

Generic Innovation In Sayfī Buhārāī's *Shahrāshūb ghazals*

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The *shahrāshūb* or *shahrangīz* (city-disturber), one of the many sub-genres of the love lyric in the classical Persianate literary tradition but one that has not been privileged as others, came into prominence in the late Timurid period and remained popular for the next two centuries. The study of this genre, since it was not composed in one fixed form but written in the *ķit'ah*, *rubā'ī*, *ghazal* and *mathnawī* forms at various times in its history, is an enlightening case study of the organic and often intricately intertwined history of the development of genres and fixed forms in the Persian tradition. Written exclusively in the *rubā'ī* or *ķit'a* forms in its early history by Samanid, Ghaznavid and Seljuq poets such as Rūdakī, Labībī, Mas'ūd Sa'd Salmān and Mahsatī, the *shahrāshūb* manifested itself in the *ghazal* form in the works of the Timurid poet, Sayfī of Bukharā (d. ca. 1504 C.E.). The author of the only extant *shahrāshūb* poems written as *ghazals*, Sayfī was associated with the court of Sultān Husayn Baykara in 15th-century Herat. His unpublished *dīwān* entitled, *Şanā'i al-badā'i* (The Arts of Innovations), is a cycle of 124 unconnected *ghazals* on *shahrāshūb* themes, each poem composed of five *bayts*, with a *takhallus* and devoid of any dedications.¹ For this achievement, the poet was hailed as an innovator by his contemporary, the litterateur Mīr 'Alī Shīr Nawā'ī, in his biographical dictionary, "Mawlānā [Sayfī] has written fine poems about the youths of the city, and for the form (*tarz*) and manner (*tawr*) in which he composed subtle verses (*laṭā'iṣ*) he is an innovator (*mukhtari*)."² What did it mean to be an innovative or original poet at this time? Obviously, the fact that Sayfī's work is the only *shahrāshūb* in the *ghazal* form in Persian literature is an original literary feat, but how did such a work come to be written? In order to explore the generic and historic implications of why Sayfī, a Timurid poet writing at a specific time in history, chose the *ghazal* to write *shahrāshūb* verses when there was no precedent for this, one must situate both the form and genre in the particular stages of the course of their development during Sayfī's time.³

¹ There is a complete manuscript of this work in the Kitābkhānah-i Markazī, Tehran (MS no. 4585). The text is being edited by the present writer. For manuscripts in Russia and Central Asia, see Mirzoev 1977. Mirzoev's article is also a useful survey of this poet's works; also see Gulčin-Ma'ānī 1967: 26-28.

² Nawā'ī 1985: 231.

³ In Mirzoev 1977: 285, there is mention of a poet of the early fifteenth century, Kotibī Nishopurī, who has two *shahrāshūb* *ghazals* in his (unpublished) *dīvān*. However, he cannot be considered a precedent for Sayfī since the latter's work is larger and more cohesive. It is certainly likely that poets had begun to write the occasional *shahrāshūb* in the *ghazal* form.

The critical study of the problematic history and definition of the *shahrangīz* or *shahrāshūb* begins with the pronouncement of E.J.W. Gibb in his monumental history of Ottoman literature, that the *shahrangīz* genre of poetry was the invention of the Ottoman poet Mesīhī who wrote such a poem describing the youths of Edirne in 1510 C.E. Gibb asserts that “both subject and treatment are his [Mesīhī’s] own conception, he had no Persian model, for there is no similar poem in Persian literature.”⁴ In actuality, this type of poetry was already in existence in the Persian tradition for some centuries before that, and Persian and Ottoman poets of the sixteenth century who wrote *shahrangīzes* were only canonizing what had perhaps long been a literary diversion for Persian poets. The multiplicity of terms in use for this genre during its long history pose as many problems for its history as the texts of the poems themselves. Now exclusively referred to as *shahrāshūb* in Persian, it is best defined by De Bruijn: “[It is] based on the representation of the beloved as a youthful artisan or member of another social group having such marked features as to allow a poet to make fanciful allusions to this quality.”⁵ Gibb observed about these poems that “it is very rare indeed that they contain anything in any way personal or individual ... Though humorous, these verses are always complimentary in tone; the boys are always spoken of in flattering terms. The humour again is never coarse ...”⁶ The last point is not true for at least one poet of the 11th century, the shadowy Mahsatī, whose obscene *shahrāshūb* poems won her a reputation as an immoral *bāzārī* woman.⁷ Several of her poems have a limerick-like quality, as this *rubā’ī* about a butcher:

ān dilbar-i қaṣṣāb dukān mīrāst
istādah budand mardumān az chap u rāst
dastī bi-kafal bar zad u khūsh mīguft
aḥsant, zahī dunbah-i farbah kih marāst

The ravishing butcher’s shop was well-stocked,
people gathered all around.
He slapped a rump and said sweetly,
“Wow! What a fat piece of meat I have!”

After its bawdy emergence at the hand of this female poet, in an irony of gender poetics, the *shahrāshūb* lost its pithy quality and became sanitized in the hands of male court poets. Another early proponent of this genre was the Ghaznavid poet Mas‘ūd Sa‘d Salmān (d. 1021 C.E.), who addresses a butcher as well but in a much gentler tone in this *kiṭ‘a*:

ālat-i kushtan dārī ṣanamā ghamzah wu kārd
zīn dū nākuṣhtah zi dastat narahad dījānwārī

⁴ Gibb 1965: II.232. For a survey of the various theories about the origins of the *shahrāshūb*, see Mahdjūb 1967: 677-699; Shamīsā 1995: 228-230; ‘Abdullāh 1965: 200-275.

⁵ De Bruijn 1983: 7.

⁶ Gibb 1965: II.235.

⁷ Gulcīn Ma‘ānī 1967: 15-17; also see Meier 1963.

*tū marā đjānī u chūn bā tū buwam đjānwari
 zindah gardam kih zi dīdār-i tū yābam naṣarī
 mītarsam kih marā rūzī bikushī tū azānkhī
 đjānwar kushtan naṣd-i tū nadārad khaṭari⁸*

Coquetry and knife - these are the tools of your trade, my beauty-no living creature escapes alive from the two.
 You are life to me [but] for you I am an animal,
 I come to life when I catch a glance of you.
 I fear that one day you will slaughter me
 for you have no qualms about killing living creatures.

Mas‘ūd Sa‘d’s work is a collection of ninety four of such vignettes on different features of the beloved, spanning the entire spectrum of possible youths to be found in a typical city of the time.

The tradition of writing such verses on craftsmen in the *rubā‘ī* form goes back at least to the Samanid poet Rūdakī, but Mas‘ūd Sa‘d Salmān was the first to write a sizable number of *shahrāshūb* poems which have come down to us. From about this time until its reemergence in the form of the *ghazal* with Sayfī, the history of its development is obscure and there are no major extant examples of this genre. But the fact is that from its earliest manifestation, the *shahrāshūb* shares some features with the lyrical *ghazal*. The compound word, *shahrāshūb*, is found in early *ghazals* as one of many epithets of the beloved. The portrayal of the beloved in the *shahrāshūb* explicitly as a boy is a distinct feature of the early Persian *ghazal*, and specifically the character of the rowdy and dishevelled boy is to be found in the *ghazals* of Sanā‘ī, ‘Aṭṭār and Hāfiẓ.

The *ghazal* in its chequered history as, to use Julie S. Meisami’s description, “both highly conventional and highly flexible,”⁹ had lent itself easily to poems that were written in all kinds of modes: elegiac, panegyric, *habsīyyāt*, etc. Its evolution is explained by Frank Lewis in the following:

[B]eginning with the formal characteristics of including one’s signature, or *taxallos*, in shorter poems on a variety of themes, such as those found in the *Dīvān* of Sanā‘ī, poets separate out the various *topoi*—the mystical, the religious, the amatory—and develop them in different directions, until finally ... these disparate strains began to harmonize once again. By this time the evolution has come full-circle: *gazal* has lost its original meaning—an amatory, as opposed to a panegyrical (*madh*) mode or theme—and is now considered a fixed form of its own that can treat of a range of themes in various modes. Certainly by the Timurid and Safavid periods, if not during the Mongol period and even earlier, the *ghazal* is recognized as a genre of its own, with a pre-determined limit as to length, but little restriction as to theme¹⁰

As the privileged form in the post-Mongol period, it was used to ingenious and innovative ends by many a poet, such as the two fifteenth century Timurid poets,

⁸ Mas‘ūd Sa‘d Salmān 1985: 933.

⁹ Meisami 1987: 241.

¹⁰ Lewis 1995: 106-107.

Abū Ishāk (Bushāq) ‘Afīmah and Nizām al-Dīn Maḥmūd Kārī, known as the “food poet” and the “clothes poet” respectively, who had produced *dīwāns* that were entirely on the subject of food and clothes.¹¹ For these poets, including Sayfī, the production of such *dīwāns* was a response to both the aesthetic exigencies of their time and the literary traditions they inherited.¹² Despite the fact that Timurid poets were extending and reformulating the parameters of form and genre, the study of the *ghazal* of this period has not received much attention. According to Paul Losensky, “while most scholars recognize that the *ghazal* was ‘by far the most popular poetic genre’ of the period, we seldom find examples of this genre quoted or analyzed, and discussions of later Timurid poetics focus largely on rhetorically complex instances of the *kaṣīdah* and *masnavī*.¹³ Too often viewed merely as the precursor of the stylized and metaphoric *sabk-i Hindī ghazal*, the poetry written in the later Timurid age is dismissed as a hollow reflection of the artistic sumptuousness that marked the courtly culture of this time.

Returning to the familiar figure of the butcher, this time in Sayfī’s poem, will illustrate how the genre of *shahrāshūb* and the *ghazal* form came together neatly without violating the conventions of either tradition:

tā parīrukhsārah-i қaşşāb rā dīwānah am
 bā rakībānast dā’im djang-i қaşşābānah am
 sarw-i sīmandām-i man tā bar miyān zandjīr bast
 hast azān zandjīr kūllāb-i balā har dānah am
 tā shawad rawshan kih man az kushtanīhā-yi tū am
 dāgh kun az dast-i khūnālūd-i khūd bar shānah am
 dast u pāyam chust band u bar gulūyam kārd māl
 sar djudā sāz az tan u andāz dar vīrānah am
 gar birānad bandah-yi **Sayfī** rā az dar hamchūn sagān
 kay rawam az āstān-i ū sag-i in khānah am

As long as I am crazy for the beautiful butcher
 I am in a constant bloody battle with my rivals.

The chain that my beloved tied around my waist
 has become hooks of torture for every atom of my body.
 Since it is clear that I am one of your victims for slaughter,
 brand my shoulder with your own bloody hands.
 Bind my hands and feet tightly, press the knife to my throat,
 sever my head from my body, and toss me into the wilderness.
 Even though he drives his slave **Sayfī** away from his door like a dog,
 how can I leave his threshold? I am the dog of this house.

¹¹ Browne 1951: III.344-353.

¹² For the aesthetics of this period, see Subtelny 1986: 56-79. Subtelny discusses the importance of the quality of *takalluf* (affectation) which could be achieved externally through the use of difficult metres, rhymes or words, or internally by means of unusual images, comparisons and other rhetorical devices. Also see Yarshater 1986: 965-94. Sayfī’s interest in outward forms is attested by the fact that he wrote treatises on ‘*arūd* (meter) and the *mu’ammā* (riddle) form.

¹³ Losensky 1998: 142-143; 135 for a survey of such attitudes.

This poem, striking in its sado-masochistic images, is both a *ghazal* and a *shahrāshūb*. It is faithful to all the conventions of the *ghazal* that were established by this time, and it is a *shahrāshūb* because of its theme and the fact that we are reading the work with certain generic expectations. As in the *ghazal*, the beloved here is represented as inattentive and downright cruel towards the poet, who in turn is the archetypal suffering lover. The experience of love has allowed the poet to internalize his beloved's actions – as he fights bloody battles with his rivals – and at times even transforms him into the very object that is his beloved's professional tool, as with the *sāzandah* (musician) who is a much gentler object of love than the butcher:

*tār-i tanbūr-i khūd az rishtah-yi djānam sāzad
tā bi-miḍrāb-i djafā sāzadash az ham kandah*

He makes strings for his lute from my soul's sinews,
to torture me by strumming them with a pick.

One significant feature of these poems is that the unity of the *ghazal*, a much-debated topic of scholarly discussion, is preserved here.¹⁴ In this respect, this type of *ghazal* with a short narrative and straightforward language devoid for the most part of elaborate rhetorical devices, anticipates another sub-genre of the love-lyric, the *maktab-i wukū'* (realistic school) that became popular with the *sabk-i Hindī* poets.¹⁵ Another noteworthy aspect of Sayfi's *ghazals* is that he masterfully manipulates the *takhallus* in the *ghazal* to transform the topical and beloved-centred *shahrāshūb* poem (for which the *rubā'ī* and *kit'ā* were most suitable), to a more subjective and poet-centered narrative. In the *makṭā'* he often separates his lover and poet personas by distancing Sayfi the lover from Sayfi the poet in order to boast about the merits of his work, as in this *makṭā'* from a *ghazal* about a *sharbat-dār*:

*tā chū Sayfi wasf-i khūbān-i shikarlab mīkunam
harkih khāhad lidhdhatī mīkhānād az ash'ār-i man*

As long as I describe, like **Sayfi**, the sweet-lipped beauties,
anyone seeking pleasure will read my poems.

Each *ghazal* explores the multiple and variegated aspects of the dalliance of lover and beloved, with the lover remaining constant with respect to his emotional and physical state as the beloved changes his external form. As each successive boy spurns the lover, the *sawdā'* (transaction) of the marketplace embodied in the *shahrāshūb* genre is metaphorized into the *sawdā'* (passion) of love of the *ghazal*. Beyond playing with the single aspect of the beloved's identity, there are no other

¹⁴ Mirzoev has noted this feature of the *ghazal* during this period in the works of Binā'ī, Djāmī, Nawā'ī and Sayfi, as discussed by Rypka 1968: 282. For unity in the *ghazal*, see Lewis 1995: 14-36.

¹⁵ Shamīsā 1990: 159-162.

distinguishing characteristics among the 124 boys. In Sayfi's work, as in the poems of his predecessors, there are an equal number of boys whose description is based on a physical characteristic (e.g., curly-haired beloved, the beloved who is hard of hearing, the beloved on the street) as on a trade,¹⁶ and at times he ingeniously includes an unusual case, such as the *yār-i zindānī*:

*nīst yārī tā bi-zindān pīsh-i dījānānam barad
mīkhuram may tā 'asas gīrad u bi-zindān barad*

There is no love until I am with my beloved in prison,
I drink wine so the policeman can haul me off to prison.

In other instances, there is only a boy with a name, such as 'Abdullāh, Ḥasan 'Alī, *pīsar-i Shāh* Ḥusayn, or a collective group, as the unnamed *sih barādar* (three brothers). Thus, the range is wider than merely the craftsmen of the *bāzār* and covers the entire social scene of the day, as is the case with Mas'ūd Sa'd's poems of this genre.

If we decontextualize Sayfi's poems from the history of the *ghazal*, their primary importance is as a catalogue of different tradesmen in a typical Timurid city. For this reason, historians have mined them for information on the various trades and professions found in the *bāzārs* of pre-modern cities at different points in time, although such a utilitarian function of poetry is only viable if there is a proper understanding of its appropriate literary and historical context. Eastern European literary critics of Persian literature like Rypka and Becka have perceived Sayfi as a spokesperson for the poor classes and the *shahrāshūb* as espousing a working-class ethic and social consciousness.¹⁷ Although the phenomenon of the practice of poetry spreading to every strata of society in the Timurid period is attested to by biographical dictionaries and histories,¹⁸ it is worth keeping in mind that the courtly poet's interaction with his Others, who may be members of lower classes or minority groups, in the *shahrāshūb* is more in the realm of metaphor and is not meant to mirror any social realities or comment upon them. Although Sayfi was influenced by the multifariousness of his society and thus documents the existence of unusual trades and words that are not used in Persian anymore, but which would have been familiar to his audience, his poems have more to do with the world of the *ghazal* than the real one.

Why was the *ghazal* not used after Sayfi to write *shahrāshūbs*? With Safavid and Mughal poets, the *shahrāshūb* increasingly became merely one topos of many in the structurally complex poems that fall into the larger category of building verse, composed to eulogize rulers for their extensive construction projects in

¹⁶ In this respect, Sayfi's work is closer to the earlier *shahrāshūbs*, and different from the later ones where the boys are exclusively youths engaged in trades.

¹⁷ Rypka 1968: 282, 508. Mirzoev 1977, however, emphasizes the technical mastery of Sayfi over his social consciousness, 287.

¹⁸ Losensky 1998: 137-145.

Safavid Iran and Mughal India. *Shahrāshūbs* became elaborate poems, written in the *mathnawī* form, with the prerequisite multiple sections such as *du‘ā*, *madh* for a sultan, description of the wonders of the capital city, enhanced by a catalogue of tradesmen.¹⁹ By including this section in his panegyric, the poet indirectly comments on the flourishing markets and bustling streets of the ruler’s cities, and begins to call the modest *shahrāshūb* (city-disturber) by grander names such as *falakāshūb* (heaven-disturber) and *jahānāshūb* (world-disturber). From the inner and private world of the lover and beloved in the *ghazal*, the *shahrāshūb* moved into the public realm for which the *mathnawī* form was more suitable.

In summing up, we return to the question, why did Sayfi choose to write his poems in the *ghazal* form when his precedents had been *shahrashūbs* in the *kit‘a* and *rubā‘i* forms? In addition to the fact that the *ghazal* was the most adaptable form for expressing the various modes of love, whether mystical or courtly or other, its homoerotic ambiance with defined roles for the lover and beloved made it particularly attractive for the *shahrāshūb* at this time. Since this genre had not yet developed into an explicitly panegyric poem that praised a ruler and his capital by describing its beautiful youths, the *ghazal* with the ambiguities of its language, was well-suited for Sayfi’s purposes. Not the least, Sayfi chose the *ghazal* because it allowed him to exploit the functions of the *takhallus*.

Maria Eva Subtelny makes the following comment about the poetics of this period in comparison with that of the *sabk-i hindī*, which followed this age:

The same intricacy that was to mark the former [*sabk-i Hindī*] on the internal, metaphorical level, with associations connected with old images rebounding off each other and creating, in turn, new and unexpected images, characterized the latter [Timurid poetry] on the external or formal level.²⁰

It follows then, that Sayfi was an innovator only on an external or formal level. However, the criteria for what is considered original or innovative in poetry are never universal nor constant, and it would be self-defeating to reduce the achievements of a whole age or even an individual poet to binary opposites of internal and external. The *sabk-i hindī* poets were often equally interested in experimenting at the formal or external level as their Timurid predecessors;²¹ likewise, Timurid poets were not unconscious of the idea of innovation in terms of

¹⁹ Some better-known of Sayfi’s successors in the Persian tradition are Lisānī Şirāzī who panegyricized the Tabriz of Şhāh Tahmāsp (r. 1524-1576) in his *Madjma‘ al-aṣnāf* (The Assembly of Crafts), Wahidī Ķazwīnī’s *shahrāshūb* in *mathnawī* form dedicated to Şhāh Sulaymān Şafī (r. 1666-1694) that describes İsfahān as well as the craftsmen of its bazars, and Kalim Kāshānī’s panegyric *mathnawī* on the Mughal city of Akbarābād written for the emperor Şhāh Dījāhān (r. 1628-1656), that has *shahrāshūb* verses specific to an Indian context. For the *sehrengīz* in Ottoman literature, see Stewart-Robinson 1990: 201-11; the *shahrāshob* in Urdu literature became exclusively a poem of the decline of cities, see Petievich 1990: 99-110.

²⁰ Subtelny 1986: 79.

²¹ Schimmel 1973: 28, *passim*.

style and imagery. We should not be restricted to binary oppositions in our ideas of what originality or innovation signified; W. Jackson Bate's explanation of the concept of "originality" in eighteenth-century English literature is particularly useful in our case:

[Originality] was an "open" term, capable of suggesting not only creativity, invention, or mere priority but also essentialism (getting back to the fundamental), vigor, purity, and above all freedom of the spirit. As such it transcended most of the particular qualities that could be latched on to it, qualities that, if taken singly as exclusive ends, could so easily conflict with each other ... Add to this the social appeal of the concept of "originality": its association with the individual's "identity" (a word that was now increasing in connotative importance) as contrasted with the more repressive and dehumanizing aspects of organized life.²²

In Sayfi's case, I would argue that the act of choosing a poetic form that was not previously used is itself an innovative step. A literary age does not arbitrarily force its aesthetic criteria on an individual poet; the poet has equal agency in the choice of form and what to do with it. It is not a mere coincidence that Sayfi wanted to write a *shahrashub* and the *ghazal* happened to be the privileged form of the day; multiple factors in the history of literary tastes, genres and forms coalesced to produce the conditions for the *Sanā'i al-badā'i* to be composed. In addition to Nawā'i's comment on Sayfi's work, we are fortunate enough to have a *kit'ā* by Sayfi himself that is quoted in the *Bāburnāmah*:

mathnawī garchih sunnat-i shu'arāst
man ghazal fard-i 'ayn mīdānam
pandj baytī kih dilpadhīr buvad
bihtar az khamsatayn mīdānam

Although *mathnawī* is the stock in trade of poets,
 I consider the *ghazal* obligatory upon myself.
 If there are five lines that are pleasing,
 They are better than the two *Khamsas*.²³

This is a testament to an individual poet's personal choice in choosing to write in the *ghazal* form when the *mathnawī* form was becoming popular and would be used by poets for writing *shahrashubs*. It also affirms the view of the *ghazal* as an enduring, popular and flexible poetic form and genre of Persian lyric poetry.

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²² Bate 1970: 104.

²³ Babur 1993: 374-375.

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