

## LETTERS

Dear Editors:

I HAVE READ Professor Russell's response to my review of his *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature* (AUS #9), and I accept his contention that I asserted my position on the Urdu ghazal rather than arguing it. I believe that even had I argued it, I would not have been able to bring Professor Russell to agree with me, nor would he have been able to bring me to agree with him. I therefore beg respectfully to differ with him, and I decline to pursue the matter further.

—WILLIAM L. HANAWAY

Dear Editors:

THE LETTER from Ralph Russell concerning his debate with Fran Pritchett was interesting to me, because while I enjoyed reading what they both had to say, I couldn't quite figure what all the hoopla was about. Specifically, I wondered how much those of us who read the Urdu ghazal really care who the poets are as real people. The whole point, as it seems both Russell and Pritchett have observed unproblematically, is that the ghazal is about the *'ashiq* and not the poet.

But as to sociological verisimilitude, neither one of them comes quite to the point of saying what *can* be read into the ghazal that *is* reflective of its environment—viz., that its perennial popularity surely implies an appreciation for both the *'āshiq's* persona and the extravagance of expression so characteristic of the genre. This is information gleaned far less from internal readings of poems, or from what we know of poets' lives, than from the eminently documentable esteem in which the ghazal has been held for several hundred years (at least) in the Indian subcontinent.

Perhaps the Pritchett-Russell debate could be seen as reflecting, at least in part, differences in aesthetic values between Progressivism and

Modernism (or “New” Criticism), but that might be to give each of the party’s views less than they deserve. While I care about what Pritchett and Russell have to say about Urdu literature, I really don’t care at all whether Mir really had an illicit love affair, or who Ghalib’s *ṭavā’if-‘āshiq* lover was, if there ever was one. When Russell asserts that the “central thrust [of the ghazal] is the celebration of the heroism of the lover” (p. 107) he hits the nail on the head, but it doesn’t seem to me to contradict Pritchett’s assertion that “the central thrust is the exploration of states of passionate desire” (cf. p. 100)—these are in no way mutually exclusive endeavors. The ability to recognize a hero has less to do with the experience of heroism in one’s own corporeal life than with having learned to recognize the conventions by which heroism is (re)presented. The success of the ghazal lies in those representations being received, and responded to, by its intended audience. I’m sure both Russell and Pritchett would agree that sociological verisimilitude was never the point, whether it could be discerned or not. Emotional verisimilitude was the point, and that is achieved when artistic expression resonates, by whatever means it has been acquired, with the emotional experience of its audience. So where’s the problem?

Why not turn the conversation to other aspects of the ghazal? Why, for instance, is the ghazal so enduringly popular (and don’t let’s answer something to the effect of “because it’s such great stuff”)? *Why* does it continue to be received as “such great stuff”? Why does its model of heroism become such an addiction? I realize that Ralph Russell probably did not have me in mind when he invited “South Asian scholars working in the USA” to “tell us what they think” (p. 109) but I have jumped in anyway.

One minor query: Why, Professor Russell, is “what country-and-western songs tell their audience, and what that audience values, less valuable than what the ghazal tells its audience and its audience values”?

—CARLA PETIEVICH

Dear Editors:

**I**F I CONGRATULATE YOU, as I do, on the last issue (no. 10) of the *AUS* I can see some of your readers smiling and saying to themselves, “Well, he *would* like it, wouldn’t he? A lot of it was written by him.” Fair enough,

but a lot of it wasn't written by me, and I liked that too! I was especially interested in the pieces which dealt with Hindi and Urdu, and decided to write some notes on this question. They turned out to be too long to be included in this letter, so I am sending them separately. [See pp. 203–08 in this issue. —*Eds.*]

One thing in the issue surprised me, and that was Shamsur Rahman Faruqi's glowing review of the re-issued *Ghazals of Ghalib*, edited by Aijaz Ahmad. I was surprised at this, and all the more so because his reviews always seem to me to specialize in faint praise, and the tone in this one was in marked contrast. Not that I do not share his appreciation of the "transcreations" as he calls them of the American poets: I do. But Aijaz Ahmad's notes and introduction called for very sharp criticism. And since I am about to make some I should say before doing so that I have a very high opinion of some of Ahmad's recent writing—e.g. his article on resisting communalism in *South Asia Bulletin* XIV; 1. 1992.

But *this* piece of work is on a very different level. Leave aside his arrogant and pretentious tone. Objectionable though it is, what is far more important is his remarkable ignorance (and that is not too strong a word) of so much of what he needed to know, or to find out, before he undertook this book. It would take too long to give sufficient examples here but any reader who has the time and inclination will find them in abundance in my detailed review of the book in the 1974 Part 1 issue of the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*.

When I learnt that O.U.P. Delhi was republishing the book I wrote to ask whether Aijaz Ahmad had made any revisions, and was told that he hadn't. He certainly ought to have done so, and should in my opinion (which, in Mushtaq Ahmad Yusufi's apt words, "is not necessarily worthless") be thoroughly ashamed of himself for not having done so. Shamsur Rahman Faruqi will, one imagines, have seen for himself all the faults which my review detailed. Yet all he has to say is, "His knowledge of Ghalib and classical Persian-Urdu poetry was, at the time he compiled this book, less than one would desire." Yes, *very much* less, and if he has not seen fit to revise anything, it still is! Then "Although he did his best, Ahmad couldn't, of course, overcome all his deficiencies ... to prove a fully competent mediator." I'll say he couldn't!—and, it seems, he still can't. And finally, after detailing "certain grievous errors of translation" and a number of other mistakes, he concludes mildly, "one only wishes that Aijaz Ahmad had done a little cosmetic cleaning up." "Little," indeed! "Cosmetic," indeed!

I am surprised, too, that Shamsur Rahman includes among his

“favorite transcreated *she‘rs*” William Stafford’s

Exiled, how can I rejoice, forced here from home  
And even my letters torn open.

This version is based on Aijaz Ahmad’s typically absurd interpretation of Ghalib’s original as a protest against censorship. He tells us in his introduction that he has “of course, read the usual scholarly commentaries.” (“Of course” is one of his favorite phrases.) How come then that he took no notice of their explanation that in Ghalib’s time the receipt of an unsealed (not “torn open”) letter indicated that it brought news of someone’s death and had nothing to do with censorship? Shamsur Rahman Faruqi presumably knew this; in which case why include as a “favorite transcreated *she‘r*” one that falsifies the original?

Let me repeat that I share Shamsur Rahman Faruqi’s appreciation of the work of the American poets, and that I greatly admire some of Aijaz Ahmad’s recent writing. But this does not in any way invalidate what I have had to say about this book, and I am surprised at Shamsur Rahman’s uncharacteristic mildness.

—RALPH RUSSELL