

**TRANSLATING CULTURE VERSUS CULTURAL TRANSLATION**  
**AGHA SHAHID ALI**

**Syed Ahmad Raza Abidi**

Research Scholar  
Department Of English & Mel  
University Of Allahabad

Agha Shahid Ali was born in New Delhi on February 4, 1949 and grew up in Kashmir. He was later educated at the University of Kashmir, Srinagar, and later on in Delhi University. He spent his childhood in Kashmir, and after completing his studies from Presentation Convent School, Burn Hall School and University of Kashmir he moved to Delhi, to do his post-graduation from Hindu College, where he taught also. From there he moved to U.S.A. He was awarded a PhD degree in English from Pennsylvania State University in 1984 and an M.F.A. from the University of Arizona in 1985.

Moving from one place to another, and having born and brought up in different cultures and societies, Shahid had the impact of various cultures on his personality. He had Muslim, Hindu and Kashmiri culture, and was also exposed to the Indian culture and tradition. He was well acquainted with the Western culture too, as the family spent a few years there, during Shahid's childhood. He was influenced by various cultures he was exposed to, and various people he came across. Among them are his mother, Begum Akhtar, James Merrill. He also loved food, he was a very good cook too, who loved to eat and also to throw parties for his friends. Apart from these, he loved ghazals of Ghalib, especially those, which were sung by Begum Akhtar. He was grown up in a home where people discussed about legends from various fields and cultures, since they used to discuss about Urdu poets like Ghalib and Faiz, Mir and Hafiz, philosophers like Aristotle and Plato, about poets like Shakespeare and Keats, legends like Laila-Majnoon and Heer-Ranjha. Being broad-minded the family observed Muharram, celebrated Diwali and Shab-e-barat, Christmas etc. with great enthusiasm which helped to lay a foundation that finds expression in some of Shahid's poems. Shahid speaks about Laila-Majnoon and Heer-Ranjha, Muharram and the legends related with it, Zainab and Hussain and the tragic land of Karbala. Shahid writes about Krishna, Shiva's trident, Parvati's anklet, about Radha and many such characters.

Shahid possessed a Platonic idea of poetry: it did not matter so much how a line came into being as that it found its way onto the page. Shahid was alert of those stray bits of language that might be turned into poetry—a joke, a throwaway line, a fragment from another poem, anything. For example, not long after telling him Christopher Merrill planned to use Thomas De Quincey's sentence—"It was a year of brilliant water"---as an epigraph to a book he began a long poem with the same

epigraph. He regularly mined Dickinson's poetry for lines that might spur new work—Merrill says in *Rattapallax* magazine in this connection:

We even planned to write a book together titled *The Blond Assassins*, a Dickinsonian phrase that eventually appeared in his ghazal, "Forever"—but his literary tastes were universal. And quoting is a crucial element of Shahid's volume of ghazals, *Call Me Ishmael\_Tonight*, in which he pays homage to American poetry by braiding lines from other poets into his own work.(149)

'Exile' means living away from one's country, or, migration from one country to another. Shahid does the exchange of cultures, and values; the transmigration from one culture to another, and from one poetic form (English verse form) to another (Urdu verse form). Shahid considered himself a 'triple exile'. He expresses the advantages, that he gained through his state of being an 'Exile', in his article in the magazine *Live Like The Banyan Tree*, when he left Kashmir for Delhi—that was his first exile, Delhi to Pennsylvania—the distance terrible—which was another 'Exile' for him, although eventually he was contributing simultaneously to three rising traditions: the new Anglophone literatures of the world, the new Subcontinental literatures in English, and the new multiethnic literatures of the United States? Shahid felt happy over the fact that the history has assured him a privileged position. As a Kashmiri Muslim (an American Shiite) writing poetry in English, he owned three major world cultures (Hindu, Muslim, and Western) without effort. As a Muslim from the Indian Subcontinent writing in English, he had three major world cultures available to him without effort, cultures that he was free to appropriate, mix, exploit without even striving for exotica. Then: his Muslim background made him familiar with the cultural sensibilities, through permutations, of course, of what is called the Middle East, particularly of classical Persian Culture. And then, by virtue of being in India he had its Hindu traditions: its music, folk culture, festivals, religion, metaphors.

Shahid worked assiduously to establish a place in American Literature for the formal discipline of the ghazal. He often used the phrase "the ghazal in America" in conversation, and invited American poets to contribute to the anthology he edited, *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals In English*. Now, in this posthumous volume, Shahid offers us his own American ghazals. The couplets, "gems that can be plucked" from the ghazal's necklace, since with Shahid's brilliance. Again, he is educating the reader: Making clear that while a ghazal's couplets do not require a narrative continuity, they do have an emotional coherence.

Lawrence Needham says,

Agha's poetry, as might be expected in a poet negotiating different cultural demands; it is particularly so in *The Half-Inch Himalayas* and later poems when the Urdu poetic tradition comes face to face with poetry in the American grain.(66-67)

In ghazal after ghazal, Shahid's virtuosity can be witnessed over and over again. As with Urdu ghazals, his poems come alive when recited, preferably before a group of connoisseurs. Taking some of the volumes of ghazal by Shahid, as examples:

According to Yerra Sugarman, 'With 'Lenox Hill' Shahid has created the music of language, the pattern and presence of essence for what had seemed to me previously to be ineffable. It is an exquisite counterpoint in which the speaker's loss of his mother—his beloved—and her incomprehensibly unjust death ("as she earned, like a galaxy, her right not to die") is woven seamlessly with macrocosms—whole histories—of cruelties, injustice and loss, into one fine symphony/tapestry. (17)

Few examples from *The Country Without A Post Office*, where Shahid has tried to follow the rule of Urdu ghazal:

'Has God's vintage loneliness turned to vinegar?  
He's poured rust into the sacred well tonight.'  
And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee—  
God sobs in my arms, call me Ishmael tonight. (40)

Another ghazal from the same book is as follows:

The only language of loss left in the world is Arabic  
These words were said to me in a language not Arabic. (73)

Apart from, and after Ghalib, Faiz and Begum Akhtar had a strong influence on Shahid. Their Arabic and Persian base and their Hindi involvement blends things beautifully to please and appeal listeners whose pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow mix up with the burdens that their songs carry, not in one sense alone but variously and comprehensively. Shahid, with an Eastern upbringing assimilates the culture of these artists to become an ambassador in literature for the entertainment and rejuvenation of people who in spite of their grand civilization and broad-mindedness and hospitality come heavily under the striking measures of Western authors like Iqbal Ahmed, David Barsamian, Edward Said and Noam Chomsky. Agha Shahid Ali's endeavour to carry the soul of Faiz and Begum Akhtar was first, a proof of the flowering of his own artistic personality and, second, it was tumult and turbulence based on strong feelings and emotions to evaluate the crisis of the East so that it can be felt also in the West.

Shahid is a remarkable poet in that he is as faithful to tradition, as in his love for the Urdu literary tradition, as is creative in his experimentation with taking the tradition into new and innovative directions. Yet he never loses the spirit and deep intent, or to put this in South Asian vocabulary, the 'bhava' or 'rasa' (translated as emotion, mood, deep intent, overall aura) of the tradition that he plays with. The overall mood that a ghazal evokes is 'melancholic and amorous' and when Western poets use the form, they are mainly attracted to the formal challenges rather than the emotional content of melancholy and love. This could also be termed as contrapuntal rhetoric. Here we can add the words of Ketu H. Katrak:

In his introduction to *Ravishing Disunities*, Ali 'confesses' that when he first attempted his first ghazal, he totally dispensed with the 'qafia' and settled simply for the 'radif'. By taking such poetic license, he admits that he "made matters much too easy for himself." Edward Hirsch

remarks that Ali "was a splendid practitioner of the form, which consists of at least five thematically autonomous couplets, each with the same rhyme plus a refrain. The poet often signs off with his or her own name in the final signature couplet. The form is driven, Ali suggested, by a constant sense of longing."(51)

Living as an exile, Shahid chose not to play victim; he made his home wherever he was, and it was his sense of generous hospitality, honesty, and warmth that made his friends feel welcomed everywhere. M.L. Williams talks about the ghazal that he and Shahid's other friends composed as tribute to Shahid. Williams says,

The epigraph to the "Ghazal for Shahid (Missing You in Palm Springs, 2001)", from *Ravishing Disunities*, inspired this communal tribute. Williams further adds, the project developed subsequently out of luck and love. I shared the idea first with Elena; she suggested that I contact Christopher Merrill, one of Shahid's closest friends, who provided the opening couplet. (146)

The ghazal consists of ninety three couplets, composed by collective contribution of ninety four different poets. The final couplet being extracted from Shahid's poem "Land":

"At the moment the heart turns terrorist,  
Are Shahid's arms broken, O Promised Land?"(51)

Agha Shahid Ali has also composed a book of translations which is named as *The Rebel's Silhouette: Translation of Verses By Faiz Ahmad Faiz*, which was published in the year 1992 by Peregrine Smith Books. This book included Ghazals of Faiz, such as: "Tanhai" (Solitude), "Khatm Hui Barish-e-Sang" (The Rain of Stones is Finished), "Mujh Se Pahli Si Mohabbat Meri Mahboob na Maang" (Don't Ask Me For that Love Again), "Zindan Ki Ek Shaam" (A Prison Evening), "Ham Jo Tareek Rahon Mein Maarey Gaye" (We who were Executed), "Lao To Qatl Nama Mera" (So Bring The Order for My Execution) etc.

Having lived a brief life of only 52 years (1949-2001), Shahid has achieved great heights in the world of literature. After the death of his mother Sufia Agha Ashraf Ali, he lived with his father Agha Ashraf Ali, his siblings Agha Iqbal Ali, Hena Ahmed and Sameetah, whom he left in the year 2001, for his heavenly abode, who are taking his voice across the globe, fulfilling his dream of living forever, as he said once, 'Darling! I don't want immortality through my works. I want immortality by not dying.'

**WORKD CITED**

- Advani, Rukun. "Agha Shahid Ali: A Few Memories". [http://www.tehelka.com/channels/literary/2001/dec/8/lr120801\\_gha.htm](http://www.tehelka.com/channels/literary/2001/dec/8/lr120801_gha.htm). web.
- Ali, Agha Shahid Ali. *The Half-Inch Himalayas*. Middletown: Wesleyan U P, 1987. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Nostalgist's Map of America*. New York: Norton, 1991. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Call Me Ishmael Tonight: The Final Collections*. New Delhi: Permanent Black & Ravi Dayal Pub., 2004. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Rooms Are Never Finished: The Final Collections*. Delhi: Permanent Black & Ravi Dayal Pub., 2004. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. ed. 2000. Introduction to *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*. Hanover, NH and London: University Press of New England. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Live Like the Banyan Tree: Images of the Indian American Experience*. Ed. & auth. Lila Prasad. The historical society of PA, 2006. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Death Credentials". *Indraprastha* magazine. New Delhi: U P, 1971. 16. Print.
- Brian Keith, Axel. "The Diasporic Imaginary." *Public Culture* 14.2 .2002, Print.
- Ghosh, Amitav. "'The Ghat of The Only World': Agha Shahid Ali in Brooklyn". *Man's World*. New Delhi: Permanent Black and Ravi Dayal Pub, 2002 Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "'The Ghat of the only World': Agha Shahid Ali in Brooklyn". *The Imam and The Indian: Prose Pieces*. New Delhi: Permanent Black and Ravi Dayal Pub, 2002. Print.
- Kabir, Ananya Jahanara. *Territory of Desire: Representing the Valley of Kashmir*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. Print.
- Katrak, Ketu H. "'Cultural Translation' and Agha Shahid Ali's Uses of The Ghazal Form". *Catamaran: South Asian American Writing*. N.p., Fall 2003. Print
- Khan, Muhammad Shafi "'A Memory of Musk': Agha Shahid Ali, poet of Unique Voice". *Sensor*, Sunday Supplement of *Greater Kashmir*. Ed. Ahsanul Haq. Feb. 2002. Print.
- Majumdar, Keya. "Nation as Image, Imagination of the alien: A Glimpse into Agha Shahid Ali's Book, *The Country Without a Post Office*". *Kavya Bharti: Special issue: Poetry of the Indian Diaspora-I*. Madurai: American College, 2004. Print
- Mattoo, Neerja. "Agha Shahid Ali As I Knew Him". *In Memoriam: Indian Literature*. 207 N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.
- Merrill, Christopher. *Rattapallax 7 Magazine*. N.p.: Rattapallax P, n.d. Print.
- Nayeem, Hamida. "Shola-e-ishq Siyah Posh Hua Tere Baad". *Sensor*, Sunday Supplement of *Greater Kashmir*. Ed. Ahsanul Haq. N.p.: n.p., Feb. 2002. Print.
- Needham, Lawrence. "'The Sorrow of a Broken Time': Agha Shahid Ali and the Poetry of Loss and Recovery". *Reworlding, The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*; Ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson. G P, Number 42, n.d. Print.
- Shanta Acharya. "The Contribution of Poets from India to American Poetry Today". *Kavya Bharti: Special issue Poetry of the Indian Diaspora-I*. Madurai: American College, 2004. Print.
- Sugarman, . Yerra (special section editor). "Foreword". *Rattapallax 7 Magazine*. N.p.: Rattapallax P, n.d. Print.
- Williams, M.L. *Rattapallax 7*. N.p.: Rattapallax P, n.d. Print.