

EVENT TITLE : The Ghazal and its Homes through Time

Event Description: Originally a popular form of love ode in ancient Arabic, the ghazal was embraced by Persian poetics and later found its way into numerous Persianate cultures, most notably Urdu. For two millennia, the ghazal has remained intact in spirit, form and sensibility, with a few important shifts in formal mechanics as it transitioned from Arabic to Persian. In this panel, five women poets with a background in Arabic, Urdu, and Persian, will discuss the ghazal's history and read some of their own ghazals.

Statement of Value: By underscoring how the ghazal form flourishes at the confluence of cultures and continues as a living tradition, panelists will discuss and highlight the history of the ghazal drawing from the Persian, Arabic, and Urdu traditions. The panelists are all women and range from academics, working poets, teachers, and translators at various stages of their careers.

The moderator will make some introductory comments and launch the discussion by reading each participant's biography. The panelists, including the moderator, will present their comments and read for 12-15 minutes. The last ten to fifteen minutes will be devoted to audience questions.

EVENT CATEGORY: Poetry Craft and Criticism

Event moderator:

Deema K. Shehabi is the author of *Thirteen Departures from the Moon* and co-editor with Beau Beausoleil of *Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here*, for which she received the NCBR Recognition Award. She's also co-author with Marilyn Hacker of *Diaspo/Renga*. She won the Nazim Hikmet Poetry Prize in 2018.

Event Participants:

Shadab Zeest Hashmi, author of *Ghazal Cosmopolitan*, *Comb, Kohl & Chalk* and *Baker of Tarifa*, is the winner of the San Diego Book Award, Nazim Hikmet Poetry Prize and the Hybrid Book Prize from Sable Books. Her work has been published worldwide. She has an MFA from Warren Wilson.

Adeeba Shahid Talukder is a Pakistani American poet and translator. Her collection of poems, *Shahr-e-jaanaan: The City of The Beloved*, is a winner of the Kundiman Poetry Prize. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Michigan and fellowships from Kundiman and Poets House.

Persis Karim is a poet, editor and professor of Comparative & World Literature at San Francisco State where she also directs the Center for Iranian Diaspora Studies. She is the editor of three anthologies of Iranian diaspora literature and has published poetry in national literary magazines.

Zeina Hashem Beck is a Lebanese poet. Her books include *O, Louder than Hearts*, and *To Live in Autumn*. Her poems have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Poetry*, *Ploughshares*, and *The Nation*, among others. She's the co-host of *Maqsouda*, a podcast in Arabic about Arabic poetry.

Initial Panelist Remarks

Shadab Zeest Hashmi:

As a poet in whose native culture (Urdu), “Ghazal” is often interchangeable with “song,” I believe the Ghazal sensibility transcends the written word. In essence, the ghazal— whether as a poem, song or calligraphy— aims to capture the highest conception of love. The ghazal uses language to battle with language itself and ultimately subdue it with the fervor of love: an intense force played out in “qafia” (internal rhyme) and “radif” (refrain), mechanics that embody the indomitable nature of such a love. It is a living tradition because it aims to say the unsayable, and is therefore not subordinate to language and not indispensable.

Zeina Hashem Beck:

I discovered the ghazal in English rather late, perhaps around 2013, and I was immediately drawn to the form, even felt familiar with it. I don't remember the first ghazal I read in English, but I remember one morning in Paris, I bought a book by Mimi Khalvati and opened it on a random page to find her beautiful “Ghazal: It's Heartache.” I loved the rhyme and repetition, the leaps each couplet made, the longing in it. Over the years, the ghazal became my favorite form, and it has in fact reconciled me with form, which I'd dreaded in the past. The more I read and wrote

ghazals, the more I experienced how liberating its rules and boundaries could be. Two books about the ghazal that I keep returning to are *Ghazal Cosmopolitan* by Shadab Zeest Hashmi and *Ravishing Disunities* by Agha Shahid Ali, who writes in his introduction, "What defines the ghazal is a constant longing." Perhaps it's the longing that draws me most to it. When I found out the ghazal in Urdu is sung to an audience who participates by repeating and anticipating, this reminded me of the Lebanese zajal, where poets I watched on TV when I was little sat at a long table with food and arak, challenging each other and engaging the audience. Perhaps this is where that initial sense of familiarity came from.

Persis Karim:

I remember hearing poetry recited aloud at parties at my aunt's house as a child in California. Noting its tendency to excite my relatives, I asked my father what all the commotion among adults was about. "Persian poetry," he said. "One of our gifts." I heard Hafez's ghazals in a foreign tongue first: my father's native Persian. That was my first encounter. The power of the ghazal is its foreignness, its at-home-ness. I am drawn to forms that enable us to corral our passions but also to let them free in the wind. I use the ghazal to do both.

Deema K. Shehabi:

I first encountered the ghazal indirectly through Agha Shahid Ali's translations of Faiz Ahmad Faiz in *The Rebel's Silhouette*. Immediately, I recognized the ghazal's essence: "a restless wind through my rib's cages." In the ghazal, the long waiting, the desire, and the impossibility of waiting—whether for liberation, love, or reunion with the beloved—seemed familial at the outset. In the ghazal, absence and presence exist simultaneously, its spirit seemingly hiding behind a door of words. I could also hear in the ghazal's quintessential lament echoes of the songs of Umm Kulthum and Sabah Fakhri. The ghazal's ultimate reason for existence is to weave lament and praise together (almost like prayer), and my impetus for writing poetry was to engage in both. Later, I read the ghazals of Agha Shahid Ali, Marilyn Hacker, Shadab Zeest Hashmi, Mimi Khalvati and fell in love with the ghazal's shackles and leaps.

Moderator questions:

1. As a ghazal practitioner, how have you been inspired by the ghazal tradition? How do you relate to the ghazal as a living tradition?
2. Which ghazals have inspired or influenced you as a practitioner? Feel free to list books and influences.
3. The ghazal is a love knot of contradictions and leaps. How has the ghazal's form both grounded you and freed you at the same time?

Outline:

- I. What is the Ghazal? The Ghazal and its Transmutations through Time: Commentary by the Poets
- II. Poets highlight 3 distinct ghazal culture: A Ghazal in Urdu, Farsi, and Arabic
- III. Shadab, Persis, Adeeba, Zeina, and Deema read their own ghazals
- IV. Audience Q and A