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# Exploring Form and Meaning in Agha Shahid Ali's Ghazal "Tonight"

MICHAEL BAGLEY

The formal qualities of poetry often reflect the time and culture in which the poem is written. Blank verse not only reflects a natural cadence of the English language, but also enables, to some degree, the "freethinking tendencies" that defined many poets' relationship with God and institutional religion throughout in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Gerber 249). The Japanese haiku, in which form and theme are intrinsically connected, reflects the Japanese ideology of the interconnectedness of nature. Agha Shahid Ali, a Kashmiri poet who writes exclusively in English, often uses form to complicate this notion. Ali was born into a wealthy Muslim household in Kashmir. He attended an Irish Catholic school and a Hindu University. His parents were religiously tolerant and provided Ali with the space and encouragement to pursue his poetic aspirations from a young age (Benvenuto 262). The conflicts between the religious and cultural tolerance within in his household, and the religious and cultural conflicts that have plagued Kashmir's history are a source of tension throughout much of Ali's poetry. Specifically, in his poem "Tonight," Ali uses form and allusions to express the complexities of cultural, religious, and national identities of people from conflicted societies like Kashmir.

Ali's poem "Tonight" employs a traditional Arabic form of poetry called the ghazal. Ghazals are relatively short poems comprised of a series of stanzas of closed couplets. One word—called the *radif*—is repeated at the end of the first two lines, and in every other line after that. In many cases, as is the case with "Tonight," the penultimate word in each couplet rhymes. Each stanza should also express a complete idea or emotion that can be understood outside of the context of the poem as a whole.

Harvard professor and literary critic Stephen Burt asserts that each couplet should seem to be a separate poem (234). The final couplet of the poem should reference a significant name, often the poet's own name. Ghazals usually employ secular erotic themes that metaphorically relate the adored to God. While the form of the ghazal is highly structured and easily identifiable, the meaning, Ali insists, ought to be difficult to work through (Burt 235). The ghazal form in Ali's poem, "Tonight," however, does more than simply provide structure. The ghazal form represents the foundation on which all other meaning is built.

The form in the poem "Tonight" is significant because it combines traditional Arabic poetic form with modern English language. Ali's choice to use the ghazal form expresses a desire to maintain some connection to Arabic tradition, while his choice to write in English expresses a desire to form a connection to the Western world. Furthermore, he chooses to write in a very accessible syntax. Aside from the second stanza, the language throughout the poem reads very similarly to prose or dialogue, reflecting his likely desire to be read and understood by an English-speaking audience. The refrain in a ghazal, literary critic David Ward argues, is "the seed from which the poem grows" (64). The word *tonight*, therefore, is doubly significant in terms of both form and meaning. Formally, it determines the iambic meter for the rest of the poem. Thematically, *tonight* influences the immediate and ephemeral themes and allusions throughout the poem. It is significant that Ali uses the most common metric foot in the English language in a traditionally Arabic poetic form. His poem represents the bridging of classical elements from both Arabic and Western traditions, expressing a desire to connect his speaker's Islamic roots with a Western audience.

The ghazal provides a form that enables the speaker to shift rapidly and fluidly between moods. In the first three stanzas of "Tonight," the speaker expresses three distinctly different moods. In the first stanza, the speaker expresses a feeling of abandonment. The subject of his attention—possibly a reference

to a lover, a God, or perhaps his home country, Kashmir—bars him from experiencing rapture. The mood is dismal and void of pleasure. In the second stanza, the speaker conveys a sense of hope. The speaker believes that “Fabrics” and “Trinkets” can make one beautiful, despite the absence of rapture in the first stanza, inspiring optimism (l. 3-4). The Emily Dickinson poem Ali quotes, “I am ashamed—I hide,” echoes this spirit of optimism. The speaker in Dickinson’s poem overcomes her material deficiencies with spiritual pride. By the end of Dickinson’s poem, the speaker is ashamed no longer, but rather “too proud—for Pride” (l. 26). In Ali’s third stanza, the speaker conveys desperation as he “beg[s] for haven” (5). In rapid succession, the speaker conveys three different moods, and the ghazal enables the poet to do this because of the separated closed couplet form. In “Tonight,” the swift changes in mood allow Ali to communicate the inner turmoil of his speaker. The speaker’s decision to rapidly shift between themes in “Tonight” also represents his inability to communicate a cohesive national, religious, or cultural identity.

In the sixth stanza, “Mughal ceilings” is a complex allusion, referencing art, empire, and Agha Ali’s own poetry (l. 11). The art from the Mughal Empire, including the “ceilings” referenced by Ali’s speaker, alludes to a problematic history in Southeast Asia. Early in the twentieth century, Mughal art was considered separately from Indian art, as “Islamic art,” despite having a historical geographic connection to Kashmir (Singh 1045). Furthermore, the founder of the Mughal empire, Akbar, while Muslim himself, included “Hindus, Jains, Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians” in his court (Department of Islamic Art). Thus, surrounded by stanzas about the exclusivity of religion, is a stanza about being cast “under [the] spell” of art from an empire that was both inclusive of various faiths, and later rejected on the basis of faith (l. 12). “Under your spell” also recalls the first line, which inquires about the followers of an ambiguous subject. In the sixth stanza, the speaker affirms he is still seeking a new muse after being abandoned in the first stanza. Furthermore, that “mirrored convexities” that “multiply” the speaker reflect the ghazal form,

reflecting the fragments of poetry that seem to multiply the speaker. Both the poem and the Mughal ceilings are at once the recognition of both spiritual inquiry and the struggle of accepting multiple identities in Kashmir.

The first and twelfth stanza are intentionally ambiguous and can be read in a variety of ways, further complicating the poem. It allows the reader to connect the fragmented themes throughout the poem to in at least two distinct ways. The “who” in the first stanza, as previously highlighted, is ambiguous. If the reader assumes that it is God who has abandoned the speaker, then the poem reads as a blasphemous rant against a God who would leave his devoted followers lonely. In this reading, the twelfth stanza assumes that the speaker’s “rivals for [God’s] love” would be sacrilegious temptations, attempting to lure the speaker away from God. The speaker confirms this reading, having already made blasphemous remarks throughout the poem. The speaker wants the reader to understand the importance of “idols” in “[converting] the infidel” (9-10); the “priest in saffron” alludes to a Hindu priest (16); “Damn you, Elijah, I’ll bless Jezebel tonight” damns a biblical prophet in favor of a sinful heathen queen; and in the last line, he claims that “God sobs in [his] arms”. All of these allusions to religion represent blasphemous notions.

The reader can also interpret the ambiguous subject of the first and twelfth stanzas as a lover. In this reading, the religious references throughout the poem are not references to the Judeo-Christian or Islamic God, but are rather symbolic of the unexplainable essence of mankind’s consciousness, which allows one to interpret love, pride, and anger as well as other human emotions. The loneliness motif used throughout the stanzas becomes more prominent. “God’s vintage loneliness has turned to vinegar— / All the archangels ... fell tonight” does not reference God’s lonely status as the one supreme being in Judeo-Christian or Islamic culture, but rather man’s anguish turned to bitterness in the process of falling out of love (or rather, the subject of the speaker’s love falling out of love with him) (7-8). Thus, when the “doors

of Hell” are “left open—for God,” the speaker is expressing his descent into despair (14). The eighth stanza equates the speaker’s loss of love to the destruction of an entire religion; no “statues” or “priests” remain (15-16). The lover has left and there is no evidence of there ever having been love except for the wreckage of the speaker’s “heart’s veined temple” (15). That this seemingly religious poem can be read through a romantic lens complicates the traditional notion of a ghazal, which often uses erotic love as an expression of religious devotion (Burt 235).

The speaker further demonstrates the complications of his cultural identity by using Western literary allusions. Perhaps the most biographically relevant literary reference in Ali’s poem, “Tonight,” quoted in the epigraph, is Laurence Hope’s poem, “Kashmiri Song”. Like Ali, Hope (a pseudonym for Adela Nicolson) experienced the world through a transcultural lens. Though she was British, she considered India her home (“Adela Florence Cory Nicolson”). “Kashmiri Song,” like “Tonight” plays with a strange association between secular and pious love. The two poems share, almost exactly, the first stanza. While Laurence’s speaker is almost certainly referring to a lover, and not God, she uses religious allusions to express this love. Like Ali’s speaker, Laurence’s speaker is distressed over the loss of a seemingly necessary connection. Laurence’s speaker suggests she would rather die than say “farewell” to her lover (l. 12). This is also alluded to in Ali’s poem in the twelfth stanza, when the speaker chides his lover and expresses that “this is no farewell” (l. 24). The allusions to “Kashmiri Song” reaffirm the possibility of the romantic reading of “Tonight,” and attribute to the complicated cultural perspectives in the poem.

As previously explained, the quoted Emily Dickinson poem in the second stanza demonstrates a unique mood not expressed anywhere else in the poem, “Tonight”. However, it also represents a much more interesting complication of the speaker’s cultural identity. Ali chose to quote one of the most widely read American poets, one who has a tendency to criticize organized

Christianity in her poetry. Not only is the speaker in “Tonight” conflicted between Arabic and Western literary traditions, but also he is inspired by a Western woman who questions the credibility of institutionalized religion. Furthermore, the speaker inverts the order of the quotations from Dickinson’s poem, and in doing so, also inverts the meaning in some ways. Where Dickinson’s poem, as previously suggested, represents spiritual pride overcoming material depravity, Ali’s quote suggests the overcoming of spiritual depravity through material beauty. It is also not insignificant that Dickinson references Ali’s home country (Cashmere is an archaic spelling for Kashmir). Dickinson wants to take something from Kashmir to her own home in an effort to make herself beautiful, and Ali wants to take something from America to don beauty on his ghazal.

The final line of the poem makes another important literary allusion. “Call Me Ishmael” (l. 26) is the first line in Herman Melville’s novel, *Moby Dick*. Ishmael, the protagonist in *Moby Dick* (though some might argue that Ishmael is a bystander to Captain Ahab’s story), is a merchant sailor who, having no money or home ashore, takes to the sea and embarks on a whaling tour. Immediately, the similarities between Ishmael and the speaker in “Tonight” become apparent. Both feel outcast in their own land and are desperately searching for a purpose and a community. Ishmael looks to the sea for answers, while the speaker in “Tonight” looks to the “Mughal ceilings” above (l. 11). Melville’s novel is also notable in its wavering temperament toward morality and Christianity, and its use of religious allegory.

The allusion to Ishmael in the final stanza is also significant for its implication in both Christianity and Islam. In the Old Testament, Ishmael represents the son of Abraham, exiled from his family. While God blesses the firstborn son, it is his brother, Isaac, who is revered by Christians as inheriting Abraham’s legacy. Ishmael, however, is revered in Islam, as he is often cited as the ancestor of the prophet Mohammed. Burt suggests that this allusion encourages a reading in which Ali’s speaker “affirms himself decidedly with Islamic tradition” (239). The stanza

understood as a whole, however, does not allow for such a simple reading. The first line of the stanza alludes to Job 1:15-1:19 (Burt 239). Ali embeds himself in place of the messenger bringing news to Job. While Job is also in the Quran, the almost direct quote from the King James translation of the Old Testament about religious devotion in desperate times would seem to place Ali's speaker decidedly with Judeo-Christian tradition. However, Ali's speaker uses the two contrasting religious allusions to surround the blasphemous notion that God would sob in the arms of a messenger. Rather than inheriting one religious doctrine over another, the speaker in the final stanza exemplifies the religious turmoil that makes up the subject of much of the poem. He is claiming the role of the messenger, the blasphemer, the devout, the migrant, the exiled, and the forefather at the same time.

Agha Shahid Ali's poem, "Tonight" is exemplary in its ability to use form to convey meaning. Furthermore, Ali's mastery of using multifaceted allusions enhances the formal qualities of the poem, namely the poet's ability to use the ghazal form to swiftly change the themes and tone of the poem. As Ali states, "One should at any time be able to pluck a couplet like a stone from a necklace, and it should continue to shine in that vivid isolation . . ." (*Ravishing* 2-3). That this essay attempts to string a common thread through the multiple layers of meaning throughout the couplets is a reflection of the human characteristic to identify patterns and grant them meaning, and should not take away the ghazal's intention for the reader to understand each couplet as being complete in meaning in and out of the context of the poem as a whole. "Tonight" could easily be read in a manner in which none of the questions in the first stanza are answered. Too often in poetry, readers look for answers to the conflicts posed in the poem. In "Tonight," the speaker(s) in the poem experience(s) deep internal turmoil, and the first stanza misleads the reader into expecting an answer. Ali provides no answers. He simply acknowledges that a question is worth asking, that his struggles are worth writing, and that some reader might find it worth reading that struggling with religious and cultural identity is not unusual. In United States in the 21<sup>st</sup>

century, a time and place in which immigration and religion are so connected to one's political identity, it is important to find literature that illustrates the complexities of identity for immigrants, culturally diverse people, and religious minorities. It demonstrates that no one is defined simply by his or her religious, cultural, or national identity. These identities play important roles for Americans, but, ultimately, they are rich complex aspects of individuals. Rather than leading us to answer our questions, these complexities lead us only to question of ourselves: *Who are you now?*

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## About the Author

Michael Bagley is a senior majoring in English and Secondary Education. His research for this project was completed under the mentorship of Dr. Susan Levasseur (English) in the Fall of 2017. For his honors thesis, he is investigating the effects and best practices of using multicultural literature in the high school classroom. Much of his work at BSU is related to poetry and the cultural lens through which literature is written and read. After graduating, Michael plans to teach high school English.