



“Language is...a space you inhabit”

Akshaya Kumar in Conversation with Maaz Bin Bilal

(This is an edited version of an on-stage conversation that took place between Maaz Bin Bilal, and Professor Akshaya Kumar in the Mulk Raj Anand Auditorium, Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh on 20 October, 2023 in the presence of the students, researchers, teachers and poetry-lovers of the tri-city)

Akshaya Kumar: This is a very refulgent time for Indian English poetry, because if you look at the proliferation of the anthologies now, the number of poets is multiplying. In the earlier anthologies, it was Bombay or Mumbai that dominated, now the spatial spread is much more pan-Indian, and inclusive. Delhi, the seat of political power, is now firmly on the poetic map. Among the emerging Delhi poets, Maaz Bin Bilal is a now a regular presence in the anthologies which have come, of late. Other than the place, what dominates in his poetry is the lived composite culture of the sub-continent, which suffered unfortunate reversal in the form of Partition. Maaz restores the shades of that composite past which reverberated the region through two ways. One, he translates Urdu and Persian verses of the sub-continent into English retaining the formal sound schemes of the original verses with uncompromising fastidiousness; two, more significantly he Urdu-izes English as writes his own poetry – pre-eminently in the form of English ghazals. So, in many ways he reminds us of Agha Shahid Ali, who shall feature in our conversation more than once. From Shahid Ali to Maaz, there is now a robust tradition of English ghazal. Even poets from south and the diaspora – from Jeet Thayil to Vijay Seshadri – have attempted English ghazals. I have a feeling that very soon ghazal is going to overtake the sonnet. So, Maaz let us begin the conversation. What does Urdu mean to you? Because you say in the subtitle of your *Ghazalnama* – “Poems from Delhi, Belfast, and Urdu.” Is Urdu for you a space, a native space? A cultural idiom of the sub-continent? What is it?

Maaz Bin Bilal: Thank you, Prof. Kumar. I wish to express my gratitude to you for inviting me to Panjab University. My father was born in Ludhiana, yet, I have never lived in Punjab, and this is my first formal engagement in the state. Please accept my thanks, also, for a wonderful poetic introduction.

So, Urdu for me is not just a language, perhaps it is not even a distinct language. I am of the opinion as many others are that Urdu and Hindi are but one. Historically, they were both considered the same language by poets well into the nineteenth century. Ghalib did not like the word Urdu used for his language which he called Rekhta or Hindvi. Hindi and Urdu may even now be understood as just different registers in literature. The poetry and literature of Urdu might be dissimilar to what the different Hindi speaking people might speak amongst themselves, but that difference also exists across the regions of North India and its many dialects such as Awadhi, Braj, Maithili, Khari Boli, Bhojpuri, Marwari etc. and their respective literatures. Urdu, I believe, is one such register or dialect of Hindi, much closer to High Hindi than many of the Western, Eastern or Southern dialects. Why they are officially two languages and what has happened to them in differentiating them is more a matter of politics.

But within that register Urdu also stands for other things for me and others. It has stood for a while as the metonym of a culture. It has been understood as a cosmopolitan culture of *adab*. And *adab* has many meanings: hospitality, respect, manners, culture, and literature. The political attempts to exorcise Urdu have resulted in the separation of this culture from other registers of Hindi, and consequently High Hindi becoming a very specific and exclusionary language. I feel there is cultural violence involved, and the practice of Urdu in the form that I try to undertake becomes automatically an attempt to address that kind of violence. It is an approach to strive for a greater inclusivity. So, in that sense perhaps it is a cultural necessity.

It is a language I have heard since childhood; its music is what I heard. The first poem I ever remember writing was an Urdu *sher* when I was five or six years old. I never ended up studying Urdu formally, but Urdu has always been there in the background. It bolsters my writing in English, especially in the ghazal form. It is the

place where my culture, way of thinking, my languages and their rhythms originate. Thus, it is as much a place in *Ghazalnama* as are my geographical coordinates of Belfast and Delhi. Shamsur Rehman Faruqi has argued that Urdu got its name as the shortened form of the language of Shahjehanabad: *zuban-e-urdu-e-mualla-e-shahjehanabad*. And so, a final couplet or maqta from one of my ghazals in *Ghazalnama* to end this long opening response:

Maaz thought he'd live happily in Europe,
Did he know he'd Delhi's map in his heart?

Akshaya: So, when you express yourself, does the ghazal come to you organically, as your spontaneous form of poetry? Or are you writing English ghazals at an experimental level? Choosing to write a ghazal, that too, in English, is a serious challenge. Writing under the shadow of Ghalib, we know, is a huge task. I think that there is not a single contemporary Indian English poet who has not invoked Ghalib in his poetry. Pick up any poet, and Ghalib begins to emerge as a pressing presence. Ghalib's verses surreptitiously enter into their verses. The usual poetic masters – Eliot, Yeats, or Shakespeare – are not as much challenged, but, yes, they are culturally contested. Is it time that we acknowledge the poet-masters from other Indian languages as ancestors of Indian English poetry too? Is now Ghalib safely a part of the pantheon of the ancestors of Indian English poetry?

Maaz: I would definitely put Ghalib in that pantheon. I think he is nineteenth century's best poet globally. The twentieth-century American poet Adrienne Rich wrote,

“How is it, Ghalib, that your grief, resurrected in pieces,
has found its way to this room from your dark house in
Delhi?”

But I think there was an earlier question of attempting the ghazal itself that I should try to address. So, yes, I started writing the ghazal in English after Agha Shahid Ali of course, but after reading Shahid's ghazals I realized that in many of his ghazal, many of his themes and concerns are almost entirely American, while he retains the form of

the ghazal. Those are also good ghazals in a way, but I feel that the ghazal is more than just formalist concerns. Like you said almost everyone at least from India is writing ghazals in South Asia. Not everyone technically, but quite a few. A lot of these poets are following formal concerns and they are writing whatever they feel like in the form. But my investment is also in the themes and the universe of the ghazal because of my location—the place I grew up in, and the tradition that I wish to situate myself in. Ghalib was moving around a lot, but he lived in Ballimaran most of his life, and many of his houses were a few hundred meters away from the house I grew up in and lived for twenty-five years. So Ghalib was around in a sense in the soil, in the streets around me. An opening poem of *Ghazalnama* derives all its connotations from a *sher* by Ghalib:

Said Ghalib
'twas not his destiny
To be one with his beloved,

My lover too
Lives across his house
Is it something in the air?

But even orally, I was attuned to the ghazal as there would be ghazals played on the record or cassette players in the house. So, that already seeped into my skin. These creative responses are almost bodily, I think. But because I was educated primarily in English through a private school in South Delhi, and later studied English literature at university, I ended up writing poetry in English. Yet, more than in Shahid's ghazals, I found that the universe of ghazal there in Urdu poetry comes from the Persian tradition but also involves various figures or characters from the subcontinent. The Brahmin is an important figure; the kafir is often interpreted to be an infidel and enemy by not careful readers, but the kafir is often the beloved. The beloved is the one who tempts you, s/he is the idol also – *sanam*. There are things that are uniquely Indian about the ghazal universe. There is an older cosmopolitanism which exists within this Persian ghazal. It is very international. And there is an entire universe there. So, for me that universe is also important. I have also written ghazals where I am not dealing with this universe per se, but

increasingly in my efforts I strive for that abstraction, using characters, symbols, and codes from that universe. So, I feel that it hasn't been done in English as much, and within English it is not as daunting, perhaps for me to try to advance on the ghazal poetics. I couldn't do it in Urdu, because again, I am not trained in Urdu as much as I would like to be. And to create Urdu newness would require even more effort in one way. So, while ghazals come naturally, they come in English, yet they are faithful to not just the form but also to the ghazal universe. By being written in English they further the pre-existing multilingual tradition and create newness for the ghazal as a form and in English poetry.

Akshaya: Let me go back to your choice of ghazal as a form. It is a form that requires lot of inner restraint and fastidious craftsmanship. The protocols of maintaining a *kafia*, *radif*, and other properties specific to the form, in a way, tie down the poet's freedom. True it is that in a ghazal, each couplet can claim autonomy, and in this way ghazal does concede some kind of freedom also. Don't you think the modern experience is very splintered and that it is very complex, and that within the compositional obligations of ghazal such experiences cannot be articulated, without the risk of aesthetic compromise. I can understand if there is a sense of grief or mourning, or a subtle eye to eye communication, ghazal as a form has no aesthetic parallel. But how to bring ghazal to the articulation of modern-day complex experiences? Is ghazal capable enough to take onboard the new specters of climate change, Anthropocene, the apocalyptic arrival of AI, post-truth etc?

Maaz: Actually, some new ghazals of mine which are still unpublished reflect on these newer technological realities as they interact with the fundamental concerns of humanity, which have always been embedded in the ghazal universe. There is a ghazal engaging with time, which refers to AI which I am still revising, so I will quote a few *shers* here from it:

Father left us a bit early
Did coding miss a kink in time

Man took over from dinosaur

Would AI make us sink in time

When we move across dimensions
Will we create a chink in time

Let me read the ghazal, “The L-word,” which articulates different possibilities of age-old yet modern love:

There’s such epistemic murk around the L word
Don’t we always try to work around the L word?

No Shireen for me, no Heer, please, I am no Qais
Other desires also lurk around the L word

Jehangir's City—with its bold Anarkali
I left my heart there to bark around the L word

Tigresses may take all in Sundarban mangroves
A male, what use is my quirk around the L word?

You should come seek the Arabic 'refuge' in Maaz
It is no use playing Turk around the L word?

It’s quite an elusive, connotative kind of poem. The L-Word used to be a TV series. There are all kinds of L-Words here. I leave those to your imagination. And there are certain modern connotations here too. Yet, at the same time queerness and homo-eroticism has been a part of the ghazal tradition very strongly, albeit it did not use that vocabulary. Even the way pronouns are used in Urdu poetry, a lot of poetry can easily be interpreted as homoerotic. At another level this tradition is sometime blamed for being just about the lover, beloved and rival, and almost held to be conventional and orthodox. But the lover is a radical figure. As I hinted upon earlier, in the *sanam* or *kafir*, there is transgressive love always happening here. Wine drinking is valorized which is otherwise taboo in the Islamic tradition. So, there has always been some radical potential and in fact the radical tone is almost conventional. So, all of that is there for us to capitalize upon. Faiz even in his *nazms* continued to utilize the ghazal idiom, characters, and universe. *Nazms* are free verse poems. So, this has

been happening within the ghazal form. Within my own poetry, the newer poems that I am writing, maybe I could find something here... There is a conscious move away from technology also, which I think is a mortal concern now, so perhaps this ghazal may reveal well what I suggest:

Be convivial, pleasantly greet in letters
I would prefer if we meet in letters

There is surfeit of the screen and e-texts
Eschew e-mail, let's retreat in letters

They will be perfumed, elegant, with sleights of hand
I'll hand write in ink my heartbeat in letters

'Should I write another for when the postman comes?
Since I know of your thoughts, your conceit in letters'

Would you let go your fears, and put pen to paper,
Just trust my love, and be indiscreet in letters

I will plant a forest, don't worry about trees
We're the minority who're replete in letters

'The world is full of paper, *still*, please, write to me'
How else, my desk, Maaz, would be complete in letters?

Akshaya: This reminds me of "The Country without a Post Office." There are a lot of letters in Shahid Ali as well, which never reach or if at all they reach, they reach when the receiver is no longer alive. You say that Shahid is Americanized, so which is the greater challenge – Americanizing ghazal or retaining ghazal's innate Indianness?

Maaz: I am not sure if one should compete. That also comes consciously. You have your pen name in the last couplet, so what are you to do with it? You are referring to yourself almost like an alter ego. So, you praise yourself, use the meaning of your name in terms of its semantic value, even ridicule your insignificance and so on.

There are different ways to write the maqta, the final couplet, so it is also part of form in the way it is executed. But at the same time, I wouldn't say what is tougher, but the language which is English is coming from the West. Americans are considered native speakers and so there is more easily an American English than there is recognition for an Indian English, internationally. Of course, there are many varieties of Indian English. But just for the simple fact that it hasn't been done well enough with primarily a South Asian focus. Shahid moved away completely and that was his choice. That he used the form to express precisely what he felt like expressing as a member of the diaspora. For me, while living in the contemporary times in India, it is important to write English ghazals a certain way. For if I was in Pakistan or elsewhere, I might not be writing English ghazals actually. So, a lot of concerns can change because of location and historical time. If the world was not as Islamophobic as it is, I might not be writing ghazals. Since, ghazal is love poetry, and to love in India is now a radical and subversive act, I write in this form. So, my English ghazal is coming from certain traditions and within India I found this English ghazal to be more ecumenical and syncretic. So, I wouldn't say which is tougher, but it is the more important need for me to execute this.

Akshaya: So, you intend to say that writing ghazal in itself is an act of resistance? Political resistance?

Maaz: I would like to think so in my case. A lot of people are exploring the ghazal form also as curiosity. I can't speak for them. I think of it as, yes, bending English to my will. Internationally, there are poetic forms such as the haiku that seem to gain more prominence in English. For us, in India and the Persianate East, in many different ways, in terms of linguistic, cultural performance, and in terms of other ways of doing politics, the ghazal must be an important genre to bring to English. It certainly is important for me. In this form of love poetry, at times when loving the other is made difficult by conservative institutions and politics, I seek to push the envelope with this form of love poetry. By writing the ghazal I create new syntaxes, new rhythms, rhymes, refrains, and non-linear narratives in English, countermanding the Western linear narrative poetry of free verse. Thus, my ghazals put forth a politics of love and friendship, and

throw a postcolonial challenge to English poetics as it exists with an Anglo-American English hegemonic model. In times when even place names with Perso-Arabic inheritances are being changed, I write English ghazals with Perso-Arabic motifs, characters, and words.

Akshaya: But I have seen that you have written poems on themes which have nothing to do with Islamophobia as much. There is a poem on Rohith Vemula. That interests me because normally poetry is used for themes of social injustice or human rights, but not for so overtly politically charged kind of situations.

Maaz: Akhil Katyal, who is here, had written a very short poem from a line in Rohit's suicide letter. The poem you refer to was a kind of a response poem to Akhil's poem. I wrote it in the form of a ghazal. I am not sure if I still agree with writing that kind of directly political ghazal, like I said earlier I am now moving more towards abstraction, so I am not using political references as overtly. So, it is not one of my favorite poems in this collection although the cause at that time was very moving.

The first poem I remember I ever wrote was an Urdu sher in response to the Babri Masjid demolition. So, different political causes seem to move me, I think, from very early on, and here also, it was an individual's demise, probably under discriminatory circumstances.

So, the ghazal for Rohith Vemula has an epigraph which is a couple of lines quoted from the suicide note: "Never was a man treated as a mind as a glorious thing made of stardust." The poem is called "Stardust." I will read the poem, if you allow me:

One grew up familiar in India with the magazine of
"Stardust",
Then the word acquired new meaning, the real sheen of
stardust.

It will be the aura of lady-killer Khans no more,
Bhim's descendants call for the whole tureen of stardust.

The bold and reckless, the spotless fear this dirt,
They wish to stifle the power foreseen of stardust.

All of us made up of this substance, some abuse it
More than others, the in-between of stardust.

The Goths took refuge in Antilia, it's a monstrosity now
In the city of slums, the obscene of stardust.

Some stardust is fed by foie gras, others try and fail
To sell their kidneys, the untouched, unseen of stardust

Blood is up for spoils, but will it ever boil?
When a light dies, will we careen off stardust?

You inherited it reduced to kitsch, gossip of films, Maaz
Rohith reclaimed your makeup, made up, pristine, of
stardust.

To an extent I would like to think that a poem happens. There are things you can plan, you can keep reading, practice, including translation, and doing things, but there is something that strikes you out of the unknown, moves you all of a sudden and then a poem happens. This suicide note moved a lot of us.

Akshaya: The way you mobilize ghazal for political purposes is exceptional. It in a way amounts to reinventing the ghazal. If you look at the penultimate couplet, you use a very fiery expression: "will it ever boil?". How do you bring something like this within the relatively even-tempered mood of ghazal? Ghazal does not allow you to "boil".

Maaz: Even Ghalib was not considered a revolutionary poet. There is a sher:

*Rag-e-sang se tapakta voh lahu ki phir na thamta
Jise gham samjh rhe ho ye agar sharaar hota.*

Rag-e-sang would be vein of marble, so this grief which if it becomes rage can even melt marble and can make blood pour from it. It is as if in a poem made of two-line verses lava is compounded, that is brimming over, ready to explode. The power of this poetry must overwhelm.

I see my own ghazals a bit like that. They can be delicate, but they can be mighty too.

Akshaya: So Ghalib is a revolutionary poet?

Maaz: It depends on how you read it, at least in some verses. In personal life, Ghalib was a survivor. He appealed to the powers that be, be it the Mughal king of Delhi, other nawabs, or the British resident in Delhi, or even Queen Victoria. He managed to survive the 1857 mutiny retributions from the British despite having been a member of the court of the king who was exiled to Rangoon. However, in his private letters, he expressed a lot of anguish, grief, and even anger. His poetry is full of life, love, vigour, and a modern questioning self. He is radical in his expression of the strongest of emotions. It might be a stretch to call Ghalib a revolutionary, but his verses embody incredible power.

Akshaya: In your collection *Ghazalnama*, why do you club two different forms – one of *ghazal* and another of *nama*?

Maaz: See, in English there had already been *Trotter Nama* by Allen Solly, and *nama* can mean letter, preface, or treatise. Although there are not only ghazals in this collection, there are other poems also. But the aesthetic that I was trying to evoke is the ghazal aesthetic. Like Faiz was doing in his *nazms*, the universe is that of the ghazal. So, Faiz uses a lot of poetic elements from the ghazal, using the ghazal universe. So even when I am writing about a subject such as Rohith Vemula, sometimes I am writing in the ghazal form. When I am writing in other forms also the kind of aesthetic and imagery I am using is from this kind of tradition. So, I wanted the collection to be a sort of homage to that form.

Akshaya: In this collection you have of course written poems which are not in the ghazal form, but ghazal as an influence and trope infiltrates. But this has also happened of late that earlier people used to demarcate an original book of poems and a book of translations. Increasingly I have seen that, though you have said from Urdu, but people even do not really want to use this as a marker of separation. They appropriate translation, for instance in Shahid Ali. He translates and he never says he translates. There is a full Ghalib ghazal there. He never mentions. So, are the days of writing exclusively a book of translations over in that sense, because you have put them in one running kind of collection.

Maaz: No, I have published a full book of translation, Mirza Ghalib's *Chiragh-e-Dair* as *Temple Lamp*. In *Ghazalnama* too, I have clearly attributed all the translations to the original authors. When the book was subtitled "Poems from Delhi, Belfast, and Urdu" and you asked me this question what is Urdu? Urdu for me is also a place like Delhi and Belfast. Language is also kind of a mental space you inhabit and cannot move away from. So, Urdu in the subtitle was anyway there. The translations were meant to be interspersed throughout the collection. They were not supposed to be a separate section of translations which there is now. So, the current sequence of sections is Delhi, Belfast, Urdu, and Delhi again. But to answer your broader question then. Translation still is for me, particularly when I do poetry, it is a part of my practice. I have reproduced the Urdu originals in the Persian script here and I have given my translation. When you are recreating a poem in your own words, the reader is reading your words, so there is a claim that you are making to some kind of ownership or at least to that version of the original poem that is definitely yours. And there is a certain poetic skill that is required to undertake a poetic translation.

Akshaya: But if one owns the translated poems, why should one not treat them at par with one's original poems? I would rather go for the kind of practice that Shahid Ali does. For instance, Tagore writes *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*. He never says he has translated the *bhakti* verses; he just owns them.

Maaz: I would not. I think it is a matter of choice. I write some original poetry and try to write some original prose as well. I do think there is a difference. It used to be the South Asian Indian tradition to appropriate even the translated. A lot of people were doing this kind of appropriation. But we live in a world of copyrights, we are also conditioned by capitalism as well. But I feel that for me it is a matter of intellectual honesty too; I really don't know and can't say for sure, whether it is me living in this world which is increasingly capitalist and this idea of copyright cannot be wished away or a duty and responsibility I feel towards the original author.

Akshaya: Is Ghalib still under copyright regime? Often, we hear that some verses of Ghalib which circulate in the social media, were never written by Ghalib.

Maaz: Ghalib would be out of copyright, but I am not just speaking of the idea of copyright in that there is private and intellectual property to whom somebody has a claim. What I am talking about is an ethical position regarding that. So, it is not just the capitalist side of it, but I feel it incumbent upon me to own up to the fact that certain images and ideas of a certain work that I am recreating are of another author's mind. I did not really think of them, I am working with them.

Akshaya: But there is a greater ethic – that you own them unconditionally.

Maaz: I feel compelled to have some kind of distinction there. So, I will make an acknowledgment, a dedication, or epigraph. The first poem has an epigraph from John Hollander's "Ghazal on Ghazals" for example. Because in a way it was inspired from that. I can only speak for myself.

Akshaya: True, true. One is that you have translated a range of poets. Even Amir Khusro is translated and Faiz, too. These two poets have been translated number of times and people have translated them in free verse, in the form of ghazals as well. This question always intrigues me. What is the incentive of translating the already translated, multiply translated? What is the motivation to do it all over

again? Do you think a new translation would make a serious difference to the existing ones?

Maaz: I think it is the greatest homage you can pay to poets and poems you really love and admire. You read them closely and then you begin to think how you will enter them and carry them to the other language you work in and you make an attempt. It is not as consciously thinking, "Oh! Is there a better translation or not? What is the point of doing this?" I don't think you always end up thinking like that, although I must also say that at one level, yes. There is a poem here, a translation from Ghalib.

*Ye na thi humari qismat ki visal-e-yar hota
agar aur jeete rehte yahi intazar hota*

I won't read all of the famous ghazal by Ghalib. I might read most of my translation. I am not a great fan of transcreations personally. There has to be some negotiation. If you have butchered the original then that's not quite owning it. I read a translation of this poem by Vijay Seshadri which I did not particularly like. So, I thought let me attempt one, and, in an hour and a half, I had a draft ready. This is one of the later drafts that I am going to read now.

It wasn't our destiny to be with our lover,
Had we lived anymore, the way it would've been longer!

I live by your promise, knowing it to be false,
Wouldn't I've died of joy, if I were a believer?

Through your caprice we learnt that the pledge was weak,
With such ease would it break if it were any stronger?

They should ask my heart, how your half-drawn arrows,
Could pierce it through, and where'd they get their power?

What friendship is this that friends become counselors?
There should've been a healer, a sympathizer!

Blood would pour unstoppably from the veins of marble,
What you believe to be grief may be scorching fire!

If this torment's heart-breaking, where'd we go hiding?
If it weren't the pain of love, it'd be our career.

To whom do I complain, of this sad night's refrain?
Death wouldn't be too bad, if only once it were.

This dishonour on death, why didn't we drown instead?
There would've been no tomb, there would've been no bier.

Who can see Him? He is One, the Monad. Were there
any duality, our four eyes would pair.

These matters of mystic thought, these renderings of yours,
Ghalib, we'd call you a saint, were you not a drinker.

This was my attempt.

Akshaya: When you read translations, you find stark difference between one and the other. Did you ever think translating Ghalib's *ghazal* in some radical way, say, as a pop song?

Maaz: Someone could. I think I have not attempted that. It could be done. I mean all experiments are valid and there will be an audience. There are hip-hop ghazals that have been written. Patricia Smith has a Hip-Hop Ghazal with "hips" as her *radeef*. So, people are welcome to do it. I think there is scope for people who enjoy that kind of thing, to take pleasure from the different kinds. And there is pleasure to be had from reading different translations of the same work as well.

Akshaya: Going back to Shahid Ali's translation of Faiz Ahmad Faiz, he does not follow the metrical obligations and he translates ghazals into free verse. What do you say about it? Should ghazals necessarily be translated as a ghazals in the target language?

Maaz: I would like ideally that to happen, but yes free verse frees you to do other things. Sometimes you can translate the meaning

better, you have more openness, broken away from the limits of form. But again, the question becomes about which aspect is it that you wish to translate and emphasize. A ghazal for me cannot exist without its form. By form I do not even mean the *qaafia* and the *radif*, “*rhyme ho yeh zaruri nahin hai*.” So, for example consider this *masnavi* (*Chiragh-e-Dair*) that I have translated—*Temple Lamp*. *Masnavi* is the epic poem. *Padmaavat* is a *masnavi*. So, this is a long poem but this is also written in couplets. Each will have its own rhyme and refrain. But I did not translate it with rhyme and refrain. What was essential for me there was this idea that each couplet is made up of two parts. The first line is either a question or exposition that has to be resolved in interesting ways in the second line. This equal, two-part structure of each *sher* is what I tried to recreate. The fidelity to autonomous *shers* is the integrity of the ghazal too that is most fundamental. So, when a ghazal is rendered in free verse where lines are also broken arbitrarily and the meaning of a single couplet is translated arbitrarily say in five lines, then it no longer remains a ghazal. Why call it a ghazal? If you are only interested in translating meaning then why even translate poetry? Translate a newspaper report.

Akshaya: Can English ghazal – translated or original – be sung like an Urdu ghazal? Did you ever think in terms of asking or commissioning a singer to sing these ghazals?

Maaz: I haven’t yet actually found a good sung rendition of the English ghazal. Tanya Wells, the British singer of Urdu ghazals, does sing the English translation of a *sher* or two at times, but I have not heard a full ghazal in English sung. On the other hand, I have done musical performances of my ghazal readings with the vocalist Priya Kanungo where we each performed in alternative interludes. I recited two *sher* at a time of from my dual ghazal *Amaltas-Monsoon*, while Priya would sing one *antara* of the *Raag Yaman*.

Akshaya: Coming to your translation of *Chiragh-e-Dair*, you talk about Persian cosmopolis. Here in this translated poem *Temple Lamp*, Delhi is given up and Banaras is owned by Ghalib without any sense of guilt. As a translator, you go along with Ghalib here. How does the

essential Delhiwalla in you cope up with you this kind of Delhi-bashing that Ghalib does?

Maaz: For Ghalib, Banaras comes at the cost of Delhi, yes. But I went to Banaras for the first time when researching for this book and I liked it. A part of me loved it. There is a very funny incident which happened. I asked a *panda*—the priests who sit on the ghats under the umbrella—for directions, as I had just reached the city. He asked me to come down and put a tilak on me, which I have rarely done in life. The other time was in school at an award function and this was the second time. I didn't like it in school actually, but this time I was somehow almost enchanted by it. It felt very natural, the way he did it. It was as if Banaras had claimed me. So, if one loves one city, it does not mean that one has to not like other cities. In Ghalib's case there are historical causes, for the protestations he makes against Delhi in the poem and his appreciation of Banaras, and I think some of this is also performance. So, as poets and readers we also perform sometimes, not everything is literal. Ghalib is running away from debt in Delhi and is going to Calcutta to have his pension reinstated from the British to the full at the time. So, he reaches Banaras and he grieves that some of his best friends are not writing to him. He has grievances against the city. Firstly, Fazl-e-Haq Khairabadi is mentioned—he was the great great grandfather of Javed Akhtar and Farhan Akhtar. Khairabadi was a jurist and poetry connoisseur who edited Ghalib's Diwan for him. He once adjudged Ghalib to be guilty in a case and sentenced him to prison or to pay a hefty fine. Ghalib did not have that money himself and Khairabadi paid the money on his behalf. These are the kind of friends Ghalib is complaining about. So, I don't think these are real complaints, these are just sentimental *shikwas* that he has with the best of his friends. He still loves them, so I think it is that kind of a situation for him. Because you see him lamenting Delhi intensely in the diaries and letters post-1857, so it is not like he didn't like Delhi. Banaras really enthused him. He has written in letters and even in later life stating that if he had been young and had gone to Banaras, then he would have just stayed on there forever. Ghalib likes Calcutta a lot too, but he loves Banaras.

Akshaya: So, people say that his admiration for Banaras was more spontaneous and his admiration for Calcutta was, because he was after his pension. What do you think makes the distinction?

Maaz: He doesn't explicitly make it anywhere, as far as I know. But for me the fact that the greatest homage a person or poet can pay to someone or some place is to write about that place in poetry. And Banaras is the only place on which he has written a long poem. So, I do think he loved Banaras in many ways. There are possible guesses as to why he loved it. Banaras is also famous for its *bazaar-e-husn* and so on. He writes in great praise of the bodies and the beauties he sees at the Banaras ghats. He doesn't meet anyone of note in Banaras. No one who is important or part of the elite culture at the time knows that Ghalib is in Banaras. So, he stays there secretly. Calcutta on the other hand was a seat of power, it was where a modern literary culture was already established. Even newspapers had started there. So, he finds a more vibrant public culture there that is not there in Banaras.

Akshaya: Why should he be so angry with Allahabad? Allahabad is also *sangam*. But his denunciation of Allahabad is no-less literary.

Maaz: Again, we don't know exactly why. But there were possibly followers of rival poet Qateel who harassed him. There is a hilarious letter by Ghalib that I have actually translated in the introduction where he says a lot of things about Allahabad.

“What a ridiculous place is Ilahabad! May God get rid of it; for it has no healing for the sick, nor anything of note for the gentleman. Neither do men and women have any life here, nor do its young and old have any love or kindness in their hearts. Its people are a blot on the face of this earth. Its desolate inhabitation is only worth tilling as farmland . . . It is unfair to call this terrible valley a city, and it is so shameful that a person should stay in this dwelling of ghosts . . . Because it has heard that the sinful would also obtain grace for the sake of the virtuous, it has cast its hundred thousand dishonours with its three thousand hopes with the lot of Banaras, and sent the river Ganges speeding towards Banaras as a sign of respect.

However much of a burden Banaras may find it to look at this black-faced city, its heart is comforted by the knowledge that the Ganga lies between the two. By God, if the return journey from Calcutta means that I have to travel through Ilahabad, then I shall drop the very idea of returning home and never return. Suffice it to say, after spending a night and day in this city of ghosts for the crime of not having had my luggage delivered yet, I found a ride the next morning, and quickly reached the banks of the Jamuna. I crossed the river like a fast gust of wind and made my way to Banaras.”

Akshaya: Ghalib lavishes exceptional praise on Banaras. He is at his lyrical best. Can you read some lines, specifically on Banaras, from your translated poem?

Maaz: Thank you, I would like to read from near of the middle of the poem where Ghalib is at his most fulsome in praising Banaras.

40

Be it in spring, or in summer, or winter,
the weather here each season is that of heaven.

41

Escaping the bleakest winters
and scorching summers,

spring pitches winter
and summer camps in Kashi.

42

Autumn, when it shakes its wings
in pride,

becomes on (Kashi's) forehead
a proud sandalwood mark.

43

Bowing in respect to the very air
of this garden (that is Banaras),

the spring breeze wears
a janéu made of flowers.

44

If it not be a tilak
on the forehead of the sky,

then pray, tell, what is
that many-hued wave of twilight?

45

Each fleck of dirt here
in its ecstasy is a temple,

every thorn with its verdure
becomes paradise.

46

This settlement is the seat
of the idol-worshipping faithful,

from beginning to end
it is the pilgrimage of mystics.

47

The (supreme) place of worship for
the conch-blowers,

surely, (Banaras) is the Kaaba
of Hindustan.

Akshaya: As I was reading this “Temple Lamp,” what struck me most was the limited range of imagery. For instance, look at this repetitive use of the image of paradise for Banaras. It is liberally used in Persian poetry. Jahangir invokes the same image for Kashmir. Does this not point towards the deficit of imagery in Persian or Urdu poetry?

Maaz: It is the most important image in the Abrahamic tradition. The idea is that man was thrown out of this ideal place which was paradise. Paradise was a garden of pleasure. Geographically, if it existed at all, it was somewhere in Iraq, which is not so paradisiacal anymore. Yet, there is deep yearning for it among many believers and poets. So, I think it is a foundational belief that any place that has to be good or is the best can only be that. It is something that is at the root of this very way of thinking and you are supposed to return to it. If you die and if you do well in life, you will return to paradise. In Ghalib's case with Banaras, at one level one can say that it is just abstract imagery that he used to call Banaras *pardes*, but that is not the only reasons. I have tried to show the other reasons in the book in my introduction using James Prinsep's sketches of that time that show a green, garden-like Banaras. Banaras in early 19th century was actually not like we see it today. It was a very green city, and did not have the kind of pollution and traffic it has now. Gaudoliya bazaar is now this big famous bazaar. A small river called Godavari used to flow there. Maidagin Chowk used to be Mandakini Talao, a pond. All of these existed when Ghalib went there. So, there was much greenery in Banaras with many water bodies, not just the Ganga. Ghalib had been ailing for a while and as he came to Banaras he managed to recover his health. He came there in winter time when it was probably not that cold there. In the verdant environs of Banaras Ghalib did find a healing touch. In terms of the people he saw around, the evident piety and metaphysics, I have not read those sections of the poem aloud just now—the sections where he is describing the piety of the people—all those things considered, he probably did really find Banaras a veritable paradise.

Akshaya: Let us change gears, and switch from the promises of paradise to the pangs of Partition. This is a question on *The Sixth River* by Fikr Taunsvi, which you translate in English. Of course, this is a very important book because this was written just at the stroke of Partition – one month prior and one month after to Partition, and the writer has given first-hand account from ground zero. But Fikr Taunsvi is known for his humour and what you get here is just one to two sentences of humour, rest of it is all saturnine. Partition as a trauma, subsumes the possibility of humour. Where is his trademark humour?

Maaz: I think in that moment Fikr is not as much of a humorist, probably, certainly not as much as later. We must remember Taunsvi is publishing *Chhata Darya* in 1948, his trademark as humour happened later. Before Partition he was a poet and an editor. He had just published his first poetry collection, *Hayule*, in 1947 and he had been editing for the Progressive and Modernist magazines from Lahore. And he never wanted to leave Lahore, he was a communist. So, he only left because Mumtaz Mufti betrays him. He didn't care about religion and this idea of nations. For him the *suba* that is the province is important, Punjab and Lahore are important. The cultural identity is important. It's actually the partition that shook the poetry out of him and here he produces dark satire, probably his first piece of writing after partition and then he becomes a satirist full time and over time a comic satirist. He wrote a daily column called "Pyaz ke chilke" for over 25 years in the Urdu Daily *Milaap*. I am actually working to translate that now. And he wrote it 5-6 times a week and that comic satire is making fun of the government, the buses in Delhi, the new societies that have been created and so on. He has lost a daughter and he mentions it almost as if in passing and then he just moves on. In a sense he is anticipating Manto ever before Manto writes his partition stories.

Akshaya: With this we come to an end to this very animated session of conversation. The aesthetic choices that you make are very precisely defined.