Ghazal Original

Kiran Ahluwalia's own contemporary Canadian spin on the Indian art of the ghazal makes her truly unique, reckons Ken Hunt.

Listening to Kiran Ahluwalia's debut *Kashish* (Attraction) made it clear that she was distinctive, yet the assurance that she has developed since 2000 is astonishing. Nothing prepared listeners for the paradigm shift for Indo-Pakistani diaspora music that she lauched with *Beyond Boundaries* in 2003, however. That was when she broke through into the wide blue yonder. She is already demonstrating that she has the potential to become one of the great ambassadors of Indo-Pakistani diaspora music, not from Canada, from anywhere. Plus, if somebody gets judged by the company that they keep, then her choice of collaborators in the sarangi maestro Ramesh Misra and the Cape Breton Island fiddler Natalie MacMaster on her latest CD *Kiran Ahluwalia* (Triloka) speaks volumes for her future as well as her good taste. She has already gone beyond 'unusual' and 'distinctive'. She is unique in the proper sense of the word.

Unlike with the waves of immigration that arrived in Canada as a consequence of the fall-out from the Vietnam War or the toppling of the Shah of Persia (especially on the West Coast around Vancouver, BC, with its Vietnamese musicians such as Khac Chi or the city's Ryan label releasing material by the Iranian classical vocalist, maestro M R Sharjarian), I knew next to nothing about the socio-historic background to Indo-Pakistani immigration to Canada. One of the first things that intrigued me about Kiran Ahluwalia was the fact that she was part of a subcontinental, specifically Punjabi diaspora. "I think in most countries when you look at emigration," she offers, "it comes in waves. The very first Indian emigrants to Canada in the 1800s were labourers building the railways. Then came a wave of farmers – not just Indian, but from everywhere. Next there were more labourers. In the '70s the wave was another block of people who wanted greener pastures economically. My parents were part of this wave. They came to Canada to have a better standard of living, to have more freedom economically. Now, it's a different wave."

Kashish's press release based her in Ontario province. Now, when discussing the Punjabi diaspora in musical impact terms, bhangra has generally hogged the headlines and limelight. Kiran Ahluwalia was different. She roots her art in a different *terroir*, so to speak. Hers concentrates on *ghazal* and Punjabi folksongs, the former informed by having undergone the rigours of classical training with Padma Talkwalkar in Mumbai and ghazal studies with Vithal Rao in Hyderabad.

Kiran Ahluwalia was born in Patna in Bihar, in July 1965 the only child of her Rawalpindi-born father Dr Jagjit Ahluwalia and her Lucknow-born mother Dolly, while her father was posted there. Whilst she was still a babe-in-arms the family moved to New Zealand where her father earned his PhD in microbiology. Five years later the Ahluwalias returned to India. In 1974 when she was nine the family moved again, this time to Canada. Before they moved she had already been introduced to a variety of music including light-classical, religious and popular Indian forms coupled with local listening experiences that included tapping into Maori fusion.

"There was no prejudice [against music] in our immediate or extended family. My parents both learned music as children and as teenagers and participated in music competitions in colleges in India. My father played tabla in his family. My mum sang – and played harmonium too, but it was mostly singing. Harmonium would have been to accompany herself. On my father's side they would have these huge musical gatherings where there'd definitely be a few instruments in the home. You know, a couple of harmoniums, a couple of tables. And somebody would play something. Music was very much a part of life on both sides of the family. They both had a love for ghazals. They would certainly explain what lyrics meant. But as a child I don't really remember analysing what they meant. I just remember listening to everything that they exposed me to. And whatever I understood, I understood. I don't really remember trying to make an intellectual connection with any sort of music; it was really an emotional connection with the mood that any sort of music, and especially ghazal, creates."

Ghazal germinated as an Arabic word. It can be rendered in English as 'to talk to women' and 'to talk of women'. As a poetic form, lexicographers and Arabic scholars suggest it has not been traced back before Islamic times. It has an aphoristic Zen koan-like quality that engages even in translation. It travelled, like so many things associated with Persian-Muslim culture, to the Indian subcontinent on the waves of Mughal conquest. Typically, ghazal is a sequence of rhyming couplets known as *ashaar* in the plural (*sher* in the singular). Each sher contains one self-contained idea or contemplation. Each sher is a self-standing, two-line poem. None of a ghazal's couplets need link with the next, a characteristic that builds bridges to allegory.

Ghazals often seem like emotions momentarily crossing or flickering across a face. The observant will suspect if the person is feigning, concealing or sending deeper or secret signals. For example, on *Beyond Boundaries*, Ahluwalia drops in couplets that even in translation suggest motivations masked, desires disguised and translucence reigning. On *Main Dhoondta Hoon* (Eternal Search) she sings, "The arrows that have pierced my heart have been discovered/ But the hands that pulled the string cannot be found." (If that sounds like a rumination on a theme by Rumi or Kahlil Gibran it is merely ladling from the same pot.) More obliquely on *Vo Kuch* (Passion) she remarks, "He has completely gripped my emotions/ As if taken hold of my thoughts." Who the 'he' or 'He' is, is open to interpretation. Ahluwalia appreciates ambiguity.

In the Mughal sphere of influence, ghazal became the pre-eminent literary form and poetic fountainhead. Its progress across the subcontinent was shepherded by its absorption into Sufi utterance; that connected with Hinduism's mystic and reforming movements like Hinduism's Bhakti reformation, Sikhism or the Baul faith. Meditations addressed to the beloved or talking about the unattainability of love are particularly important rhetorical devices. Ghazal's themes of love will present love in multi-levelled ways. Love may be presented as secular or spiritual, chaste or erotic, physical or sacred-profane. Specific names and particularities – events, dates and personalities – are generally taboo, not because they compromise ambiguity but the better to communicate a higher love or divinity. Not unnaturally, in a ghazal the beloved being addressed, frequently stands for God. Or in the case of Sufis – since they are in the scheme of all things Muslim after all, Islamic freethinkers and pantheists – the mystic's love for the *mursid* or guide.

"For me, my interpretations are quite secular, about carnal love, but Rasheed Nadeem, the very first poet with whom I composed who was Canadian, writes them in the Sufi mystic tradition, which is all about getting closer to God. So when he says how no matter how hard I get close to you, the distance between us remains vast, he's talking about God in *The Unsung Ghazal*, to give the English title of *Kina Nere*; the gist of the ghazal is that no matter how close I try to get to you, the distance between us remains vast. When I'm composing, and it's not to say that I'm not spiritual, for me my inspiration is love between human beings. For

me, that ghazal is about a man who's shy, who's not able to communicate those three famous words. He's not able to tell her how that's how he feels for her. Something holds him back. He's having such a hard time communicating with her and telling her how he feels about her. He's trying so hard in his mind, yet the distance between him and her is growing because he's just not able to blurt the words out."

On the variability of interpretation, she says, "In *Yeh Nahin* [*Wandering Dusty Paths*, on the album *Beyond Boundaries* and 2005's *Kiran Ahluwalia*], Rafi Raza is saying, 'It is not that I intended to come here, but this is where I ended up'. Once a poem is written it is open to many interpretations. There are different meanings. One possible meaning is that he is talking about his journey from his native Pakistan to his adopted homeland Canada. Of course, I'm much more of a romantic, so when I was composing the ghazal, for me I always imagine it in romantic terms about it being about someone who's had an argument with his loved one. It's not quite about being ready to say sorry, but unconsciously about wanting to be back together. The person is wandering the streets of the city but they end up at their lover's doorstep without a conscious intention of doing so. They go on to explain that they know their soul is dusty but they've travelled so long and they've tried so hard to shake the dust from their soul, so please look beyond the dust, please try to understand me. For me, that was my interpretation of the ghazal when I was composing it."

Ghazal has traditionally not only been a written or printed but also an art form, performed at symposia of poets known as *mushiara*. Unbeknownst to the family, Toronto was hosting them too. "After I released the first CD my parents found out what are called mushiara. You've probably heard the word *mehfil* which means 'musical gathering'. Mushiara means 'poetry recital by many poets', 'a gathering of poets'. They heard there was a mushiara happening in Toronto, so, of course, I wanted to go. We went and the first mushiara we went to was run by an organisation called Punjabi Kalma da Kafla. Translated, it means 'Caravan Of Punjabi Pens'. I thought, 'Leave it to writers to come up with a beautiful name for their organisation'. It was Punjabi-speaking poets from Pakistan and India. There were Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Sikhs. The Punjabi language and their love for it united them. There were about 40 poets. Some of them were really, really good."

It was a breakthrough of a far-reaching kind for her. "That's where I heard my first so-called Canadian ghazal or what I call Canadian ghazal, because these were South Asian Canadians, like myself. There was a person by the name of Rasheed Nadeem. He recited his poem *Kina Nere* there and I fell in love with it. I'd been taping on my Walkman. Over the next couple of weeks I was composing to it. Then I phoned him. It was a big adventure in itself to get his phone number. I explained who I was. He was really anxious to hear my composition. He didn't want to wait to meet me. He asked if I could just sing a bit over the phone. He was so excited and said he wanted to introduce me to more poets. From then on I became very good friends with him and began composing more of his work. And talking to him, conversing with him about what kind of works I was looking for. *Kina Nere* is on *Beyond Boundaries* and *Kiran Ahluwalia* too. Here I was, having done Indian music quite isolated, quite alone. I listened to it in an isolated kind of way, not with my other friends – who weren't Indian, at that time. It was a thing I did alone. I was really, really excited to make this discovery. I didn't have to plough through published books from India or Pakistan. I could get first-hand primary material and I get first dibs on it as well! It was a great discovery! Since then, as I toured Canada I would always publicise at my concerts that I'm continually looking for poets. Now I go to mushiaras in Toronto but I also get many poets phoning me and sending me their work unsolicited, because now they know who I am."

We discussed many other issues to do with ghazal's flexibility, even touching on its political dimension epitomised by the work of the Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911-1984), but when asked if there was a point that she wanted to make, she had one in mind. "One thing I've learned to clarify," she wraps up, "is that many times I'll have an interview and I'll see the interview in print and the headline will be like 'Kiran Ahluwalia does traditional music' or 'Modern woman doing traditional music'. I read that and I think I've failed to communicate that this is *not traditional* music, this is *contemporary* music written today, composed by somebody who's living today using arrangements and sounds that are very much today. A lot of people when they hear that this is a genre that originated so long ago just equate it as being old music. The genre is old, but the music I'm doing is not."

She takes breath. "I find that it's not easy to articulate where it is I'm coming from. I'm not somebody who just lived in Canada. I did go back to India and India is where I received the majority of my musical education. I don't consider myself as doing fusion music. The ghazals that I'm doing, I've sung them in India, I've sung them with the same arrangements in Pakistan. People realised that it's something different only because of the guitar actually. But for my English being in a Canadian accent, they would never know that these ghazals hadn't been given birth to in India or Pakistan. It is very much in the genre, but I've developed my own style and put my own little stamp on the evolution of the genre. It's not fusion, it's original work, which is very, very much within the genre."

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Photo: Alex Kaplan