

From Sonnet to Ghazal: The Poetic Muse of Jeet Thayil

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Abstract: The sonnet and the ghazal are two traditional forms of poetry that are grounded in thematic and musical structural unity. In contemporary times, both forms have undergone alterations to keep with the demands of the times, freeing themselves from the stringent generic norms, to expand the horizon, so to speak, both in subject matter and structure. For Jeet Thayil, poet, musician, performer-poet, novelist, the fascination for the sonnet and the ghazal seems to derive as much from the predominant musical aspects in these forms as from their strangely liberating rigidities. This paper analyses the style and content of select sonnets and ghazals from Jeet Thayil's Collected Poems, to comment on the adaptability of the form to reinforce nuances of emotion.

Keywords: sonnet, ghazal, sonnetto, metapoetic, structural unity, rhythmic structures

The sonnet, a traditional and popular poetic form of European origin derived from the Italian sonnetto, a little song, best serves to capture emotion succinctly within its generic parameters of fourteen lines, set rhyme scheme and thematic stanzaic organization. In subject matter, the compact form of the sonnet "can range from 'light conceits of lovers' to considerations of life, time, death, and eternity, without doing injustice to any of them" (Encyclopedia Britannica 1). The ghazal, another popular form but of ancient Asian origin, is a poetic vehicle ideally suited to express pangs of love and separation. Typically composed of five to fifteen syntactically and grammatically self-contained couplets, thematically unrelated to one another except for the structural unity that stems from the patterns of rhyme, repetition and rhythm, it resembles the Petrarchan sonnet in the rigour of structural elements like two-line stanzas, rhyme and refrain rules etcetera. Though of ancient Perso-Arabian roots, the ghazal has acquired a cosmopolitan underpinning in contemporary times and "has effectively transcended and transferred the culture of its origins and made itself at home in vastly different cultures and times" (Hashmi, 22). It has

opened up its thematic boundaries to accommodate a wider range of issues beyond the traditional thematic axes of love and religion. “A mixture of sacred, profane, romantic, and melancholic elements are frequently stitched into the ghazal’s poetic fabric. Many ghazals revolve around the theme of lovers’ separation,” remarks Chambers (1).

For Jeet Thayil, poet, musician, performer-poet, novelist, the fascination for the sonnet and the ghazal seems to derive as much from the predominant musical aspects in these forms as from their strangely liberating rigidities. In Thayil’s sonnets and ghazals, the emotional force flows forth unimpeded – it violates and makes mockery of the stringent generic rules. In a review of the *Collected Poems*, Arundhati Subramaniam remarks, “While Thayil revels in sonnet and ghazal, the poetry also reveals a capacity to segue between the spoken voice and lyric impulse, between the wild and the bravura. There is a skilful ability to modulate scale, to nuance the emotional chords” (The Hindu Online). This paper analyses the style and content of select sonnets and ghazals from Jeet Thayil’s *Collected Poems*, to comment on the adaptability of the form to reinforce nuances of emotion.

Thayil compares the nature of the ghazal and the sonnet in his sonnet “Dear Salil,” and hints at the vogue of these two popular forms in contemporary times, especially in the virtual world:

For I too am taken by it, the bittersweet honey and gall

Of the ghazal, its whisper and bite on the worldwide web.

If the sonnet is an English rose, the ghazal is Arab,

hooves moving at the speed of light on the worldwide web. (5-8)

In a meta-referential interpretation of the sonnet in “Dear Editor,” Thayil confesses why he likes writing sonnets and highlights the fluid nature of the form that writes itself:

Well, one, I like the way it leads

you by the hand down the stair

of the page, leaves you resting on air

as on an armchair, while someone reads

to you the words you want to own.

Two, I want to say something about bliss.

I like bliss, and if I had to narrow it down

to a couplet, I'd narrow it down to this:

You start with a line and follow it through,

the sonnet writes the sonnet, not you. (5-14)

Thayil experiments boldly with conventional rhyme and rhythmic patterns and alters the forms to emphasise the scope for structural freedom in poetry. In masterly instances of inter-generic hybridity, he casts many of his ghazals in the mould of sonnets and infuses the sonnet with ghazal-like passion. The sonnet "Ghazal," echoes a classical ghazal in the lamentation of separation from love and the underlying tender yearning for the warmth of love. The subjectivity of the experiences and the musicality of alternate lines ending in the selfsame word render a lyrical aspect to the ghazal-sonnet:

When you leave you'll take what I remember of love.

Summer will feel like the December of love.

From forest fire to flicker in a matter of weeks,

What will be left but an ember of love? (1-4)

In the sonnet "Malayalam's Ghazal," which replicates the structural form of "Ghazal," the poet rues the loss of the native tongue in a humorously self-deprecating tone:

When you've been too long in the rooms of English,

Open your windows to the fresh air of Malayalam.

Visitors are welcome in The School of Lost Tongues.

Someone's endowed a high chair in Malayalam.

I greet you my ancestors, O scholars and linguists.

My father who recites Baudelaire in Malayalam.

Jeet, such drama with the scraps you know.

Write a couplet, if you dare, in Malayalam. (7-14)

The ghazal poet typically “presents himself as a solitary sufferer, sustained by brief flashes of ecstasy, defined by his desperate longing for some transcendent object of desire. This object of desire may be human (female or male), divine, abstract, or ambiguous; its defining trait is its inaccessibility. Naturally such a subjective, introspective, deeply emotional poetic stance is well suited to lyric poetry” (Faruqi and Pritchett 111). Many of Thayil's ghazals manifest the self-reflexivity typical of the lyric. The pattern of rhythm produced through a studied and seemingly artificial repetition of a single word captures the tedium, tone and tenor of contemporary existence. In “Blue Ghazal,” the word ‘tonight’ strikes a beat like a pounding on the distressed soul. This poem captures an emotional nadir of the poet, a painful moment of self-doubt and loathing:

Give up your pen—you won't make a rhyme tonight.

The moon's cursed. Words are unsublime tonight.

Nobody's to blame, the note said nothing more.

I'm nobody; my love's not worth a dime tonight.

...

Self-loathing, thy proper name is poverty—

...

Broken moon, of broken blue and white china,

Only you are less hopeful than I'm tonight.

Jeet, why are you hungry when your bowl is full?(1-4, 11, 15-17)

Sara Lodge writes, "The sonnet was a form framed for self-reflexive meditation on the constraints and pleasures of form itself" (533). Accordingly, many sonnets treat the sonnet form or the sonneteer himself as the central thematic focal point. This motif is evident in Thayil's poetry too. In "The Sonneteer," the poet qualifies himself as 'famous;' yet there is a playful irony in the portrayal of his success:

I was famous, I won the Hawthornden prize.

Girls flashed me. One said, 'You're the poet, right?

What a godawful waste it would be, otherwise.'

I told her my talents would not last the night,

and it was a waste, you bet, any which way.

She said, 'Poetry boy, I don't give a damn.

I've got time to kill, make a sonnet for moi.'

'She hawks her beauty in the night,' I began,

and stopped, unable to motor my mouth. (1-9)

In keeping with the many improvisations and crossing of boundaries that define Thayil's poetry, the theme typical of the ghazal is reiterated in a sonnet. "Separation's Sonnet," which is ghazal-like in sentiment, encapsulates the pangs of separation. The poet pines for what is lost through a trigger of associative memories:

What are you doing, what improvised thing?

In a borrowed room your cell phone rings,
each ring measures the floor, the rungs
of your dream. Holding, I ask how you sing,
and for whom. To imagine the bed you're in,
the vertiginous smile that will break him,
the man whose roses bleed at your window.
To want is to wait, as I do in the place I know,
my breathing loud and single as the room,
its smell of spider dust and old perfume.
Each small thing lasts longer than the shiver
that is life. I fix the remembered instant:
you on your feet, singing, shaking a river
of salt from our shared overheating skin. (1-14)

Eagleton views the sonnet as “a poetic form of conscious literary art more disposed to the reflective than to the song type of the lyric” (150). This ruminative aspect of the sonnet is reinforced in many of Thayil's sonnets. For instance, “Self-Portrait,” delves into the dark and murky abyss of the poet's soul, to lay bare the sense of sadness that characterises his life. A Kafkaesque sense of existentialist hopelessness lies at its very core:

Unhappiness is a kind of yoga, he tells himself
each morning, a breath meditation; besides,
do you want to be happy or do you want to write?

...

A mountain moves and nobody notices. The world
is old and set in its ways, and K. is saying, Of course
there's hope, there's always hope, but not for us. (1-3, 12-14)

The sonnet acquires a surrealistic flavour in "Quiet and Concerned with Provenance:"

Around the room, the names I did not know
grew into their faces like the flies.

The names, the faces grew like the flies, so
I grew too. Buzz was my new sound. My eyes
magnified, scraped to insomnia glass,

I went to the pitiless father and son
who froze the water into place,
whose boredom melted it down. (1-8)

Even a sonnet like "The Parrot of Happiness" belies the promise of the title and visualises
no escape from the monotony and boredom of life:

He clicked the afternoon's fine
weaves one colour at a time.

Colours like a delicatessen.

No room for delight or precision,

just big opinions droned

for hours, in a rude baritone. (5-10)

“Suicide’s Sonnet” reflects the darkness and despair that the poet’s soul experiences. The poem symbolically indicates the nihilism that plunges the persona into the depths of despondency:

Like someone who comes home late

to find the furniture rearranged,

I’m stepping lightly on my paws

...

why did you dismantle the fire alarms?

Why does the night sweat the sheets?

Why is the kitchen full of weaponry?

Why do I return, now more than ever,

to the window high above the street? (1-3, 10-14)

Again, in the sonnet “One Morning at the Cattle Fair,” the poet reveals a deeply disturbing sense of emptiness:

One strange dawn in Ajmer,

he woke by a mist-made river,

found himself neighbour to herds of

elephant and buffalo, and

newer horses never ridden.

At water's edge he looked

backward over his life and found

no trace of habitation. (7-14)

The speaker of the sonnet "Why Should You Believe Me?" is an agnostic soul that cries out:

How can we be sure he was among us,

when the signs speak only of his absence,

the garden denuded, stones washed clean

of blood, the story ended as if he'd never been? (1-4)

In a classic act of inversion, Thayil's scepticism paves way for an avowed faith in the divine in the sonnet "Found Poem," thereby illustrating the many personae the poet is capable of adopting:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down

in still waters.

He leads me to green pastures.

He restores my soul and helps me walk

in the path of righteousness, for his own sake.

And, yea, though I walk in the valley

of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil. He

comforts me with staff and rod,

provides me with wine and bread.

In the presence of mine enemy

goodness and mercy enter me.

You anoint me with oil, my cup

overflows. You lift me up. (1-14)

What emerges out of the foregoing discussion and illustrations is an indication that literary conventions change to address new and varied cultural demands. Jeet Thayil's seemingly odd juxtaposition of the sonnet and the ghazal best illustrates the adaptability of the sonnet, the modern temper of the ghazal, and the appeal of the two forms across cultures. The innovative use of these poetic forms by a sensitive poetic mind has resulted in a fascinating blend of contraries, of hope and despair, of faith and doubt, and of love and separation.

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