a form that I use to house my themes of teenage love, Malaysia, family, spirituality, celebration, and food.

The recurring trope of loss, in my work, made me realise that the ghazal was suited to my themes. Many of the boy-girl relationships I had always ended sadly and the ghazal is the right form for the poems that I wrote on this subject. Personally, I miss the Malaysia I grew up in, with better race relationships in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century than it is having now. Losing the Malaysia of the past to present-day Malaysia is indeed a catastrophe. Furthermore, the community that I used to live in has evolved and changed with the death of family members, relatives, and friends. The centre of my social interaction was the church and moving away from the neighbourhood also meant the end of weekly interactions between childhood friends and relatives. For these reasons, the ghazal is the best home for loss as the structure of the ghazal is repetitive and therefore conducive in providing a hypnotic quality that enhances that sadness. Another important reason for this attachment to this form is that the Urdu ghazal had Indian roots, that spoke to my Indianness. The opportunity to use an Indian form compared to a Western one is empowering.

Using the rules that Shahid Ali laid out, I constructed 100 Malaysian-English ghazals. The aims of the study are to hybridise the ghazal, to create ghazals that are multi-toned, and

to imbibe this Sufi-Muslim construct with a Malayali-Malaysian's predilections. However, my ghazals are different from Shahid Ali's ghazals although both are hybrid ghazals. Even though Shahid Ali knew Urdu, he wrote his ghazals in English, rendering his aesthetics fundamentally hybrid. As argued by Ward and Woodland, Shahid Ali being Muslim-Kashmiri and American, he was a hybrid himself. Comparatively, the Malaysian hybrid ghazals I write are polyglots as they are not exclusively written in English. I use Malay, Tamil, Malayalam, Arabic as well as English. In terms of the regularity of the use of non-English words, most of my ghazals use words from the Malay language, whilst less than a quarter of the non-English words are in Tamil, Malayalam, Turkish, Chinese, Hindi, and Arabic. In this manner, my ghazals are a hybrid of Shahid Ali's genre of ghazals. Secondly, I create ghazals that are multi-toned. Although a high percentage of the ghazals are love poems, almost 36 of them, I also wrote poems that are joyful and celebratory. Thirdly, is the use of Catholic-Christian imagery, metaphors, and allusions that I included in my Malaysian English ghazals. It is refreshing to stretch this traditionally Islamic form to include Catholic-Christian concerns and imagery. Ultimately, I deliberate on how I use the ghazal, as advocated by Shahid Ali, and appropriate it to write my type of Malaysian hybrid ghazals.

The ghazals I wrote are grouped into seven categories which are teenage years, Malaysia, family, celebration, spirituality, and food. I attempted to use the standard as set up by Shahid Ali and achieved varying degrees of success. I attempt to follow the eight rules Shahid Ali suggested for English ghazals from the tradition of the Urdu ghazal. According to these rules, a ghazal should have a minimum of between five to 12 couplets that contain no enjambments. However, the couplets must have a strict formal scheme with a rhyme and a refrain. Each line must be the same length. The last couplet should be a signature couplet with the takhalus—the poet's name. The scheme of rhyme and refrain must occur in both lines of the first couplet and then, only in the second line of every succeeding couplet. Finally,

it should be terse and melancholic.

There are several theories about the origin of the ghazal. According to *The Encyclopaedia of Islam (1960)*, there are various possibilities about the origin of the ghazal. One theory is that it originated in the erotic nasib of the qasida (panegyric) and developed in a technical form. However, most scholars agree that the ghazal is characterised by the theme of love (Eve, et al., 2020). There are many uncertainties in this culture and tradition of writing the ghazals. Chief among this uncertainty is the nature of the beloved. There are certain stock characters in the Persian ghazal and the beloved is a highly disputed stock character. It may therefore be concluded if the writers of the ghazals were male and if their beloved was indeed a young man, that the erotic language that was used in the poetry was an indication of the evident homoerotic love practised by the poets towards the “young man or teenager, a soldier, a page” (Eve, et al., 2020, p. ). In the quote, the beloved can be assumed to be a young boy, and from such assumptions, the notion that the individuals were involved in the practice of homosexuality, as women did not participate in the same social space as the men.

There are six important structural requirements for a ghazal, as explained in the book *History of the Ottoman Poetry*. It is a short poem of about 4–15 couplets. The first couplet is called the matla ““and it is invariably musarra,” meaning the two hemistiches always rhyming together. All the second lines rhyme together to end with the matla. The last couplet in the ghazal is called the maqta, where the poet introduces his name, much like affixing his name to the ghazal. The themes in ghazal are as follows: pleasures of wine, the delights of spring tide, woes or joys of love, and laughter. Several couplets are unrelated to the poems. Only one tone should run through the whole poem. Finally, each couplet should be complete with a complete idea, fully expressed. The introduction of the name towards the end of a poem is not particular to the ghazal but common to all the verse forms of more than two couplets

derived from the Arabian rhyme system. From this system, the takhalus (introducing the name towards the end of the poem) is not particular to the ghazal rather it was common to all verse-forms of more than two couplets. Shahid Ali “took back” the form from the American poets who were using the form in a diluted manner (Ali A., 2000, p. 1).

Rumi was a prolific poet. His *Diwan-e Shams* contains more than 3,000 poems, mostly ghazals (Harmless W. a., 2020) which many believe are love poems that show his devotion to Shams-e Tabrizi. A major theme in Rumi’s poetry is the love for the beloved. An inclusive definition of who the beloved is provided by an eminent Urdu scholar. In his broad view, she is the betrothed or the wife of another man, or when love found one outlet in homosexuality, one of the beloveds of the Urdu ghazal is a beautiful male youth (Russel, 1969, p. 117). Every ghazal has at its centre the yearning for the beloved, which is present and strong in Rumi’s corpus. Sufism is a branch of Islam that was closely connected with the ghazal. A working definition of Sufism is problematic, as it can be confusing and misleading. The fact that each master was speaking from his spiritual station and understanding of his listeners adds to this confusion. Each definition uncovers a different aspect of Sufism, which is current within its proper context. Annemarie Schimmel in her book *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* explains the mystery surrounding the concept of Sufism. Sufism is generally the accepted name for Islamic mysticism and that part of the answer is with the word mysticism itself. According to her, it means that which contains “something mysterious” and “not to be reached by ordinary means or by intellectual effort” (Schimmel, 1975, p. 3). One must accept that the term Sufism means many different things to different sets of people. Throughout the research, it seems impossible to keep to one definition as indeed it has proven to be a concept that was an ever-evolving set of values and practices. For this section on American Sufism, I shall rely on Jacob Needleman’s definition which is as follows:

Sufism is indeed a system of ideas rooted in the great perennial vision of man and

reality that lies at the heart of all the world's spiritual traditions, but the contemporary, albeit modest, awakening interest in Sufism is directed mainly to its status as a practice leading to a higher state of Being. In short, Sufism is a way. What is meant by that term is a guided inner struggle, in which a man or woman strives to emerge from a state of egoism, submitting to a supreme goodness that is both idea and energy. (Aminrazavi & Jacob, 2014, p. xii)

Melancholia and mystery are characteristic of the ghazal. The poetry that the Sufis penned was connected to their religion and God. Understandably then, Shahid Ali mentioned in the rules set out in *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*, the ghazal is always melancholic. At this point, the reader is led into the history of the ghazal in America, an important development in this thesis, reviewing Adrienne Rich's ghazals and how dissimilar they are from the ghazals of Ghalib. Through the efforts of Aijaz Ahmad, a critic residing in New York, at that time, American poets such as Adrienne Rich, WS Merwin, David Ray, Mark Strand, and William Hunt (Caplan, 2008) were given literal translations and notes, thereby introducing them to a completely foreign aesthetics. The result of which was the publication of the *Ghazals of Ghalib*. Ahmad aimed to introduce Ghalib to America, in that, the poetics of the poet was more important than the form. This contact with a foreign form of art sparked interest in the ghazal and Rich's *The Blue Ghazals* was the direct result of that contact and connection. The ghazal form caught the imagination of Adrienne Rich as she attempted to write her version of the ghazals. The American context at this point was turbulent and unsettling which further pushed for a new experiment. She finished *The Blue ghazals* and started on *Ghazals (Homage to Ghalib)* in July 1968, during the most turbulent years in the post-war history of the United States as the country was reeling from the assassinations of key leaders of America, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy. Rich's ghazals are "erotic and political, speaks for women's rights, marginalized groups as

homosexual and African-American” (Kashani, 2014, p. 40) Cheri Colby Langdell in *Adrienne Rich: The Movement of Change* suggests that *Leaflet* is a political volume given to women’s experiences and the women’s liberation movement, dealing with socio-political break-ups such as the anti-Vietnam War movement given to women’s experiences and the women’s liberation movement, deals with socio-political break-ups as anti-Vietnam war movements. It was deemed radical and out of the norm as she used fragmented sentences with erratic punctuation.

Shahid Ali was very specific in his criticism of Adrienne Rich in *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*. Firstly, he partly blames Aijaz Ahmad for not “quite explaining Ghalib to those who collaborated with him in translating Ghalib.” (*Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English: Real Ghazals in English*, 2000, p. 11). Then he quotes Rich from her note in her *Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib* in which she admits that she was not strict in following the structure and metrics of the ghazal but adhered to the use of five minimum couplets to a ghazal. More importantly, Rich seems to see a sort of unity between the couplets. For Shahid Ali, each couplet is supposed to be able to stand on its own, without contributing to some sort of wholeness and he found this liberty that Rich took with the ghazal as clashing to the spirit of the ghazal.

Although Shahid Ali did not agree to her radical use of the ghazal form, one can appreciate the fact that the form has allowed some poets to experiment with it and appropriate the form to voice their agency. As Barua, 2006 indicates, Rich creates disunited and autonomous couplets in her ghazals and brings unity to them by creating an association between its images. The ghazal’s couplets were meant to be disjointed; each couplet to shine as a single gem. Consequently, in Rich’s ghazals too it worked in isolation and fragments becoming the perfect form to showcase the postmodern fragmentation. The technique of non-



linear unity in the ghazal helped Rich bring diverse themes such as feminism, lesbian life, politics, revolution, Black power, the Vietnam War, and the events of the 1960s together. However, critics have differing views on the success of Rich's ghazals. Some viewed her appropriation of the form as Rich's brand of activism. Kashani concludes that images, forms concepts applied in the ghazals mirrored those of the male Muslim poet Ghalib. The ambiguity and the possibilities it offered to voice her lesbian feminism were so powerful that it managed to serve the objectives of Ghalib and Rich, despite being centuries apart. Caplan on the other hand, concludes that Rich's attempts to use the ghazal are less successful. He surmises that her use of the ghazal as a motif—a non-Western gesture, and not as a prosody, a requirement she must fulfil, is what makes it less effective. He surmises that her use of the ghazal as a motif, a non-western gesture, not as prosody, those requirements she must fulfil, is what makes it less effective (Caplan, 2008). Nevertheless, Rich's exploration sparked interest in English ghazals, and other American poets credited her work as their inspiration to follow suit, among them Jim Harrison's *Outlyer and Ghazals* (1971), John Thompson's *Stilt Jack* (1978), and Denise Levertov's *Broken Ghazals*. True to Rich, most of her ghazals consisted of at least five unrhymed, metrically irregular couplets, which apart from their titles, would be impossible to identify as ghazals. However, because of the work of Shahid Ali, the ghazal which started in America as a largely free verse structure was coaxed into its traditional rhyme and stanzaic features.

Situating the ghazal within the tradition of the Urdu ghazal helps in the understanding of the evolution of the form in Urdu, how the language of the ghazal changes from Persian to Urdu, and the metamorphosis of the Persian ghazal into the Urdu ghazal of today. Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797–1869) is the most famous of the Urdu poets that the Indian sub-continent has provided. It was on his centennial death anniversary that the Pakistani Aijaz Ahmad brought together American poets living in New York to work on a pamphlet of

translations. He is said to have written the greatest poetry of his age “under conditions of extreme trauma.” It must be remembered that Ghalib lived during a traumatic time with the conquest of India by the British and the war of 1857, during which time he lost many of his friends. All that he underwent is reflected in his ghazals particularly, the motif of loss as he saw his friends “violated and exiled” and this mode haunts his later verse (Goodyear & Raza, 2008, p. 112). Paying attention to his poetry gives us some understanding of why Shahid Ali might have objected to the American use of the ghazal form. Every element of the ghazal seems to have a cultural and religious significance, as the form was closely connected to the religious beliefs of the Sufis, and the metaphors that were incorporated held layers of meaning within the context of their society. An entire culture resided within the ghazal.

Some scholars argue that Shahid Ali’s ghazals were not original, but hybrid ghazals. It is necessary at this point to reproduce faithfully the basic points about the ghazal as can be found on pages 183–184 of *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*. Shahid Ali attempted to claim back the ghazals by encouraging poets to follow these basic points. Firstly, a ghazal is a poem of five to twelve couplets. Secondly, it contains no enjambments between couplets. Once again, there are ABSOLUTELY no enjambments between couplets. What links these couplets is a strict formal scheme. Each line must be the same length (inclusive of the rhyme and refrain). The last couplet may be (and usually is) a signature couplet in which the poet may invoke their name in the first, second, or third person. The scheme or rhyme and refrain occur in BOTH lines of the first couplet and then ONLY in the second line of every succeeding couplet. There is an epigrammatic terseness in the ghazal, and finally, THE REFRAIN MAY BE A WORD OR A PHRASE.

Shahid Ali’s achievement was to blend both the ghazal form to the English language; a sort of a contribution, hoping to enrich the English language with the ghazal’s poetics.

Therefore, writing in strict formal structure was his way to discover self and retain his identity. He manipulated the ghazal form at three different levels in his poetry; he composed ghazals in English, he translated ghazals of famous masters and he inspired many American poets to write real ghazals in English (Zaidi, 2008).

Shahid Ali and I are similar in that religion is an important part of our creative imagination. Under the section, My Ghazals, I deliberate on how I have used the ghazal form as advocated by Shahid Ali and elucidate on the composition of my ghazal titled *Yellow*. Using the poem by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, I offer a discussion on how I make a necessary deviation from Shahid Ali's rules and produce my context to lay the foundation of my ghazal. I circumvent the lack of Islamic culture within a feminist text and use it as the context or backstory of my ghazal. My elucidation is to show how my ghazals are a hybrid of Shahid Ali's hybrid.

The creative portfolio has 100 Malaysian ghazals that were written primarily between May 2018 to December 2020. They were constructed chronologically, according to their numbers. For example, Ghazal 1 was written before Ghazal 10. In keeping with the tradition of the ghazal, these poems remained titled Ghazal 1, 2, etc. Structurally, all the ghazals were written according to the classic style, which is in couplets with the radif as the end rhyme. Only a handful of these had the takhalus in the final couplet. All the ghazals were edited to ensure that they had the minimum requirement of five couplets. The hardest rule to follow was the incorporation of the qafia, or the rhyme scheme, which was attempted but which I failed to follow. As discussed in Chapter 1, the issue is in the pliability of the Urdu language which cannot be applied in the grammar of the English language. Five of the ghazals in this portfolio were published in the *Bengaluru Review* in February 2020. Two others were read on *Readings* in March 2021, now a monthly online program that showcases

writers' works. *Men Matters* Online Journal published Ghazal 22 in its June 2021 issue.

The ghazals are discussed according to broad themes, in which 18 ghazals are specifically discussed under the theme, teenage years. Secondly, the ghazals that deal with Malaysian festivals and celebrations are reflected on in an attempt to recount the impetus for crafting ghazals that are sometimes referred to as anti-ghazals. Subsequently, reflections of how Malaysian food, language, and socio-cultural allusions are embedded within the ghazals and finally, a reflection on the deliberate use of Catholic imagery as a form of appropriation of this traditionally Muslim construct. Thematically, my poems embody the challenges and struggles I face as a Catholic-Malaysian woman of Indian origin.

I discover that the rules in *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English* allow a sense of certainty to my craft. In writing the ghazals, I adhere to all the basic structural rules but achieve different degrees of success. In this way, I hybridised the English ghazal. Secondly, I created ghazals that are multi-toned, and thirdly, I used a predominantly Sufi-Muslim construct to house biblical metaphors and allusions. The Malaysian hybrid ghazal I wrote were polyglots because they were not exclusively written in English as when I penned the ghazals, I also used Malay, Tamil, Malayalam, Arabic as well as English. Consequently, to fruitfully decipher the meanings of these ghazals, the reader must understand the nuances of these languages. For instance, in Ghazal 3 from Chapter 3 of this thesis, the refrain is "Ah Chee," which is a Malaysian term of endearment commonly used by the Chinese community amongst themselves. Later, it became common for people of other races to address older womenfolk of Chinese or Indian ancestry with the term "Ah Chee." This is one example of how non-English words were incorporated into the ghazals to add a Malaysian flavour to the ghazals I wrote.

Other instances when words from other Malaysian languages are incorporated are

found in Ghazals 4, Ghazal 6, Ghazal 8, Ghazal 11, Ghazal 16, Ghazal 17, and Ghazal 19 (*see* Chapter 3). The ghazal's origins were from a non-English, non-Western domain, and infusing it with non-English words was another step in claiming the form. In this way, my aim for this thesis is to problematise the main language of the ghazal (English) to include the various cadences of the other languages to conjure the spirit of the ghazal. I also wanted to accommodate ghazals written in English but with code-mixing, to reflect a post-colonial Malaysian construct. In summary, my Malaysian ghazals are further hybridised by the inclusion of other languages such as Malay, Tamil, Malayalam, and Arabic.

Secondly, I crafted ghazals with melancholic and nostalgic tones. A relatively high percentage of the ghazals were love poems; a longing for lost opportunities. These are melancholic poems that fit well within the ghazal form. This harks back to the tradition of the traditional ghazals, which were written by the ghazal masters to express this longing for the beloved, be it or human. However, the celebratory poems (Christmas, Raya, and Thaipusam) are also included as subject matter. More importantly, these celebrations were connected to Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, which are a few of the predominant religions practised by Malaysians. Under the subsection, *Influence of Sufist Imagery on the Ghazal* in Chapter Two, reference is made to Sufism and the ghazal. In summary, that section explains how the ghazals were "infused with mystical thought". Similarly, I attempted to connect my Malaysian ghazals with the practice of Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. However, I worked more with the practice of the religion and less with the theology. Although Shahid Ali insisted that the ghazals must have a melancholic tone and most of the 100 ghazals followed this requirement, a small percentage of the ghazals I wrote were happy ghazals. For instance, the food poems such as Ghazal 30 is a poem of seven couplets, each one a description of a type of Indian food that Malaysians are generally accustomed to. As such, the tone in this poem is joyful rather than melancholic, for most Malaysians take pleasure in eating (Duruz & Khoo,

2015). Granted that the ghazal form is best suited for melancholic subjects such as death and illness, yet it can also be the site for celebration, contrasting tones of melancholy and joy within a Malaysian ghazal.

Finally, I used a traditionally Sufi-Muslim construct (metaphors and allusions in traditional ghazals were Muslim-centric) to house my Malaysian-Catholic concerns. For example, Ghazal 11—which was essentially about the Passion of Christ in general, and Good Friday in particular—was an attempt to push the limits of what a ghazal might discuss. The refrain “Allah, Allah,” an incantation of the Muslim God, was used as a site for the appropriation of the form to hint at the precarious Malaysian position on religious inclusivity. This was an attempt to widen the use of the ghazal form to encapsulate the real concerns of religious inflexibility and allow it to speak for multi-religiosity. This was done by appropriating a Sufi-Muslim construct such as the ghazal to encapsulate various non-Muslim concerns such as Jesus Christ’s Passion and Thaipusam. Fundamentally, the literary intention is to permit non-Muslim concerns, allusions, and metaphors to be used within the ghazal. There was also an intention to open the traditional form of the ghazals and to allow broader Malaysian concerns to be framed within these new, hybridised ghazals.

This thesis is significant as it will bring awareness to the ghazal’s rich history by illuminating how an Indian art form was brought from India through trade to Malayan soil. The ghazal practised in parts of the Peninsular was in the form of a song and dance that was very different from the Urdu ghazal. A corpus of work in this genre will provide a fresh opportunity for Malaysians and those interested in Malaysian literature to discover hybridised English ghazals, as an alternative to the Western forms; an opportunity in art and culture for a Muslim construct to hold Catholic-Christian concerns, and in a small way, point to possibilities, pave the way for peaceful co-existence—that art will mirror life. Scholars are

unsure of why and how the ghazal both as a lyric poem and as a song (as practised in Malaya), was so unlike. Studies in the Urdu ghazal will show up the need for further investigation to understand how these art forms were practised and contribute towards an understanding of our literary history, with various influences colouring our heritage. It might be an avenue for research and discourse on cultural heritage and move away from the political rhetoric that has clouded our shared consciousness, in recent times.

The scope of this thesis is only limited to Shahid Ali's contemplations on the ghazal and his influence on my ghazals. This thesis is also limited to the English ghazals written in the United States. Understandably, the ghazal was written in many societies and languages. However, the focus of this thesis is on the English language ghazals of America. Further, the Urdu ghazal is intertwined with Islamic Mysticism, practice, and concepts that are challenging to researchers. Part of the problem with understanding Mystical Islam is that it is a sect that aims to keep much of its practice a mystery. Thus, the language used in ghazals, and the inherent qualities of Mystical Islam make the study of this art form challenging.

### ***My Contribution to the Ghazal Form***

My main contributions to the ghazal form are thus: further hybridised the English ghazal, created ghazals that were multi-toned, and used a predominantly Sufi-Muslim construct to house biblical metaphors and allusions. The Malaysian hybrid ghazals I wrote were polyglots because they were not exclusively written in English as when I penned the ghazals, I also used Malay, Tamil, Malayalam, Arabic as well as English. Consequently, to fruitfully decipher the meanings of these ghazals, the reader must understand the nuances of these languages.

The ghazal's origin was from a non-English, non-Western domain, and infusing it

with non-English words was another step in claiming the form. In this way, my aim for this thesis is to problematise the main language of the ghazal (English) to include the various cadences of the other languages to conjure the spirit of the ghazal. I also hope to accommodate ghazals written in English but with code-mixing, to reflect a post-colonial Malaysian construct. In summary, my Malaysian ghazals were further hybridised by the inclusion of other languages such as Malay, Tamil, Malayalam, and Arabic.

Secondly, I crafted ghazals with melancholic and nostalgic tones. A relatively high percentage of the ghazals are love poems; a longing for lost opportunities. These are melancholic poems that fit well within the ghazal form. This harks back to the tradition of the traditional ghazals, which were written by the ghazal masters to express this longing for the beloved, be it or human. However, the celebratory poems (Christmas, Raya, and Thaipusam) were also included as subject matter. More importantly, these celebrations were connected to Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, which are a few of the predominant religions practised by Malaysians. Under the subsection, *Influence of Sufist Imagery on the Ghazal* in Chapter 2, reference is made to Sufism and the ghazal. In summary, that section explains how the ghazals were “infused with mystical thought.” Similarly, I attempt to connect my Malaysian ghazals with the practice of Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. However, I worked more with the practice of the religion and less with the theology. Although Shahid Ali insisted that the ghazals must have a melancholic tone, and most of the 100 ghazals followed this requirement, a small percentage of the ghazals I wrote were happy ghazals. As such, the tone in such poems is joyful rather than melancholic, for most Malaysians take pleasure in eating, which is a favourite pastime (Duruz & Khoo, 2015). Granted that the ghazal form is best suited for melancholic subjects such as death and illness, yet it can also be the site for celebration, contrasting tones of melancholy and joy within a Malaysian ghazal.



Thirdly, I use a traditionally Sufi-Muslim construct (metaphors and allusions in traditional ghazals were Muslim-centric) to house my Malaysian-Catholic concerns. For example, Ghazal 11—which was essentially about the Passion of Christ in general, and Good Friday in particular—is an attempt to push the limits of what a ghazal might discuss. This is an attempt to widen the use of the ghazal form to encapsulate the real concerns of religious inflexibility and allow it to speak for multi-religiosity. This is thru appropriating a Sufi-Muslim construct such as the ghazal to encapsulate various non-Muslim concerns such as Jesus Christ’s Passion and Thaipusam.

2020 has been a remarkable year for Malaysians as well as for people all over the world because of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the point of writing this, Malaysia has fallen into an uncontrollable abyss of rising numbers of infections, with Selangor (my home state) consistently achieving the highest number of infections. Naturally, I was affected by this calamity and the ghazals I wrote during this period had couplets that fragmented these concerns. Ghazals 50–60, in particular, refer to the isolation and difficulties faced by Malaysians and people in other parts of the world. In short, these ghazals deal with contemporary issues. Fundamentally, the literary intention is to permit non-Muslim concerns, allusions, and metaphors to be used within the ghazal, to open the traditional form of the ghazals, and to allow broader Malaysian concerns to be framed within these new, hybridised ghazals. I would like to consider the anti-ghazal aspect of this ghazal. According to Jenna Butler in her thesis, *Writing the Body, Writing the Land: Barbour, Brandt, Webb, and Halfe*, the anti-ghazal is a ghazal with rules that go against some of the tenets of traditional ghazal writing. Butler looked at the work of four Canadian writers (stated above), particularly that of Phyllis Webb, and discovered that like Adrienne Rich, Webb took to the form to give voice to the silences in her poetry. Butler used the term “anti-ghazal” when a pertinent rule of the ghazal was not followed (Butler, 2020, p. 95).

More importantly, I define Malaysian ghazals, derived from the concept of the anti-ghazal. However, as the term anti-ghazal has strong connotations of the negative compared to the positive, I would use the same concept of the anti-ghazal but brand it as a Malaysian ghazal. The definition of a Malaysian ghazal is based on the tenets espoused by Shahid Ali, in that it is written in couplets, and that it has a refrain. Secondly, the use of multi-languages would define the Malaysian ghazal, as explained in this chapter. Further, idiomatic Malaysian expressions would be a necessary component of the Malaysian ghazal. Important Malaysian themes of fasting, praying, celebrating, and eating should also be included as a crucial element in the Malaysian ghazal. This would call for Malaysian specifics in terms of setting, such as street names and other specifically iconic Malaysian imagery. The ghazals must move from the mono-toned cry of the gazelle as desired by Shahid Ali to one that is multi-toned. Couplets could alternate between sad and happy couplets to an entire piece being sad or celebratory. Although the hybrid English ghazals of Shahid Ali used metaphors that were traditionally Muslim, such as the Karbala, Malaysian ghazals could include allusions to the culture and religion of all Malaysians.

### ***Conclusion***

This thesis is significant in the Malaysian context as it offers another literary form for poets and writers to work with, given that this form, cherished by Shahid Ali, has new and interesting ways of putting forward the experiences of the contemporary urban Malaysian society. My ghazals are different from those advocated by Shahid Ali in aspects of culture and theme. In the foreground of these ghazals is the Malaysian culture. The hybrid ghazals I wrote were about the Malaysian experience of celebration and the food Malaysians favoured. I alluded to the Catholic-Christian festivities that Malaysian Christians celebrated, and contemplated on the lived experiences of a young woman living in Kuala Lumpur during

the 1980s and the 1990s in a relatively Catholic-centred neighbourhood. Although I understand some of the concepts of Islam, I wrote from the perspective of a Malaysian-Malayali-Catholic woman.

One of the aims of this thesis is to write English ghazals after the style of Shahid Ali's hybrid ghazals. The portfolio of 100 ghazals attests to this endeavour. These ghazals are a hybrid of Shahid Ali's in that there is a manifest use of many languages in these ghazals. Their multi-tonality speaks to the Malaysian condition of melancholia and the joy in the consumption of food. I believe that using the ghazal, a traditionally Sufi-Muslim form, to hold Malaysian themes and ideas is an excellent discovery and opportunity to re-cast this treasure trove of a form to be shared and showcased. Young Malaysian are already experimenting with this form, as can be witnessed by the ghazal written by Puteri Yasmin Suraya with the title *Ghazal: On Growing* from the collection, *Malaysian Millennial Voices*. May a Malaysian ghazalic wave emerge!

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