

## **Desire and the Self: A Lacanian Analysis of a Ghazal By Arshad Mehmood Nashad**

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### **Abstract**

*A ghazal consists of couplets and each couplet is considered an entity in itself. It defies 'unity of thought' but some ghazals do possess a certain 'nazm' like unity in their composition and it becomes possible to interpret them by applying a singular theoretical framework. In this paper, a ghazal by Arshad Mehmood Nashad is interpreted by applying Lacan's idea of Desire as it appears to have this theme running through it. Lacan dubs his brand of psychoanalysis as a 'rereading of Freud' but his theoretical formulations are termed as 'post-structuralist' as he heavily borrowed from the linguistic model developed by Ferdinand de Saussure. Nashad's poetry, though entrenched in the literary conventions of the Sub-Continent, is 'digressive' to say the least. He treads certain untrodden domains and has introduced a new flavour in the practice of ghazal writing. The article attempts to explore Lacanian concept of desire in one of his ghazals.*

Apparently, it is a redundant practice to put an Urdu ghazal under a rigorous analysis as the genre eludes a unified and whole scale interpretation. Though ghazal abides certain formalistic unities yet its thematic texture is not built around a singular idea. The task of a critic is to analyse each couplet as an entity in itself without seeking a central thread that runs through it. In this article a ghazal by Arshad Mehmood Nashad is interpreted by 'imposing' a certain unity on the poetic piece. The act of imposition may seem superficial but a closer look at the ghazal suggests, a 'Nazm' like unity which is unusual in this form of art.

French psychoanalyst Lacan believes that desire is always a 'desire of the other' (Evans, 1996, p. 37). The things that we desire are not innate but are engendered in the other – in the social formation in which we are born. This implies that we desire those things that we suppose the other lacks and if we have those things we will be desired by the other. We can draw

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two conclusions from this premise; firstly, desire is built on the principle of 'lack'; secondly, it is a desire to be recognized by the other. Lacan has mentioned two kinds of others:

Throughout his teachings, Lacan regularly utilizes the terms "other" (with a lower-case o) and "Other" (with a capital O)... The lower-case-o other designates the Imaginary ego and its accompanying alter-egos. By speaking of the ego itself as an "other,"... Additionally, when relating to others as alter-egos, one does so on the basis of what one "imagines" about them (often imagining them to be "like me," to share a set of lowest-common-denominator thoughts, feelings, and inclinations making them comprehensible to me). These transference-style imaginings are fictions taming and domesticating the mysterious, unsettling foreignness of one's conspecifics, thereby rendering social life tolerable and navigable. The capital-O Other refers to two additional types of otherness corresponding to the registers of the Symbolic and the Real. The first type of Other is Lacan's "big Other" *qua* symbolic order, namely, the overarching "objective spirit" of trans-individual socio-linguistic structures configuring the fields of inter-subjective interactions. (Johnston, 2013)

In the first couplet of Nashad's ghazal, the two 'others' are contrasted in an interesting manner. Love can be understood as a contemplation of an 'alter-ego' that exists outside the 'self' and which is in fact an 'other' with a small 'o'. The contemplation of this 'other' transcends one's own ego and it seems that the subject is denying his self in the process of contemplation though Lacan denies the existence of an autonomous ego or self.

*Hum junoon paisha k rehte thay teri zaat men gum*

*Ho gaye silsila e gardish e halat men gum* (Nashad, 2009, p. 53)

The poet says that he spent his life contemplating this 'alter ego' – this 'other' with small 'o'. The self is contemplating the other because it wants to become the other's desire. By negating his 'self', by surrendering his 'ego', he yearns for recognition by this 'other'. But this contemplation was intercepted by 'silsila e gardish e halat', the registers of the Symbolic and

the Real - the cultural and sociological conditions that surround him. In other words, the 'Other' with the capital 'O' intervened to assert its demands and thus drew the self away from its desired object. The pain of this 'loss' can also be compared with Lacan's concept of entry into the Symbolic Order of language i.e., into the Other with capital 'O' when for the first time the child experiences a 'split' from his mother – the small other. The demands of the social order are more pressing and in order to meet these demands the subject must succumb to the demands of the Other. But the interesting thing is the desire for an 'alter-ego', for an 'other' with whom we fall in love, is also engendered in the big 'Other'. Most of the people fall in love because human cultures invoke beautiful and romantic associations with love. It is represented in fiction, movies and arts as something sublime and unearthly and the individuals, in most of the cases, kind of impose that state of mind on them. So the desire for the other with small 'o' is also a product of the Other with capital 'O'. They appear to be at variance but actually are not. The Other with the capital 'O' invokes the feelings of love in as far as they do not clash with the cultural ideals of that society and if they do then it would simply go against these feelings and attempt to crush them through its body of laws and conventions.

As we have discussed, desire is engendered in the Other but it does not mean that the individual, the subject, is just an automaton who simply succumbs to the demands of the 'Other'. Every subject asks this question 'what does Other want?' He perceives a certain 'lack' in the 'Other' – something the 'Other' does not have. So he adjusts his desire according to this perceived 'lack'. He thinks that in order to be recognized by the 'Other', he should become what is desired by the 'Other'. But the question is does the subject know exactly what the Other wants of him? The subject can never know in certain terms about the demands of the Other because the perceived lack is always veiled. The veil tells the subject that something is there but what exactly it is the subject can never know (Lacan, 2006, p. 693). So desire is always a signifier without a signified. Nashad's next couplet describes it in this manner;

*Arsa e wasl men bhi harf e tamana na khula*

*Husn e alham raha parda e aayat men gum* (2009, p. 53)

The subject tends to objectify his desire i.e. he thinks if he can get a certain object or a person then his desire would be satisfied. But desire is not about objects – about signifieds. It is a perpetual chain of signifiers and one object of desire leads to another and so on. Desire is something isolated from us and from the objects of desire and it is not possible to pin it down. The poet says that he could not express his desire even when he was in close proximity of his object of desire - his beloved. The couplet also alludes to another Lacanian concept that ‘Desire is metonymy’ (Lacan, 2006, p. 439). Metonymy is a figure of speech which works through association. Something is described not by its real name but through a thing or concept which is associated with it. It is never a complete representation. Desire is metonymy because it moves from one signifier to another without ever reaching a signified. As Evans puts it: “One signifier constantly refers to another in a perpetual deferral of meaning. Desire is also characterized by exactly the same never-ending process of continual deferral” (1996, p. 114). So the couplet tells us that desire could not be expressed or satisfied even at the moment of satisfaction as it remain hidden in ‘parda e aayat’ – in the veil of signification. The same thought is extended in the next couplet as the poet is bewildered at the fact that there is something lost in the universe and he does not seem to find it anywhere. The problem is that he does not know what it is and where to find it.

*Aql Ungasht e budundan hy nazr heran hy*

*Kon si chez hui arz o samawat men gum* (Nashad, 2009, p. 53)

This clearly illustrates that desire is not something material or which can be satisfied through material objects. Its nature is elusive and it shifts from one object to another and the subject can never know what he actually wants.

The next couplet uses an allusion which, because of its mythical and romantic appeal, has been a favourite of poets throughout history; the story of Joseph, the son of Jacob, who was abducted by his brothers and then sold in the bazaar of Egypt. Joseph was the favourite son of Jacob because of his legendary beauty and Jacob wept for his son for years. Here the poet has given the story a new twist:

*Kitne Kinaan hue khwab e Zuleika men aseer*

*Kitne Yaqoob rahe hijr k sadmaat men gum* (p. 54)

Here Zuleika, the wife of the governor, who fell in love with Joseph, denotes the object of desire that haunts the subject and entraps him. Joseph finds himself entrapped in the desire of Zuleika but this entrapment is not active as he is not the desiring subject rather he is caught in the web of her desire. On the other hand, he is also the object of desire of his father who loves him dearly. So here Joseph is the object of desire not the desiring 'self' and he is desired by Jacob and Zuleika alike. Just like any object of desire, his appeal lies in his being 'elusive', being 'displaced'. Jacob had him but later lost him while Zuleika also has him but cannot possess him. So on one hand, Joseph is wanted because he is absent and on the other he is desired because of his presence. But interestingly, both of the desiring subjects – Jacob and Zuleika are permanently disappointed and their desire remains unfulfilled. Paradoxically, the pangs of separation are not only felt by Canaan who, metonymically, represents Jacob but also by Zuleika who in a way possesses Joseph (he is their slave) and yet does not have any control over him. Joseph becomes a signified – a metaphor for desire – that is bound to remain elusive and beyond the reach of desiring subjects.

Lacan has used three terms which are related to his stages of personality development: Need, Demand and Desire. Needs are the things that we cannot live without e.g. food, water etc. But demand is the 'excess' of the need as it goes beyond it. Demand is always from the other – a demand for love. The subject demands that the other people should behave in a particular manner. When he asks for the objects he needs, the other people should provide him these things in the manner he demands. The problem is that demand cannot be expressed through language. While the subject might get the objects he needs, his demand remains unfulfilled and this unfulfilled demand becomes 'Desire' (Johnston, 2013). "Desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the very phenomenon of their 'splitting'" (Lacan, 2006, p. 690). Desire comes into being when the subject demands more than what he needs. "(Desire) is produced in the margin which exists between the demand for the satisfaction of need and the demand for love" (Lacan, 1988, p. 4). This clearly illustrates the 'inexpressibility' of desire. Language keeps us in this illusion that it can express our desire but language itself has that

fundamental ‘lack’ as its signifiers do not lead to signifieds but to other signifiers. The fact is expressed in the ghazal in this manner;

*Koi mayel ba smayat na hua sad afsos!*

*Naghma e dard raha seena e jazbaat men gum* (Nashad, 2009, p. 54)

The poet mourns the fact that his song of pain could not be heard but the problem is not that he does not have an audience; on the contrary this song cannot have expression through language.

The last couplet of the ghazal states the fact that though desire is the product of the ‘Other’ but the subject always incorporates it in his self in an individualistic manner. In this way, desire becomes a reflection of one’s self. The lover finds its reflection in the other – in the alter ego but in fact it is the reflection of the self in this alter ego. The poet says;

*Men tere shehr se guzra hon bagole kit rah*

*Apni dunya men magan, apne khiylat men gum* (p. 54)

Bagola or a cyclone always moves inwards – pulling the other objects towards its centre so is the working of desire. The desire for the alter ego is not the outward journey of the self rather it is directed inwards – towards the self. This is the reason that the poet says that though he was passing through the terrain of the other yet his contemplation was that of his ‘self’ and not of that other.

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