

THE SELF AND THE OTHER IN THE POETRY OF AGHA SAHID ALI

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Abstract

Agha Sahid Ali, a Kashmiri American poet, is known for his experiment of English Ghazal form to bring together the East and West to negotiate experiences, personal and collective. Though Sahid Ali draws enormously from the history of India, he transfigures such history into experiences that can be associated universally. One such strong found theme in his poetry is the self and the other dialectic. His dispersal from his native country and the hyphenated identity into which he was absorbed are the basis from which his relational view of the self and the other springs. The submerged self re-emerges into the relation to the other into an alien experience. The theme of exile is connected inherently to his experience of the self in relation to the other. He has the ability to glance into the “heart of loss and not flinch” and defy the continuous presence of the idealized and ingenuous making of the separation of the self and the other. His poems are reflections of an internally battled sensitive and affirmatively presented tales of existential quandary. This paper is an attempt to study the theme of the self and the other in the poetry of Agha Sahid Ali.

Agha Shahid Ali (1949—2001), a Kashmiri-American poet, is one of the most accomplished diasporic poets. He authored several collections of poetry, including *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001), *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997), *The Beloved Witness: Selected Poems* (1992), *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991), *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* (1987), *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987), *In Memory of Begum Akhtar and Other Poems* (1979), and *Bone Sculpture* (1972). Shahid Ali depicts the lyric poetry tradition of the ghazal merged with Western poetic techniques embrace the sounds and rhythm of English language. His poetry, as it combines two different traditions, are truly multicultural English ghazals where rich musical patterns are expressed. Shahid Ali, in his ‘exile’ did not lead a tassel life but became a representative who carried the culture of the home land into the world. He writes: “the ‘I’ of this digression is often a composite figure beside/besides me...I am shamelessly subjective, though an exile must cultivate a scrupulous subjectivity. A multiple exile, I celebrate myself” (Ali, *Darkly Defense* 147). His poetry is an amplification of the history and culture of the

Subcontinent. The experience of crossing borders or being a diasporic does not, for Shahid Ali, a cause of rupture between *self* and the *other* but a continuum that combines within the search that is at once local and communal experience. Within the monolithic temporal, Shahid Ali's poetry favors an abstruse association with the plural voices of time and space. His personal tale, the communal narrative of Husain, Zainab's despair and the pains she undergoes as she is shifted to Damascus and the contemporary situation of Kashmir provides the diasporian intent to search the *self* that is detached in relation to the *other*.

Shahid Ali wrote in ghazal form, a seventh century Arabic literary genre. Ghazal, when written in English, rests on the principle of stress—the long and the short in the stressed and unstressed order. A minimum of five *shers* are expected within the paradoxical unity of the poem. Ghazal is composed of autonomous or semiautonomous couplets (called *beit* [*bait*] in Arabic meaning “house” and *sheir* [*sher*] in Persian and Urdu tradition, which means “something composed or versified”) that are united by a strict scheme of rhyme (*qafia*) [*qāfiya*], refrain (*radif*) [*radīf*] and line length (*bahar*) [*bahr*]. The opening couplet (*matla*) [*matla*] sets the scheme by having it in both lines (*misra*) [*misra*] and then the scheme occurs only in the second line of every succeeding couplet (58).

Self corresponds to ‘home’ in Shahid Ali's poetry, the identity in the making and search. The imaginary homeland often appears in Shahid Ali's poetry is search for the retrospective self that is revealed by the interconnection of the *self* and the *other*. *Self* is communicated transversely through inbetween spaces—home and away, past and present, suggesting the homelessness that compels in the formation of imaginary space identifying the dream of an impracticable arrival and the recognition of an unassociated space: “Inhabited space transcends geometrical space” (Bachelard 47). The desire to be back ‘home’ in all its aptness continues to be intangible and evading space that can only be achieved through imagination. Such imaginary homelands offer transient glances of a lost *self* that cannot re-narrate and re-live the sense of abundance. Shahid Ali writes:

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox
 My home a neat four by six inches
 I always loved neatness. Now I hold
 The half-inch Himalayas in my hand
 This is home. And this is the closest
 I'll ever be to home (Ali, *Veiled Suite* 29).

The return to the *self* through a wistful engagement with the past refers to the search for the identity through symbols and images of the native land that provides a flowing multiplicity of locating the *self* in the in between space that tag along a concord heterogeneous memories. The memories of the *self* suppose a cooperative importance where a symbolic identification of the multicultural *other* is imagined through fresh experiences. The irreparable loss and sequences of violence that the poet experienced in Kashmir has left the *self* mourning for the overwhelming clashes between the *self* and its *other*:

At a certain point I lost track of you.
 You needed me. You needed to perfect me:
 In your absence you polished me into the Enemy.
 Your history gets in the way of my memory.
 I am everything you lost. Your perfect enemy...
 If only somehow you could have been mine,
 what would not have been possible in the world? (*Veiled Suite* 176-7).

The sad tales of history engraved in the poet's cave of the heart reflecting upon the human loss and anguish that did not burdened the marking of the nation states. Ali states: "relocations mean loss. Each of them also meant creating a rhetoric of loss and through loss, the illusion of belonging—to something, to anything. That dismal word: *roots*" (Ali *Darkly Defense* 148). The poet appropriates the *self* in a position that demonstrate sympathy towards those who suffered. Identities in "diasporas do not have a teleology then they invariably disturb narratives of national identities, and their particular utopias, by failing to register such local, invariably ethnically bound, future" (Chambers 53). Shahid Ali's poetry involves articulation of such transnational spaces:

the Alexandria that is forever leaving.
 I'm running toward a barbed-wire fence
 And someone is running after me (*Veiled Suite* 230).

The constitution of a borderland position comes from the articulation of the varied local issues that directly helps in the making of a transnational space which functions crossculturally as a "veritable of metamorphoses and permutations" (Deleuze 56). Such intercultural relations aids Shahid Ali to outline the natural features of partition that is transcultural, the latent interaction of the *self* that is moving within and between the nations:

So what is separation's geography?
 Everything is just that mystery
 everything is this roar that deafens:
 this stream has branched off from the Indus,
 in Little Tibet, just to
 find itself where Porus
 miles down (there it will join the Jhelum)
 lost to the Greeks. It will become
 in Pakistan, the Indus again (*Veiled Suite* 276).

Within these amalgamic experiences and situations, an assertive position brought into existence through the interconnections of the consciousness to the natural world that assimilate the global and the local in relation to the other. The temporal space becomes the eloquent moments of set of connections that is personal and collective in nature.

India always exists
 Off the turnpikes
 of America
 so I could say
 I did take the exit
 and crossed Howrah
 and even mention Ganges
 as it continued sobbing
 under the bridge (*Veiled Suite* 123).

"The transnation is both global and local. It not only interpenetrates the State, but interpenetrates the multiplicity of states in their international and global relationality" (Ashcroft 11). Shahid Ali enters into a search of the *self*, rather a dialogue with the *self* in terms of an ambivalent excess. The ambivalence corresponds to "both and neither," which is "partial and plural":

Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight

before you agonize him in farewell tonight?
 I beg for haven: Prisons, let open your gates-
 A refuge from Belief seeks a cell tonight (Ali, *Country without a Post Office*).

The transnational consciousness of the *self* fabricates fresh ways of coherent reasoning of identity that traverses through the imaginary of “non-limited locality” and streams beyond the borders into a profound localized itinerant space: “Who will protect us if you leave?” is the call.

I am mere dust.
 The desert hides itself in me.

Against me the ocean has reclined from the start (Ali, *Call* 42).

The space, thus, becomes encompassed with a ‘contrapuntal’ element that passes through the thoughts that continually traverse between the “root and routes.” The discourse which is inevitably subjective offers the imagination of a postcolonial positional *self* that moves into the immobilization of the rhetoric of terrorism, clash of cultures, a space that becomes comprehensive flowing together of heterogeneity breaking the unilinear configurations of parochial identities and national demarcations. The diasporic *self* “evokes an interaction among different cultural passages, challenges homogeneous modes of belonging, and suggests a de-territorialized construction of new identity that is both immediately local and yet mediated by the wide world” (Zhang 151). Shahid Ali’s poetry functions as an appropriation of the meeting point of the suffering *self* that is placed in a historical-geographical position jointly configures the foundation of such paths of integration whose intention is to relation with the *other* as a transformatory medium.

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