

# The Ghazal

In Arabic Literature and in Malay Music

by

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The Malay Ghazal has many interests for us. It has helped to preserve some of the best and most typical of our pantuns. It has also helped to preserve some of the most typical melodies of the old Malay folksongs. It also helps us to have the "feel" of the better side of the old traditional Malay way of life, apart from its cruelties, its injustices and its lack of certain moral principles which we now assume to be fundamental in a civilized society. The world depicted by the pantuns and melodies of the ghazal has gone; those who created the ghazal have contributed something to our meagre musical heritage. A cultural heritage is something building up in the course of history absorbing elements congenial to its growth. In this sense the culture of a people is always contemporary. No part of it can deliberately be "modernised". We must strive to create our own modes of self-expression suitable to our age. The Arabs are supremely proud of their pre-Islamic poets with all their savage passions and their terrible obscenities. Europeans do not "bring up-to-date" their old works of art. We may, of course, make use of any or all of our national cultural resources as well as those of the rest of the world in our effort to create new forms, new modes, new styles, but we should not despise, let alone suppress or replace, any portion of our cultural heritage.

In Arabic literature the ghazal is a poetic genre, believed to have originated in Arabia in pre-Islamic times (Jahiliyah). It was a form of love-poem, often also called "the erotico-elegiac genre". No example of the pre-Islamic form of the ghazal, distinct from the complex Qasida, is to be found among the collections of pre-Islamic poetry that have survived in our days.

The term "ghazal" is Arabic but has passed into Persian, Turkish, Urdu and Malay and has acquired different meanings in these languages. For example "ghazal" in Persian and Urdu has developed into a vehicle for serious poetry used by famous poets including Ghalib and Iqbal. In Malay the ghazal is not a poetic genre or a musical form: it is rather a name applied to a musical session, a sort of salon musical party, consisting of traditional Malay folksongs controlled and disciplined by a small number of musical instruments — mostly of foreign origin — with the harmonium as the leader.

Coming back to the Arabic ghazal poetic form, the next stage in its development was its almost sudden appearance in the form of a new love-lyric in the milieu of the wealthy and luxurious cities of Mecca and Medina and later in the new cities in Iraq, during the early period of the Umayyad Caliphate (early 8th century A.D.). This new artistic movement — poetic and musical — may have been inspired by the presence of Greek and Persian singers brought into the two cities as slaves and clients (Mawali) by the wealthy and leisured aristocracy of the Quraish. This was the period of the Great Arab Conquest.

In this new type of Arabic love-poem, the traditional metres and style were simplified and adapted to suit the need of singing. The sentiments expressed were tender, urbane and gay. At the same time there also grew up a new tendency in the ghazal style, a new fashion, particularly among the young poets in Medina, to depict an idealising, languishing, hopeless love, not unlike some features of the best Malay ghazal style. This tendency in the early Umayyad Arabic ghazal

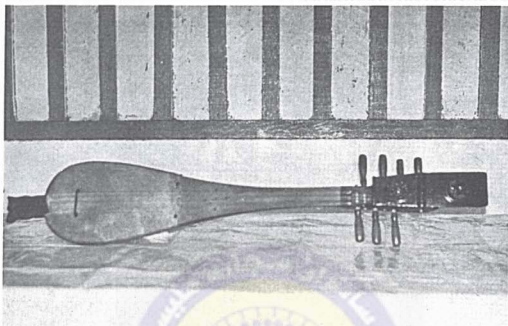


*A typical Ghazal Group in Johor Bahru today. This group is headed by En. Mokhtar bin Zam Zam and En. Mohamed Noor bin Mohd. Said, of Kampong Bahru.*

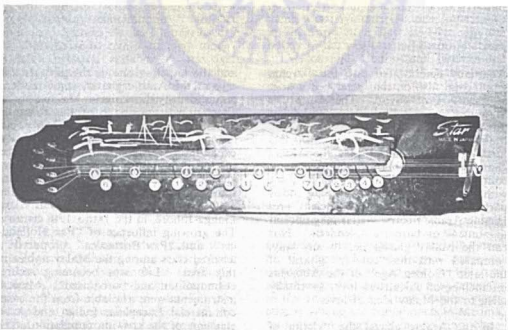
eventually deteriorated into the extreme sentimental fashion that produced a host of "martyrs of love". The stories of Majnun and Laila are well-known throughout the Middle East and the Malay Muslim world. It is with this form of Arabic ghazal that the Malay ghazal may plausibly be compared and contrasted in sentiment and spirit — not with the pre-Islamic ghazal which forms part of the corpus of the ancient pre-Islamic Arabic poetry — that magnificent monument of barbaric splendour. Nor can the Malay ghazal be, in any way, compared with the "courtly" ghazal of the later "Golden Age" of the Abbasids on themes of chivalrous love, so totally alien to the Malay idea of love.

In the Arabic ghazal the "victim of love" was the male lover. This is to be contrasted with the "victim" in the Malay ghazal: the despised, the abandoned,

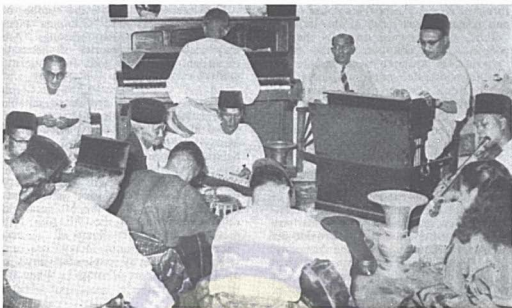
and the hopeless one, is the girl. In the case of the Arabic ghazal, some modern critics identify this Laila — Majnun poetic aberration as symbolic of the romantic nostalgia of the detribalised urban population of the new Arab cities in the expanding Arab Empire. It may not be too far-fetched to speculate that the Malay ghazal may have developed in circumstances not altogether dissimilar, at the petty "courts" of Malay nobles at Riau-Lingga-Johore, in the 18th – 19th century. The growing influence of "Pax Hollandica" and "Pax Britannica" produced a leisured class among the Malay nobles in this area. Life was becoming secure, cosmopolitan and "urbanised". Musical instruments were available from the commercial European, Indian and Arab elements of the growing population. The traditional Malay folksongs and pantuns were standardised and disciplined by the new 'orchestra'. Until quite recently, all



*Gambus.*



*Kechapi*



*A well known Ghazal group, led by Pak Lomak, taken in 1948 (Haji Musa bin Yusof – 'Pak Lomak' at the piano. Enche Mokhtar bin Zam Zam at the harmonium).*



*Tabla (drums)*

forms of music, except the sombre nobat and some curious relics of the tarikat's "dikir", were frowned upon by the old people. The adoption of the name "ghazal", an Arabic term, to denote this new form of salon music of Malay love songs would create an impression of respectability in the mind of the old people. (Even at present, Angkasapuri, not infrequently, play records of modern Arab love songs immediately after a solemn recital of the Koran, and this has not been considered inappropriate).

In my opinion the music and lyrics of the ghazal are essentially Malay in character. Foreign musical instruments have been adopted and adapted to provide the necessary accompaniment and harmony. In the Malay ghazal the dominant musical elements are melody and harmony, not rhythm. As has been indicated above, the Malay ghazal may have developed as a Malay musical expression in the course of the 19th century originating probably in the Riau-Lingga area reaching its present form in early Singapore-Johore. The varieties of folk-songs and the lyrical pantuns standardised by the ghazal clearly point to its "southern" origin. The pantuns some of which have become classic, refer to names of animals, birds, plants, and flowers which form parts of the Riau-Johore-Malacca heritage. Geographical names in the classic pantuns and names of the songs are mainly "southern".

A few examples will suffice:

- Pulau Pandan jauh ka-tengah  
 Gunung Daik berchabang tiga  
 Hanchor badan di-kandang tanah  
 Budi baik di-kenang juga.
- Pulau Tinggi Terendak China  
 Tampak dari Pasir Sibul  
 Tuan pergi jangan-lah lama  
 Tidak kuasa menanggong rindu.

Among the best known names of the ghazal songs are the following:—

- Laksamana Mati Di-Bunoh,  
 Seri Siantan, Kuala Deli, Sambas,  
 Embon Menitik, Timang Banjar,  
 Tudong Saji, Damak, Seri Serawak,  
 Gunung Panti, Putri Ledang  
 Seri Banang, Seri Mersing,  
 Siti Payong, Mas Merah.

It is interesting to note the number of "Kualas", "Hulus" and "Gunongs" mentioned in genuine Malay folksongs. Are they deep-rooted memories of the seats of ancient Hinduised gods and animistic spirits?

The cruel lack of precise or reliable information on important aspects of the social life of the ordinary people in the Malay histories is well-known. Even the Sejarah Melayu anecdotal as it is, tells us very little about education, amusements, and harmless pursuits of the ordinary people. What sort of musical amusements did they indulge in at the Malacca and other Malay courts in the 15th, 16th, 17th and 18th centuries? Some of the best pantuns in the Sejarah Melayu are said to have been sung by people (di-nyanyikan orang). What sort of songs? What are their names?

The Malay section of the Malayo-Indonesian world was the first to have been converted to Islam and to develop centres of continuous cosmopolitan life. Was this partly responsible for the lack of development in indigenous musical tradition as compared to the distinctive Javanese and Balinese musical tradition? There is a small element of "quarter-tone" in the best ghazal songs when sung by an experienced singer. There is a great deal of quarter-tone in Indonesian indigenous music. Is the ghazal quarter-tone an indication of a tendency to revert to indigenous type? or, is it a deliberate borrowing from the more sophisticated Indian or Arabic musical feature?

One of the reasons for the slow development of Malay music was perhaps the lack of sophisticated instruments once the indigenous instruments were abandoned, and the Indian string and woodwind dedicated to the royal nobat. Another was the absence of suitable patronage. In the course of the 18th and 19th centuries conditions of life were changing rapidly. Centres of security and leisure and a new class of Malay noblemen came into being. Perhaps by the early 19th century at Riau or Singapore there was a sufficiently organised musically minded Malays under the patronage of some nobles who were able to

form musical parties. Perhaps the Malay followers of the Temenggong centred at Telok Belanga with their leisure and contact with Indians and Arabs, in an atmosphere of a more tolerant society, were able to develop and organise the ghazal in their present form. They were a new generation of Malays born out of the context of the traditional Malay society. The instinct to collect, preserve and value the Malay folk melodies with the classical Malay pantuns as lyrics may have been symbolic of their condition as "urbanised", di-kampongsed, Malays nostalgically yearning for the lost glory of the good old days. It may be noted in passing that the pantuns in the ghazal are not always amatory: the element of panegyric is sometimes more prominent than the love element which tends to indicate that the Malay ghazal was developed or founded at "Court" under noble patronage.

In 1866 the "court" of Temenggong Abu Bakar moved from Telok Belanga to Johore Bahru and the work of organising modern Johore began in earnest — carried out by devoted and dedicated chiefs and followers of the Temenggong. This period of modern Johore covered by the reign of the Temenggong — later, Maharaja and finally Sultan Abu Bakar — was the most originally creative period in the history of modern Malaya. It produced men of talent and ability in almost every sphere of civilized activities, in the process of the state-building. Even some close relatives of Abu Bakar — members of the Royal Family — were men of extraordinary character, quite different from the common run of Malay princes. There was no question of democracy or social justice involved. But there was a nice balance of loyalty and respect on the part of the ra'ayat on the one hand, and a sense of direct moral responsibility and even a sense of *noblesse oblige* present in the top stratum of the ruling class on the other. I think it was during this creative period in the development of modern Johore that the Malay ghazal assumed its final form. The small group of men, royal nobles, chiefs and dedicated commoners were free from the effect of that stifling atmosphere prevailing at the traditional Malay "court". They were

free to indulge in legitimate and harmless pursuits outside their official activities.

It is interesting to recall that one of the major architects of modern Johore was the Dato Bentara Luar (Mohamed Salleh bin Perang). He was a man of great versatility. Among his "hobbies" was music of all sorts (including Chinese music). He brought Malay music, including the ghazal, to the areas in Johore which he was commanded to "open up": Muar, Batu Pahat, and Endau. Most members of his family and some members of the other families of the old Datos in Johore, have retained an interest in music especially the ghazal. His grandson, the late Col. Musa of the old Johore Military Forces was one of the finest exponents of the ghazal.

The ghazal music is essentially Malay in spirit and form, despite some traces of foreign influence, mainly Indian, not Arabic. Some of the basic instruments are Indian — the tabla and the harmonium. The ghazal is not meant to be performed in the open like the ronggeng. It is not intended for mass enjoyment. The ideal condition should be a small select group of listeners with a noble patron present, to ensure discipline and a good standard of performance.

I once attended a ghazal performance in Johore Bahru, before the Second World War. The conditions were ideal: the "patron" was a close relative of the Sultan, middle-aged, not undistinguished in appearance and disposition, dignified and discreet. It was a small party; the musicians were seasoned, the singers, two men and two young women, were all well-known in the ghazal circle. The venue was a somewhat isolated house built on stakes at the old Stulang Laut seaside, Johore Bahru. The night was clear and some of us young men preferred to remain outside in the moonlight where the music and songs sounded more distantly romantic! The noble patron had known my father and grandfather, and later in the evening, asked me to sit inside near him. The singing went on till past midnight. The vocal rendering by the girls of the standard repertoire of the ghazal songs was superb. The pantuns

were mainly of the classical type but there were some which I had not heard and which were elliptical in the extreme. The girl-singers sang of their love, their sufferings, of their lovers' heart-less neglect of them mingled with complaints of their separations. Sometimes the songs and pantuns were lively and gay, and one of the girl-singers had a wonderful control of her voice. In some difficult turns of a famous song, her voice sustained its pure haunting melody, devoid of words, for some good while, then, all of a sudden, she began to frolic and her voice merged with the quick rises and falls of the harmonium's accompaniment. The male singers' replies to the appeals and complaints of love were always dignified, playfully tantalizing, and non-committal — never vulgar. The game was quite simple. The girls were really making love to the noble patron present — a person quite beyond their hope. The male singers really replied, in their pantuns, on behalf of the "noble lover". As the night wore on, the girls' singing became more languid, and their love more appealing, and their desperate state of hopelessness appeared to me almost real. Like good artistes, they tended to lose themselves in their roles. I noticed that the noble Tengku was paying more and more attention to Sa'edah — that was the name of the star-singer. She appeared to me almost genuine in her desperate love as she sang pantun after pantun, perfectly fitted to the music of some of the most famous ghazal songs. She had an endless stock of pantuns and she was an excellent singer. At times, her singing and pantuns were greatly daring, and then, she would be less "presuming" or more obscure in her allusions to her noble "lover".

Alas! Mahmood, the senior male singer, signalled the end of the session as

someone respectfully mumbled "Suboh!" (the dawn!) His last song was "Kuala Deli" and his last pantun, after the conventional opening one, ran thus:—

Anak enggang terbang ka-hulu  
Mati di-tembak anak Perenggi  
Nyawa abang tinggal dahulu  
Ada omor berjumpa lagi.

Poor Sa'edah was the last singer. She had now been brought back to earth by the last two pantuns. She had recovered from her dream of love. There was nothing left for her but to invoke the ultimate privilege of a person of her humble status. She sang her last song in deliberate, slow, tempo and it seemed the instruments were sharing her innermost agony. She deliberately skipped the conventional opening pantun of "Kuala Deli" (Tempat jatuh lagi di-kenang. Inikan pulak tempat bermain.) She sang slowly, sustaining her tones of heart-rending humility. The last lines of her last pantun were:—

Tuan Umpama pohon yang rendang  
Tiada-lah lain tempat bernaung.

Then she stopped suddenly with the sudden dying fall of the tabla.

The noble Tengku sat up erect in his chair, and there was such an expression of tender kindness on his face as was rarely seen among his forebears.

As I sat writing these last few lines, recollecting my emotions in tranquility, I thought of some Arab princes of the olden days. An Umayyad prince (except perhaps Umar bin Abdul Aziz) would have exclaimed on such an occasion: "Let us be loved like this or in silence!"





*A Ghazal group from Johore playing in Kuala Lumpur during the recent Cultural Congress, August 1971.  
(Photo: Utusan Melayu)*