

# From Mystical Yearning to Political Consciousness: Kaifi Azmi and Ghazal's Journey into Social Reality

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**Abstract-** The study explores the complex relationship between the ghazal form of the poetry and the theme of love, charting the genre's historical and geographical evolution from its inception in 6th-century Arabic poetry to its prominence in Persian literary traditions and subsequent change in the Urdu language. The research emphasises the thematic transformation of the ghazal, which traditionally focused on unreciprocated or mystical love, particularly following the emergence of the Progressive Writers' Movement in South Asia. The paper examines Kaifi Azmi as a significant person who transformed the ghazal by infusing societal awareness while maintaining its lyrical and structural integrity. This research analyses select ghazals by Azmi, illustrating how he broadened the range of subjects. In contrast to traditional ghazals that frequently explore metaphysical yearning and idealised affection, Azmi's ghazals address the reality of his era, intertwining poetic convention with political immediacy. The paper highlights Azmi's distinctive role in transforming the ghazal into a medium for social critique and community consciousness, while maintaining its aesthetic beauty.

**Keywords-** Ghazal, Kaifi Azmi, Love, Progressive Writers' Movement, Social Critique

## I. INTRODUCTION

The ghazal form of poetry and the concept of love (Ishq) have been inextricably linked since the era of pre-Islamic poetry. Bedouin poets of Arabs articulated their profound emotions of love and solitude in this form. Later, it continued in Abbasid period in which Abu Nuwas, one of the most important poets of 8th-century Islamic world was born. "He is perhaps best known for his *khamriyyat* (wine poems). His collected poems, or *Diwan*, includes around 1,500 works that explore pleasure, sexuality, especially homosexuality, and religion." ("Abu Nuwas") His ghazals in the late 8th century earned worldwide fame. However, the true flourishing of this genre in its intricate and exquisite form appeared in mediaeval Persia as Anisur Rahman an Urdu critic writes in the Preface of his book *Hazaaroon Khwahishein Aisi: The Wonderful World of Urdu Ghazals*, "It was only when the ghazal reached

Persia in the middle of the 8th century that it started developing its own contours....Abdullah Jafar Rudaki, {was}the first canonical ghazal writer of Persia towards the end of the 9th century" (DAWN.COM). Other notable authors who crafted Persian ghazals include Amīr Khusrau (1253-1325), Sa'dī Šīrāzī (d. 1291), Jāmī (1414-1492), Urfi (1555-1590), and, most prominently, the preeminent master of the ghazal form, Ḥāfiẓ Šīrāzī (1320-1389). Urdu ghazal has evolved from its Persian prototype in both structure and texture, becoming a significant component of Indo-Persian culture. Over centuries of evolution, the Urdu ghazal has cultivated a lexicon and set of terms sanctioned by tradition, characterised by a rich tapestry of allusions, similes, metaphors, and historical or legendary connections. The comprehensive array of semantic tools referred to as *tagazzul* encompasses pivotal concepts such as: the tavern (*maikhāna*, *sharāb-khāna*) and drinker (*maikash*, *sarmast*, *Sharābī*), wine (*bāda*, *mai*, *Sharāb*, *ṣahbā*), goblet (*paimāna*, *jām*, *pyāla*, *sāsar*), cup-bearer at the wine-party (*sāqī*), intoxication (*bad-mastī*, *Khumār*, *nasha*), spiritual mentor (*pīr*, *Shaikh*), madness (*junūn*, *saudā*), candle ( *qindīl*, *shama*) and moth (*parvāna*), rose (*gul*) and nightingale (*bulbul*), falcon (*jurra*, *šāhbāz*, *šikra*) and hunted bird, lightning (*bijlī*, *barq*) striking the nest (*āshiyāna*), along with numerous historical or legendary figures, such as Joseph (Yusuf renowned for his beauty), Jesus (Maseeh the giver of life), Solomon (Sulaiman the wise), and the celebrated Arabian lovers Qays (also known as *Majnūn* – the madman) and Laila, or their Persian equivalents *Farhād* and *Šīrīn*, among others. "All these, used as catalytic agents, are arranged and employed according to a poet's imagination and sensibility with only one aim: to describe his love and the whole range of associate feelings like sadness, loneliness, yearning, longing, desire or devotion." (Kuczkiewicz-Fraś 201)

The ghazal often depicts one-sided, unrequited, platonic, or spiritual love that is both irresistible, majestic, and idealises both the lover and the beloved.

However, the concept of love in ghazals evolved, the greatest Persian ghazal masters of the 11th-12th centuries used this poetic form to express their ideas and feelings towards God, Supreme Power, rather than a human beloved *Ishq-e majāzī* to the absolute (*Ishq-e ḥaqīqī*). Poetry sometimes describes the object of devotion as both human and supernatural, making it difficult to determine who is the beloved. The Urdu convention of using the masculine gender equally for the lover (*ashiq*) and the beloved (*mashooq*) contributes to the uncertainty of the beloved's identity. This is a result of imitating the Persian pattern, which lacks grammatical gender definitions. According to Faruqi "The liberation of the beloved from the constraints of gender identity enabled the poet to use all possibilities as it suited him" (Faruqi). Western readers may be surprised to learn that in Sufi poetry, divine or mystical love is referred to as *ḥaqīqī* (meaning "real"), whereas love for another individual is termed *majāzī* (meaning "metaphorical"). This illustrates the Sufi conviction that terrestrial love is not authentic love, as it is ephemeral and ultimately it ends. Nonetheless, it remains significant. Earthly love is perceived as the initial stage in attaining genuine, spiritual love — love for God. In this perspective, affection for an aesthetically pleasing individual can initiate the soul's progression towards divine love.

Sufis claimed that all aspects of the world mirror the beauty of God. In poetry, the depiction of a lovely woman serves as a manifestation of divine beauty. Moreover, affection between individuals was seen sometimes as a grave disease of the heart or liver, a condition that induced suffering and could only be remedied by the presence of the beloved. Philosophers such as Avicenna thought that this form of lovesickness could only be remedied through union with the beloved (Ferrand 62). However, such unions were frequently unattainable due to societal norms and constraints. Poets and mystics transformed their devotion into a transcendent form of love—mystical love for God—where the lover's soul could ultimately merge with the everlasting, boundless divine. In the ghazal, the lover is consistently depicted in exaggerated and poetic terms. Poets employ numerous similes and metaphors to illustrate the beauty of the beloved.

## II. KAIFI AZMI AND HIS ASSOCIATION WITH GHAZAL

Kaifi Azmi is renowned for his Nazms, which embody his progressive principles, humanistic

values, and dedication to social justice. His Nazms frequently tackle political conflicts, socioeconomic disparities, and the quotidian experiences of the marginalized. Although he is primarily recognised as a poet of Nazm, he also crafted a limited collection of ghazals that demonstrate his literary prowess and emotional insight. As Rakhshanda Jalil writes "while Kaifi wrote several ghazals, It is in the nazm that he felt able to say more and to say it in his own imitable style" (29). These ghazals, however limited in quantity, embody his distinctive voice—merging traditional form with contemporary sensibility, frequently articulating many facets of love, including personal longing, love for humanity, devotion to ideals, and revolutionary passion.

## III. PROGRESSIVE WRITERS' MOVEMENT AND THEIR FONDNESS OF NAZM

Poets typically chose the Nazm over the Ghazal as their main form of expression in the early stage of the Progressive Writers' Movement. Its adaptability and straightforwardness made the Nazm more appropriate for tackling social concerns, political challenges, and the hardships of the ordinary people. Consequently, the Ghazal, historically linked with themes of passionate love, mysticism, and the idealised lover-beloved relationship, was first put aside. However, when Progressive poets did return to the Ghazal, they greatly changed the substance and tone of the Ghazal. They abandoned traditional themes of unrequited love and passive yearning, choosing instead to portray the beloved as a symbol of freedom, justice, or revolution rather than a distant beauty. They reimagined the lover as conscious strong, and socially aware. As Baig an Urdu critic argues "while the ghazal traditionally revolved around themes of love, longing, and beauty, the Progressive poets sought to expand its boundaries and infuse it with socio-political relevance." (1) By doing thus, they sometimes sacrificed artistic embellishment for clarity of message and goal and accorded more weight to ideological commitment and social significance than to conventional ghazal aesthetics.

## IV. KAIFI AZMI AND HIS CAREER'S BEGINNING WITH THE GHAZALS

Although Kaifi Azmi is best known for his progressive Nazms, his journey as a poet actually began with a ghazal. Remarkably, he wrote his first ghazal at the age of eleven, displaying an early sensitivity to emotion and poetic rhythm. The ghazal

he composed at that young age begins: "Ita to zindagī men kiśī ke khalal parē./ Hansne se ho sukoon na rone se kal parē." (Azmi 16). In this early ghazal, Kaifi Azmi followed the conventional form and diction of classical ghazal poetry. The poem consists of ten lines arranged in five couplets, strictly adhering to the classical structure of the ghazal. Even at that young age, Azmi employed traditional metaphors and imagery such as sāqī (the wine-bearer) and māī (wine), which are common symbols in Persian and Urdu poetic tradition—often representing emotional intoxication, spiritual longing, or existential reflection.

This early work shows that Azmi, despite later moving toward progressive themes and free-flowing Nazms, began his poetic journey deeply rooted in the classical aesthetics of the Urdu ghazal. It also highlights his command over poetic conventions from a very young age, as well as his ability to infuse emotional depth even within traditional form.

#### V. ANALYSIS OF SELECT GHAZALS OF KAIFI AZMI

The ghazal "You are smiling so much / What's the sorrow you are concealing?" examines the discord between outward façade and inner turmoil, offering a deep psychological inquiry into grief, denial, and acceptance of destiny. The poem maintains the couplet pattern typical of the classical ghazal form, although it markedly diverges in tone, subject, and philosophical perspective. The poet's reflective and aggressive tone firmly establishes this work within the modernist Urdu literary tradition, where emotional realism and existential critique replace the idealised romantic yearning of classical poetry. The ghazal commences with a contrast between outward displays of happiness and inward inner distress: "You are smiling so much / What's the sorrow you are hiding?" (Jalil 153). The speaker promptly challenges the traditional expression of suffering and pleasure, indicating a contemporary scepticism regarding external emotional manifestations. This couplet challenges emotional repression, marking an early departure from the customary themes of classical ghazals, which often glorify concealment and endurance in love. This inquiry persists in the following couplets, especially through the metaphor of tears as poison: "They will turn into poison if you keep in drinking / These tears that you are constantly gulping down." (153) The traditional motif of

intoxication—typically linked to wine, taverns, and spiritual longing—is replaced by a more tangible and self-destructive representation. The act of drinking has shifted from the ethereal to a harsh reality, converting catharsis into toxicity. This inversion highlights the psychological truth that underpins the poem's emotional structure.

Furthermore, the poet contests the romantic idealisation of enduring suffering by condemning the reluctance to let past injuries to recover: "The wounds that time has begun to heal / Why do you insist on scraping them." (153) Unlike classical ghazal poets such as Mir Taqi Mir or Ghalib, who frequently romanticise pain as a source of beauty and transcendence, this poem posits that such attachments to suffering are self-imposed and detrimental. The agency of the subject is emphasised here, indicating a distinct transition towards a more rational and contemporary sensibility. The concluding couplet, "Fate is a game of the lines on your palms / You are being defeated by mere lines," (153) alludes to the deterministic metaphors sometimes present in classical ghazals. Nonetheless, the tone has ceased to be reverent. Fate is trivialised, diminished to "mere lines," as the speaker attacks passive submission. This clarification of fate highlights the poem's existential theme: suffering is not inflicted by divine or cosmic entities but is frequently perpetuated by human choice or apathy. The poem adheres to the structural conventions of the ghazal, particularly through its couplet composition. Nonetheless, it opted thematic continuity rather than the self-contained nature of classical couplets. The poet's continuous discourse and narrative structure provide the ghazal with a cohesion and development that is unusual in pre-modern instances.

In conclusion, this ghazal illustrates how current Urdu poetry transforms classical forms to address contemporary psychological and philosophical questions. The poem replaces idealised misery with psychological reflection and counters fatalism with nuanced expressions of agency, so confirming the ghazal form's adaptability to changing human circumstances. It exemplifies the genre's capacity for both lyrical beauty and deep analytical exploration of the modern individual's inner life.

Azmi's another ghazal "Listen, my love, to the stories they all tell, / Everyone's a stranger here, no one the other knows," articulates a poignant meditation on

alienation, spiritual disillusionment, and existential despair, drawing upon traditional imagery of the ghazal while simultaneously subverting its thematic norms. The poem interweaves motifs of desert landscapes, failed devotion, and spiritual estrangement to critique not only personal exile but also larger socio-religious indifference. Azmi, known for his Marxist and progressive poetics, retools the traditional ghazal idiom to express a deep sense of modern spiritual abandonment and societal betrayal. The opening couplet, "Listen, my love, to the stories they all tell, / Everyone's a stranger here, no one the other knows," (Varma 22) sets the tone of universal estrangement. The invocation of the beloved—an essential trope in Urdu poetry—is immediately redirected from romantic intimacy to collective disconnection. Unlike classical ghazals that locate meaning in unfulfilled love, Azmi's poetic voice critiques a broader breakdown of human solidarity, where estrangement becomes the foundational experience of modern life. The second couplet "Pass by this place quickly, O caravan travellers, / Singed by my thirst, in this barrenness nothing grows" (22), extends this estrangement into an image of desolation. The poetic voice evokes the imagery of desert and drought, classical symbols of longing in Persianate literary traditions, but transforms them into representations of futility and exhaustion. The speaker's "thirst" is no longer a metaphysical yearning but a testimony to the spiritual and social infertility of his environment, a critique resonant with modernist anxieties.

Azmi deepens this critique in the third couplet: "People have had enough of my tempestuous worship / I hear that even temples are being asked to close." (22) Here, the poet aligns spiritual fervor with dissent, implying that his intense devotion—perhaps both religious and ideological—has been rejected by a society that no longer tolerates emotional or intellectual intensity. The use of the temple as a symbol functions ironically; it is not atheism or secularism that closes the temple but the community's discomfort with truth and passion. Azmi collapses the boundary between sacred and profane, suggesting that revolutionary longing is itself a kind of sacred worship, now under threat. The fourth couplet "From where someone thirsty left but a while ago / There friends revel today, and wine overflows" (22), juxtaposes the poet's personal exclusion with the ease of others' gratification. This irony captures a sense of injustice that mirrors broader themes in Azmi's work:

that the suffering of the marginalized or exiled is often invisibilized in the midst of societal pleasure and forgetfulness. The wine here, a recurring metaphor in Sufi and classical poetry, no longer signifies spiritual intoxication or romantic ecstasy; it becomes a symbol of inaccessible joy and cruel irony. In the fifth couplet, "If spring comes, do give it my salaam / I am now a part of what the desert chose," (22) Azmi articulates finality in exile. Spring, a traditional metaphor of hope and renewal, is distanced from the speaker's present condition. The poet identifies with the desert, a powerful metaphor for irreversible alienation. His choice of "salaam" implies that hope is acknowledged but can no longer be participated in—a farewell rather than a welcome. This moment registers as both elegiac and resistant, suggesting dignity in self-exile. The concluding couplet "An order has been passed that 'Kaifi' should be stoned / Where hides the saviour, alas, only God knows" (22) brings the poem to its most political and personal register. The poet's name appears in the third person, reinforcing both his symbolic and literal victimization. The image of being "stoned" carries religious, judicial, and martyrdom connotations, marking the culmination of societal rejection. The absence of the "saviour" underscores not only divine silence but the poet's abandonment by all structures—religious, political, communal—that might once have offered redemption or solidarity.

In conclusion, Kaifi Azmi's poem exemplifies the transformation of the Urdu ghazal from an expression of individual longing to a platform for collective and existential dissent. Through ironic inversions of classical symbols, deeply personal imagery, and a tone of sacrificial defiance, Azmi critiques both spiritual institutions and societal complacency. His poetic voice remains one of resistance, estrangement, and ultimately, prophetic sorrow.

In another ghazal, Azmi reinterprets conventional expressions of romantic love to examine emotional restraint, memory, and the complex temporality of desire. The initial couplet "Only one thought stops me from speaking my heart / That you too would figure in it at least in part" (Varma 19) establishes a voice characterised by vulnerability and repressed revelation. This is not the ostentatious proclamation of traditional ghazals, but a contemporary, reflective uncertainty grounded in relational intricacy. The second couplet intensifies this tension via a nostalgic metaphor: "The moonrays that enveloped me when

you lifted your veil / Continue to illuminate my solitary path.” (19) The act of unveiling—a conventional theme of romantic revelation—is recalled not as a conclusion but as a persistent afterglow that pervades the speaker’s solitude. Love has transformed from a euphoric union into a persistent absence perceived through recollection. Azmi undermines the inevitability of romantic sadness in the third couplet, proposing, “Perhaps love’s destiny can transform entirely / During the period you devote to evaluating my passion.” (19) In this context, time transforms into a liminal region where judgement postpones conclusion, suggesting that emotional vulnerability may be forfeited due to indecision. The last image “The last flower fell while wanting to know / How long must it wait for spring’s glorious glow” (19) effectively encapsulates the deterioration of hope. Azmi’s ghazal articulates a controlled yet powerful emotional landscape, combining traditional symbolism with a contemporary sense of disillusionment and unfulfilled desires.

Azmi’s ghazal “The world I seek I cannot find/ A new earth, a new sky I cannot find.” (Varma 15) offers a contemporary reinterpretation of the ancient ghazal form, redirecting its emphasis from romantic and mystical yearning to existential disappointment, collective alienation, and socio-political critique. Each couplet serves as an independent reflection—mirroring the autonomy of the classical form—while together constructing a cohesive tale of significant spiritual and cultural turmoil. The phrase “I cannot find” emerges as a poignant motif that underscores absence: of paradise, human rejuvenation, justice, remembrance, divinity, and interpersonal connection. In contrast to conventional ghazals, where the beloved typically represents an elusive embodiment of heavenly or romantic affection, in this context, the “you” is a representation of lost humanity, or even the self. The phrase “I have discovered the dagger that was employed to murder me / I can find no fingerprints upon it” transforms the ghazal into a political metaphor, alluding to systemic violence and the obliteration of accountability.

The depiction of an obliterated village “Let alone the embers, smoke I cannot find”—conjures postcolonial displacement and the erosion of cultural memory. In traditional ghazals, the poet expresses sorrow over the beloved’s apathy; Azmi mourns the obliteration of identity: “I cannot find a trace of my own footprints.”

The concluding couplet’s need for acknowledgement amidst a multitude subverts the conventional theme of unity with the beloved, substituting it with a persistent obscurity. Consequently, Azmi diverges from the idealised self-reflection of previous ghazals and presents a communal, philosophical despondency. His ghazal addresses the contemporary condition—characterized by violence, dislocation, and the erosion of moral certainties—transforming the genre into a platform for resistance and existential exploration. Azmi’s ghazal “The weeds may flourish, let the path go on / Even if I am tired, let the caravan move on” exemplifies the transformation of the classical Urdu ghazal into a vehicle of sociopolitical resistance and existential interrogation. While preserving the formal structure of autonomous yet thematically linked couplets, Azmi reconfigures traditional motifs—such as the journey, the tavern, and the beloved—to address political stagnation, collective grief, and historical amnesia.

The recurring imperative “let...move on” evokes both weariness and perseverance. The first couplet “The weeds may flourish, let the path go on / Even if I am tired, let the caravan move on” (Varma 49), captures the dialectic between decay and progress, fatigue and resilience. The image of extinguished celestial bodies “Even if they extinguish, let the breeze move on”—suggests a crisis of guidance, a world bereft of ancestral wisdom, yet propelled by some residual force of survival. Azmi sharply critiques authoritarianism and moral hypocrisy in “O, rulers of the town... let the taverns run on,” subverting the ghazal’s classical dichotomy of mosque and tavern. Here, taverns symbolize not spiritual ecstasy but the unchecked spread of vice under political and religious decay. The lines “Call it faith, or the craft of politics / The art of suicide you taught us well” (49) are a direct indictment of power structures that manipulate belief to normalize destruction, particularly through communal violence or ideological extremism. The final couplets deepen the existential crisis: the speaker is crushed by the weight of collective death—“So many corpses, how will I shoulder them?”—while also yearning to uncover his own historical effacement: “Bring the shovels... let me know as well.” (49) Azmi thus fuses personal erasure with collective trauma, evoking a buried self in a nation marked by violence and suppression. By refusing romantic escapism, Azmi modernizes the ghazal to interrogate history, politics, and memory, aligning his work with the Progressive Writers’ Movement’s ethos of literary activism.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Kaifi Azmi's literary vision is a potent amalgamation of classical tradition and modern philosophy, wherein the ghazal—a genre traditionally characterised by romance and escapism—experiences a profound transformation. Grounded in the deep literary tradition of Urdu poetry, Azmi reconceptualises the ghazal not as a medium focused on individual grief and unrequited affection, but as a platform for intellectual discourse and social awareness. His reinterpretation of the quintessential lover and beloved signifies a transition from passive longing to active defiance, as metaphors of political conflict, social equity, and revolutionary principles supplant conventional themes of romantic anguish. The study demonstrates how Azmi preserves the formal grace and lyrical beauty of the ghazal while incorporating a contemporary, humanistic ethos consistent with the objectives of the Progressive Writers' Movement. The ghazal, in his hands, transforms into a vehicle of dissent—able to contest feudal principles, champion the rights of the marginalised, and mirror the socio-political conditions. His poetry demonstrates a profound dedication to both artistic technique and political intent, blending traditional form with modern significance. Therefore, Kaifi Azmi's contribution is found not only in the substance of his poetry but also in his audacious reconfiguration of a traditional form. His legacy persists as evidence of how poetry—especially the ghazal—can surpass artistic limitations to serve as a means of resistance, reform, and lasting hope.

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