



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



## On Ghazals and other forms with Steffen Horstmann

Sunil Sharma

*'There is a sense that events in my poems take place in a world of ghosts, or perhaps at a crossroads where the spiritual world and material world intersect.'*

*Ghazal is making waves in the West.*

*One of the popular practitioners of this respected Arabic form in English is Naples-based Steffen Horstmann whose recent book Jalsaghar has attracted much critical acclaim. The widely-published poet has worked very hard with this import from the East and helped naturalise it for the cosmopolitan audiences eager to know more of literary genres from other national cultures.*

*Here the brief bio of Steffen Horstmann from his website:*

*As Agha Shahid Ali's student, Steffen Horstmann studied the history of the ghazal form and began writing his own ghazals in English. Horstmann's poems and book reviews have appeared in publications throughout the world, including Baltimore Review, Free State Review, Istanbul Literary Review, Louisiana Literature, Oyez Review, Texas Poetry Journal and Tiferet. Horstmann has recently published his first book of ghazals, Jalsaghar.*

*In this e-mail conversation with Mumbai-based **Sunil Sharma**, Steffen discusses some strange artistic encounters and cross-fertilizing traditions that have also become migratory in a globalised literary world.*

Q. How did this romance with the ghazal form start?

A. While I was still a teenager I became Agha Shahid Ali's student, at the University of Arizona, whose teaching made me familiar with classical Persian forms, particularly the ghazal. The technical requirements of the form can seem intimidating, even for an experienced poet. But in working with the ghazal there is the lure of a kind of freedom that no other poetry form provides.

In Conversation with Steffen Horstmann. Sunil Sharma.  
*Writers in Conversation* Vol. 4 no. 1, February 2017.  
[http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers\\_in\\_conversation/](http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/)

Since each couplet is considered autonomous, an independent poem, one is able to engage different issues and themes from one couplet to the next. So I was particularly attracted to that element of the form, the ability to move from one topic to the next very quickly, which creates a certain intensity that I believe is unique in English.

Q. How is English ghazal different from its original in Urdu or Persian?

A. Urdu is such a lyrical language. When I listen to a conversation in Urdu it sounds like poetry to me, the sentences seem to be filled with rhymes and spoken in cadences. It is a dynamic and elastic language, one in which the words have multiple meanings and uses. In an early issue of *Contemporary Ghazals* the poet I.H. Rizvi illustrates this by using the word 'lana' as an example, which means 'make', but it can be used in all tenses and in many different ways without changing the spelling, for instance 'shall make', 'have made', 'were made', 'maketh', and so on. So the meanings of individual words in Urdu have a kind of shape-shifting quality or elasticity, which makes it an incredibly dense and powerful language. Literal translations of the couplets of Urdu ghazals can come out to four or more lines in English. There is the capacity for poets writing in Urdu to convey more in individual couplets. In that sense, it is difficult for English to compete with Urdu, which is probably one of the reasons why Robert Bly developed the tercet-ghazal in English.

Q. What were the early influences on you, while growing up in USA?

A. I grew up reading poets like Wordsworth, Dickinson, Blake and Christina Rossetti. So when I began to read contemporary free verse the language of that poetry seemed plain by comparison. I found that I was most attracted to poets from earlier eras.

Q. What were/are the enduring literary influences over you?

A. There have been quite a few. Agha Shahid Ali of course, but also Derek Walcott, T.S. Eliot, Dickinson, Amy Clampitt, James Merrill, Terese Svoboda, Mark Doty, T.R. Hummer, and many others. Lyricism, richness of language, and startling imagery are features all of these poets have in common, and is probably what explains their influence on my own writing.

Q. What was it like being Agha Shahid Ali's student?

A. Shahid brought a great deal of humour to his teaching; he was often making jokes or wisecracks in the classroom, which created a comfortable atmosphere for his students. I don't want to imply that he wasn't demanding as a teacher, he certainly was, and he was very honest in his assessments of the work of his students. Shahid was always careful to explain why he thought a certain poem or a certain line within a poem did or did not work. People just seemed to be drawn to him; he had such an animated personality and kind demeanor.

Q. What lessons did you learn and still carry of those early encounters with him?

In Conversation with Steffen Horstmann. Sunil Sharma.  
*Writers in Conversation* Vol. 4 no. 1, February 2017.  
[http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers\\_in\\_conversation/](http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/)

A. Shahid was clearly a gifted poet, and he worked very hard on his writing. When he had blocks of time to write he would unplug his telephone and lock himself away in his house for days at a time. Sometimes his writing happened spontaneously, but he also had an uncanny ability to write whenever he wanted to, whether having coffee in a cafe or sitting in a lounge at an airport or anywhere really. So Shahid didn't wait to be inspired to write, he created ways to write as much as he could and took whatever opportunity he had to do that.

Q. How is the ghazal different from the dominant poetic forms of the West, like lyric or sonnet or ode, for example?

A. These forms are different structurally in obvious ways, but there are certain features that are particularly unique to the ghazal. One of these is the qafia, the rhyme that occurs inside the line immediately before the refrain. Without the qafia the ghazal would lose a great deal of its intensity. Also, there is the autonomy of the couplets that is unique. The sonnet or the ode follows a certain sequence, with a beginning, middle and end, so to speak, but the ghazal doesn't. Also, in a traditional ghazal, the final couplet includes the poet's name or pseudonym, as a kind of signature in the way that an artist would include his or her name on a painting.

Q. How do you view haiku? Is it different from the ghazal?

A. I love the haiku form and have published some of my own haiku. Lately there has been a movement away from the long practiced 5-7-5 format toward a kind of minimalist poem, with fewer syllables, which I find discouraging because these extremely short poems seem esoteric to me. I think the main connection between the haiku and ghazal, and what distinguishes these forms, is that each has been practised for many centuries and in many different languages.

Q. How do you assess Ghalib?

A. Even today Ghalib remains an immense presence in the world of Urdu literature. Though I have read all of his ghazals, I know his work only through translation, which is acknowledging that I know his writing only in a limited way. He is an emotional poet, which I like. I love his lines 'I talk of contemplating God but cannot make my point / Unless I speak of wine-cup and intoxicating wine,' which are from a wine poem, a certain kind of ghazal known as khamriyya, which Ghalib excelled at, a drinking poem that had a spiritual dimension to it.

Q. Have you studied modern ghazal form of South Asian writers? Dushyant Kumar?

A. I know Dushyant Kumar's work only through some rough literal translations that I've seen, which were not meant to serve as versions of his poems in English, but only to give a reader a sense of the actual content of his ghazals. I have enjoyed what I've read of his, which has a strong political dimension to it and a satirical quality. I understand that his work is extremely hard to

In Conversation with Steffen Horstmann. Sunil Sharma.  
*Writers in Conversation* Vol. 4 no. 1, February 2017.  
[http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers\\_in\\_conversation/](http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/)

translate, that it has been very difficult to effectively convert the richness and complexity of his writing into other languages.

Q. How was the English ghazal first received in the West?

A. Early on the form was largely misunderstood. In the 1960s Adrienne Rich and Jim Harrison wrote free verse ghazals which were poems that featured autonomous couplets, but with none of the formal aspects of a standard Persian or Arabic ghazal. While I'm open minded about this kind of poem, I do think it belongs in a different category. I should mention, though, that Michelle Greenblatt, an exceptionally talented young poet who passed away recently, wrote some of the finest examples of these free ghazals, which are startling in their use of a kind of lush language. Now in terms of a wider understanding of the traditional form, things changed dramatically once Shahid brought out *Ravishing DisUnities*, an anthology of mostly true to form Persian ghazals that included work by W.S. Merwin, Marilyn Hacker, and quite a few other well-known poets. This happened in 2000, and the book is responsible for making the formal features of the ghazal known to poets writing in English, particularly the use of qafia and radif, or a rhyme that immediately precedes the refrain.

Q. Any other ghazal writer that impresses you in terms of dexterity and vision?

A. I have been really impressed by the work of Denver Butson, R.W. Watkins and Bill Dennis. Denver likes to use a shorter line, which I think enhances the lyricism of his ghazals, and R.W.'s satirical ghazals are immediately recognizable to me. He is someone who is proficient in his practice of the form, someone to keep an eye on. I recently read an excellent ghazal by Liusaidh, an Hindu influenced poem published in *Setu Magazine*. In the past decade there have been quite a few poets who have written one or two ghazals, but not so many that have gone on to become regular practitioners of the form.

Q. Tell us about your book of ghazals, *Jalsaghar*.

A. The presence of *Jalsaghar* in the world seems like a kind of miracle to me. It was in 2001 that I decided in earnest to write a book of ghazals and there have been many stops and starts along the way. Working extensively with the ghazal form can be a humbling experience; initially I had to fight off a constant sense of self doubt. I reached a point where I decided that I simply wanted to enjoy the process of writing these poems and not worry about fulfilling any kind of ambitions that I had in the beginning. And it was at that point I began making real progress, when I began writing poems that I felt good about, poems that I thought were good. I have been asked a few times about the book's association with the well-known 1958 movie titled *Jalsaghar*, which was directed by Satyajit Ray. The connection between the movie and the book is the legendary ghazal singer Begum Akhtar, who performs a song in the movie and is also the central figure in my book. But the book's title is not a reference to the movie. *Jalsaghar* means 'The Music Room' in Bengali. In my

In Conversation with Steffen Horstmann. Sunil Sharma.  
*Writers in Conversation* Vol. 4 no. 1, February 2017.  
[http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers\\_in\\_conversation/](http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/)

book of ghazals Begum Akhtar becomes a supernatural being whose singing transforms the world into a luminous realm. *Jalsaghar* is the world that has become Begum Akhtar's music room.

Q. Could you capture and convey some of the finer points and associations through English to a primarily Western audience?

A. When it comes to the finer points of the form, some of the standard characteristics include a heightened concept of the idea of love, or love as a kind of ultimate but unattainable ideal. The ghazal can be a poem of desperation, especially one of a longing for the Beloved who is not present. It has also been practiced as a poem of transcendence, of the ecstasy of a sage enraptured in the light of an illumination. Traditionally the ghazal conveys an atmosphere of grief and longing, and should possess what Shahid has described as 'the nobility of language', or a musical or artistic language. I think at one time or another, the poems in *Jalsaghar* touch upon all of these features, though I don't really know if one can truly recreate in English the emotional resonance of a classical Urdu ghazal.

Q. Would you care to fight for its inclusion on the courses in mostly conservative universities of the developed nations through a sustained campaign and networking?

A. I wanted to begin by spreading news about *Jalsaghar* in the academic world in India, and I've been encouraged by the kind responses from professors there. Wafa Hamid, who is an Agha Shahid Ali scholar teaching at Lady Shri Ram College, has been particularly helpful. Shamenaz Shaik, an instructor in Allahabad, has also been very supportive. I recently heard from Golaka Behari Acharya, who has expressed an interest in translating some of my ghazals into Odia, I find that to be an exciting possibility. Nandini Bhattacharya, Veerish Badiger, Arzuman Ara and Krishna Prasad have all been extraordinarily kind in their wanting to help promote *Jalsaghar*. If this book becomes known in the US, it may become known via India.

Q. Any message for writers interested in this field of cross-fertilization of two cultures and world views?

A. I have always had a fascination with classical Japanese literature and the literature of India and the Middle East. Basho's book *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* seemed to me full of magical presences, and early on I was very much drawn to the mystical and supernatural elements in Rumi and Hafiz. A melding of influences occurs in the work of all writers, but if a particular writer is drawn to the literature of a variety of cultures then a cross-pollination of these different influences can happen in a way that seems instinctive. I suppose I have a Romantic mind, one that is informed by these works from far places and distant times. There is a sense that events in my poems take place in a world of ghosts, or perhaps at a crossroads where the spiritual world and material world intersect. These ghazals, in part, serve as a way for me to grapple with my own internal struggles, or to speculate about the mystery of human existence, or the mystery that exists in the relationship between God and humankind.

In Conversation with Steffen Horstmann. Sunil Sharma.  
*Writers in Conversation* Vol. 4 no. 1, February 2017.  
[http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers\\_in\\_conversation/](http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/)

**Sunil Sharma** has published five collections of poetry, two collections of short fiction and one novel, and has co-edited five books of poetry, short fiction and literary criticism. Recipient of the UK-based *Destiny Poets'* inaugural Poet of the Year award 2012. Another notable achievement is his select poems were published in the prestigious UN project: *Happiness: The Delight-Tree-2015*. He edits English section of the monthly *Setu*, a bilingual journal from Pittsburgh, USA:  
<http://www.setumag.com/p/setu-home.html>

In Conversation with Steffen Horstmann. Sunil Sharma.  
*Writers in Conversation* Vol. 4 no. 1, February 2017.  
[http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers\\_in\\_conversation/](http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/)