

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/3

Ghazals 1-59 and Other Poems

By Sheila E. Murphy and Michelle Greenblatt

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Review by Judy Katz-Levine

In this astonishing collaboration by the living poet Sheila E. Murphy and the deceased poet Michelle Greenblatt who suffered from fibromyalgia, a disease which did not keep her from writing with great passion, the formal structure of the ghazal, a signature of Sufi poets such as Rumi, is reinvented and brought to a contemporary American understanding.

The ghazal form was as structured as a sonnet, and was often written during the 13th to 16th centuries in the Timurid empire by Sufi mystics. Traditionally, it is known to be composed of couplets between 12 and 15 lines. Murphy and Greenblatt create an alternative form of fifteen couplets per ghazal. While the first two lines of a traditional ghazal end in the same word, every other subsequent line ending in the same word as well, Murphy and Greenblatt play on repetition by taking turns in writing inventive couplets, and therein lies their interplay of form and repetition. The similarity between the Sufi ghazals of poets such as Rumi, Hafiz and Navoiy and these experimental longer explorative ghazals by Sheila Murphy and Michelle Greenblatt is one of passion. While the ghazals of Navoiy for example focus on the depth of love for the beloved even when scorned, elevating that to a metaphor for the divine, Murphy and Greenblatt translate that love into a passion for language, the surprise turns of language and image, the light of cognitive play. While Rumi for example would be closer to Lorca in feeling, the cognitive light given to these seamlessly woven couplets of Murphy and Greenblatt do more often reflect the passion of Shakespeare for cognitive delight in the movement of human insight. One also thinks of contemporary avant garde classical music, such as the works of John Cage in "Ocean Of Sound" or the composition of Morton Subotnick, "Silver Apples Of The Moon".

Here is an example of the astonishing delight and surprise turns of image and thought manifested in Ghazals 1-59:

This quote is from Ghazal Seventeen:

*"Look for the wind to gather you from port to prominence;
Landscape's a deception so keep your camera ready.*

*The handwriting still runs across the page as if
Electric shock were prompting lines from the beyond.*

*Staccato overtime remainders figs and salt
Scattered on the late the waves of song rise and fall."*

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The sheer inventiveness in language manifested in these 59 ghazals is highly unusual in contemporary poetry, despite our love for non-rhymed forms and discursive narratives. Murphy and Greenblatt love the element of surprise especially in image, and the musicality of both poets is so matched one to another that the true love and passion must be, here, the working together of these two poets, their intense connection, as they devoted themselves to this major project of creative leaps. Here is another couplet which explores existence in contemporary America and illustrates the highly musical lines and imagistic surprises of this collaboration:

Here is an excerpt from Ghazal Thirty-Six

*"I owned a mountain full of stony slopes
And descended to exhume its dark past.*

*Labor exponentially prepares love
For the stains of eyelight squared upon roses.*

*Your code was more elegant than your word,
More picturesque than ample and not true.*

*Scented branches are the first clue of brushfire
Raging through the vicissitude of woods."*

Themes of nature are woven with theme of connection with other humans, and human activities, and there is only an occasional reference to the problem of violence in contemporary life. References to Greenblatt's experiences with synesthesia are somewhat rare but are manifested in the sensuality of surprise evident throughout this collection with its multilayered reliance on sight, hearing, taste, touch, human emotion and intuition.

This is from ghazal Fifty:

*"Simpler than blue, more resonant than all within the human
Is a color of inexpressible beauty, of mankind.*

*Buried in my chest, a weight that humbles
Crafts unmeasured space, still lingering.*

*Premises vanilla as no foreseeable infection leans
Towards chocolate being a flavor which many people love,*

*Under the cropped sun, the horizon sinks
Into syllables parallel to sky."*

Sheila Murphy and Michelle Greenblatt can be seen as explorers to a new continent of poetic form, and inventors supreme of language that pushes the boundaries of our senses and cognitive lights. This book, a work of great dedication, which was completed despite the illness of Greenblatt and her battle with pain and death, is a monument to creative invention in its pure form. It gives us the ghazal in a reincarnated state that is an available leap for all who love poetry, ancient and contemporary and explorative.