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Center/Margin Dialectics and the Poetic Form: The Ghazals of Agha Shahid Ali*

THE CENTER/MARGIN METAPHOR implies a power relationship. However, in diasporic epistemology, as Homi Bhabha (1994) and many others have shown, margins are no longer spaces marked by deprivation and powerlessness. They, on the contrary, are sites where culture is formed, marked by hybridity and multiplicity. “Rootless? Certainly not” (1992, 3), these words of Agha Shahid Ali unmistakably define his unique perspective towards the diasporic space he occupied. An Indian-American, a Kashmiri-Indian, a Shiite-Muslim, the hyphenated existence to Agha Shahid Ali did not entail an existence on the fringes or a depriving force. Instead of succumbing to the status of a refugee, he became the cultural ambassador of his country. Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry¹ is a sincere attempt to make this culture available to the world.

Answering a self-posed question, “What are the implications and consequences of writing between national paradigms, ‘bilingually’ or ‘multilingually?’” Azade Seyhan, in his book *Writing Outside the Nation*, replies,

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¹His corpus includes several volumes of poetry including *Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals* (2003), *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). He is also the author of *T.S. Eliot as Editor* (1986), translator of *The Rebel’s Silhouette: Selected Poems by Faiz Ahmed Faiz* (1992), and editor of *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English* (2000).

Transnational writing can potentially redress the ruptures in history and collective memory caused by the unavailability of sources, archives, and recorded narratives. By uncovering obscure poetic traditions, discovering forgotten idioms and grammars, and restoring neglected individual and collective stories to literary history, it introduces the riches of hitherto neglected cultures into modern literary consciousness.

(2001, 13)

This is best exemplified in Agha Shahid Ali's use of the ghazal form in English. Ali's experiments with form included his own mastery of canzone, a form which requires extreme repetitions, his use of the ghazal form in English (at times even using lines by American poets and developing them into ghazals) and his ability to persuade many American poets to write ghazals. Through these endeavors, Agha Shahid Ali not only introduced an entirely new idiom in English poetry but also exploited poetic form as a site where the "in-between" space, the hyphenated identity, could be posited. In the present paper, I have concentrated on Agha Shahid Ali's innovative use of the ghazal form of poetry as a bridge between the two civilizations that he traversed and as a means to retain identity in foreign surroundings. The paper aims to study Agha Shahid Ali's exploitation of the poetic form in the light of transnational poetics and attempts to establish that for Agha Shahid Ali the poetic form itself was transformed into a site where the oppositional cultural discourses of diasporic experience could negotiate, and points of affiliation could be worked out.

Agha Shahid Ali's Poetic Oeuvre and Thematic Concerns

Agha Shahid Ali (1949–2002) was born in India into a respectable Kashmiri family of Shiite Muslims. His ancestors came from Central Asia. His father, Agha Ashraf Ali, did his Ph.D. at Ball State University in the U.S. Ali was brought up in Srinagar, Delhi, and the U.S. His mother, Sufia Noumani, came from a family of Persian origin and was connected to the Sufi saint Abdul Quddus Gangohi of Rudauli. Ali grew up in a culturally and linguistically rich environment where the entire family read and appreciated poetry and literature in Persian, Urdu and English. He called Urdu his "mother tongue" and English his "first language" (1992, 3). He earned a Ph.D. in English from Pennsylvania State University in 1984 and an M.F.A. from the University of Arizona in 1985.

Shahid Ali's poetry can best be termed an elaboration of the Subcontinent's own mixed history. He draws from the rich cultural

resources of the country of his birth, where plurality, compositeness and eclecticism mark cultural patterns. As he says,

The point is you are a universe, you are the product of immense historical forces. There is the Muslim in me, there is the Hindu in me, there is the Western in me. It is there because I have grown up in three cultures and various permutations of those cultures.

(1998, n.p.)

To Agha Shahid Ali border crossing is not synonymous with a break or rupture; he, rather, perceives it as a continuum. History transpires Shahid Ali's poetry and he transforms it into the mythical one, whence personal, local and communal experiences are translated into a universal phenomenon. He does not use the linear time frame of history but prefers an elliptical movement using contrapuntal mythical terrain, where one voice echoes several voices across time and space, where Karakoram ranges transform into Hindu Kush and Arizona, where rain infests Kashmir, Lahore and Amherst together, and where simultaneity overshadows sequentiality. From Ali's personal history (which takes us back to the time when his ancestors came from Samarkand to Kashmir "Snowmen"), to the communal history of Husain's martyrdom and Zainab's desolation and grief as she was taken to Damascus, and to the contemporary reality of his own people in Kashmir—Ali's poetry explores it all. Speaking of the diasporan citizens' duty towards their homeland, R. Radhakrishnan writes, "As diasporan citizens doing double duty (with accountability both here and there) [...] we have a duty to represent India to ourselves and to the United States as truthfully as we can" (2007, 212). Shahid Ali keeps revisiting his homeland, "this country / where a minaret has been entombed" (1997, 48). He not only displays a very clear and close understanding of the politics in his homeland Kashmir, but also raises a strong voice of protest against the political repression, the weak political will on the part of the Government and the plight of innocent people dying in the Valley. On the cultural plane, his poems are suffused with images that reaffirm the composite culture of India—images that range from those of Radha/Krishna and Laila/Majnoon to Husain and Zainab, and his literary inspiration is as diverse, ranging from Ghalib and Faiz Ahmed Faiz to James Meryll and Lorca.

The Ghazal Form

The ghazal form, Agha Shahid Ali informs us, can be traced back to seventh-century Arabic literature. In its canonical Persian form, which

arrived in the eleventh century, it is composed of autonomous or semi-autonomous couplets (called *beit* [*bait*] in Arabic meaning “house” and *she’r* [*she’r*] 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*) [*baḥr*]. The opening couplet (*matla*) [*maṭla*] sets the scheme by having it in both lines (*misra*) [*miṣra*] and then the scheme occurs only in the second line of every succeeding couplet (2003, 19). The Perso-Arabic quantitative meter is rigorously defined. In Urdu prosody, the phonetic length of syllables is taken into account, while in English, stress is the criterion, the long and short syllables of the former corresponding to the stressed and unstressed syllables of the latter. A ghazal must have a minimum of five *she’rs*; there is no maximum limit. There is a paradoxical unity in disunity in the ghazal form. Formally, each *she’r* of a ghazal is connected by *baḥar*, *qāfiya* and *radif*, but thematically each one stands independently as an autonomous unit. The noted Urdu critic Shamsur Rahman Faruqi writes:

In fact, all poetry in the Indo-Persian literary culture is seen as synchronic, and in the world of ghazal, there is no concept of a “poem.” Ghazal consists of a number of individual verses, most often unconnected with each other by theme or mood. Even in performance, the poet may not recite all the *she’rs* of his ghazal, or may change their order, or even add a few on the spur of the moment, or incorporate *she’rs* from another ghazal in the same rhyme and meter.

(2004, 20)

The Persian form of ghazal poetry underwent a change when the form traveled to India. It came to be written in what is known as *sabk-e hindī*.² When the form was adapted in Urdu, it drew from *sabk-e hindī*, which is defined by its metaphoricity, intertextuality, wordplay, and separation of theme (*maẓmūn*) and meaning (*ma’na*) whereby a poet could use the same *maẓmūn* for multiple *ma’ānī*.

But in spite of this autonomy, there is an overarching unity that envelops the ghazal universe. S. R. Faruqi and F. W. Pritchett explain:

Yet the small two-line verse is not left entirely to its own devices, for it inhabits the long-established, well-developed ghazal universe. The ghazal universe is founded on the figure of the passionate lover, and faithfully mirrors his consciousness. The lover, while longing for his inaccessible (human) beloved or (divine) Beloved, reflects on the world as it appears to him in his altered emotional state. To him its highs are infinite heavens, its lows abysmal depths, its every scene and every moment charged with

²For a detailed study of *sabk-e hindī*, see Faruqi (2004).

intense and complex meanings—meanings to which non-lovers, the ordinary “people of the world,” are appallingly blind. The ghazal universe exists in the consciousness of ghazal poets and their audiences, who construct it by knowing verses, and constantly refine it by making, hearing or reading, accepting or rejecting, yet more verses.

(1991, n.p.)

Many problems are involved with the production of ghazals in English. They have to do with the level of lexicon, syntax, semantics and the cultural context. Since the ghazal form strives for maximum precision, their elaboration comes to depend on vocabulary taken from the lexicon of language which is pregnant with cultural context and does not need any elaboration. Thus Urdu words such as *sāqī* (tavern keeper), *sharāb* (wine), *mai* (wine), *maikbāna* (wine-cellar), *paimāna* (cask), etc., come from the same semantic domain, but given the value of their occurrence they can be used symbolically in multiple contexts to invoke multiple meanings such as divine blessing, beloved’s favors, preacher, metaphysical experience, and so on. The lack of such a tradition of diction in English handicaps the poet as he cannot depend on the reader’s participation in his metaphorical usages.

Similarly, cultural contexts metaphorically represented by this lexicon also facilitate the precision which the form is known for. Thus ghazal poets in Urdu have used lexical nodes such as *pyās* (thirst), *dar-badarī* (nomadism), *maqtal* (battleground), *qaidkhāna* (prison), *hijrat* (migrancy), etc., to exploit the history of Karbala as a metaphor.³

Ghazal, by general acknowledgement, is a form that is deeply rooted in a certain classical tradition. Hence, to think of writing ghazals in English involves the risk of using “form for form’s sake.” Why, then, did Agha Shahid Ali take the risk of not just writing and translating ghazals into English himself, but also inviting American poets to write ghazals in English as well? This question is best answered by Shahid Ali himself when he says, “What is someone of nearly two equal loyalties to do but lend, almost gift them to each other and hope that sooner or later the loan will be forgiven and they will become each other’s?” (1992, 2).

Ali’s experimentation with ghazal form is an addition to his various other efforts to “gift” the two equal loyalties to each other. If, on the one hand, Ali uses the strict metrical forms of Europe, such as canzone and sestina, to express Subcontinental ideas, Kashmiri themes, and Urdu sentiments, on the other hand, he transplants the strict verse form of Indo-

³For a detailed study of Agha Shahid Ali’s use of the Karbala metaphor, see Zaidi (2007).

Islamic tradition, the ghazal, into the English language to fulfill the same purpose. Rukun Advani rightly points out, “He had one foot in the realm of mushairas and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, the other in the world of Western versification and translation activity. His own achievement was to blend the two (2001, n.p.).

In his introduction to *Ravishing DisUnities*, Ali explains his objectives in introducing this form to the Western audience. He challenges Paul Oppenheimer’s claim that the sonnet is the oldest poetic form still in wide popular use, having originated in thirteenth-century Italy. The ghazal form, he counters, is older by far, and scholarship produced in Western academia tends to exclude everything that did not originate in the West (2000, 1). Ali sets out to amend this disoriented Eurocentric epistemology by orienting it back to the East.

Speaking of the dialectical center/margin relationship that the diasporic community shares with the host country, with special reference to the Indian-American community in America, R. Radhakrishnan writes,

When someone speaks as an Asian American, who exactly is speaking? If we dwell in the hyphen, who represents the hyphen: the Asian or the American, or can the hyphen speak for itself without creating an imbalance between the Asian and the American components?

(2007, 211)

Ali was always conscious of this possibility of imbalance. In his introduction to *Ravishing DisUnities* he expresses dismay at the complete distortion the ghazal form has met with in the West and displeasure at the way American poets have practiced the form with complete disregard for its formal structure. He argues that “free verse ghazal in America (or anywhere else) seems always a momentary exotic departure for a poet, nothing that is central to him or her, to their necessary way of dealing with the world of their poetry” (2000, 13).

This distorted, peripheral use of form obviously upsets the poet who is conscious of his twin loyalties. For this very reason perhaps, Ali declares in the beginning of his introduction that he wants to take back the gift “outright” (*ibid.*, 1). To him, what matters is the reciprocity of influence and not the unidirectional appropriative hegemonic interpretation of the “other” by the center on its own terms, or plain commoditization of the culture of the “margins.” His introduction may seem to suffer from anxiety about the “real” or “authentic,” which is so common in the diasporic consciousness, but it can better be understood as a reaction against the attempt of the West to accommodate Third World cultures in its marketplace pluralism. Therefore, while Ali harps on questions such as “What is the true Persian form?”—which sound essentialist—he does not forget

to remind his American fellow poets, the advantages of writing this real ghazal:

1. English can employ full rhymes, even the most cliché-ridden, as the *radif* saves them through a transparent masking.
2. The ghazal also offers English a chance to find a formal way, a legal way out, to cultivate a profound respect for desperation.

(*ibid.*, 11)

What hope does the form offer to marginalized subjects? The non-linear, contrapuntal structure of the ghazal, where couplets, though independent in terms of theme, are held together by “a profound and complex cultural unity, built on association and memory and expectation” (*ibid.*, 2), allows the diasporic subject non-hegemonic, non-subordinate space. Ali says, “If one writes in free verse—and one should—to subvert Western civilization, surely one should write in forms to save oneself *from* Western civilization” (*ibid.*, 13). Therefore, writing in strict formal structure was his way to discover self and retain his identity.

Agha Shahid Ali manipulated the ghazal form at three different levels in his poetry: he himself composed ghazals in English, he translated ghazals of famous maestros such as Mirza Ghalib and Faiz Ahmed Faiz into English, and he inspired many American poets to write “real ghazals” in English.

Ghazals by Agha Shahid Ali

In Persian, “ghazal” literally means “talking to/of the beloved.” In one of his couplets Agha Shahid Ali explains the meaning of his name: “They ask me to tell them what Shahid means— / Listen: it means ‘The Beloved’ in Persian, ‘witness’ in Arabic” (2003, 25). This overlap of the two meanings must have drawn this “Beloved Witness” to the ghazal form.

Agha Shahid Ali wrote many ghazals in English which were later put together in the volume titled *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*. The thematic concerns of these ghazals are no different than the thematic concerns in the rest of his poetry, namely, love, longing, loss, separation and searching for home, for lost relationships, for life, for identity, and even for death. However, what stands out in these ghazals is the completely new idiom of poetry drawn from Indo-Persian tradition, which Ali introduces into English poetry. The texture of his language is rooted in eastern poetic traditions more so than it is in English. Some of the themes (*mazmūns*) in his ghazals are very close to the themes used in Urdu and Persian poetry. For example, the theme of “dust” in the following: “I am mere dust. The de-

sert hides itself in me. / Against me the ocean has reclined from the start” (*ibid.*, 42). This couplet is reminiscent of Ghalib’s famous verse: “*Hōtā hai nibāñ gard mēñ šehrā merē hōtē / Ghīstā hai jabīñ khāk pe dariyā merē āgē* (The desert hides itself in dust in my presence / The waves break their heads before me).

Similarly, Ali tries to explore new meanings (*ma‘ānī*) in the old themes, a feature that was the hallmark of *sabk-e hindī*. One example can be found in the following couplet where Satan is projected as God’s lost love: “Who but Satan can know God’s sorrow in Heaven? / God longs for the lover He undermined from the start” (*ibid.*, 43). This conceptualization of God and Satan in a lover-beloved relationship, where the beloved is always disregarding of the offerings of the lover, is quite innovative. Ali also often used one theme for multiple meanings. This is best exemplified in his repeated use of the theme “Beloved”: “Now Friend, the Beloved has stolen your words— / Read slowly: the plot will unfold in real time” (*ibid.*, 33). Here “Beloved” seems to refer to the autocratic government which represses freedom of speech. At other places, “Beloved” is used for its literal meaning, to refer to God, etc., as in: “The Beloved will leave you behind from the start. / Light is difficult: one must be blind from the start” (*ibid.*, 42).

Wordplay, which the Indo-Persian ghazal form revels in, is also found in abundance in Ali’s poetry. For example: “Crucified Mansoor was alone with the Alone: / God’s loneliness—just His—compiled by exiles” (*ibid.*, 28). Here the two alones and loneliness are words drawn from the same semantic field, but all evoke different responses. Another couplet in the same ghazal, which addresses the famous Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, says: “Will you, Beloved Stranger, ever witness Shahid— / two destinies at last reconciled by exiles?” (*ibid.*, 29). This couplet stands as an example of what Faruqi calls the “art of congruity” where words are connected with each other in many different ways in the Indo-Persian style of poetry. Metaphors are also an outstanding feature of ghazal poetry and as Faruqi points out, “... the chief achievement of Indian Style poets was to *treat metaphor as fact* and then go on to create further metaphors from that fact” (2004, 37).

The syntagmatic use of metaphor is found in Ali’s English ghazals as well. Notice the metaphoric usage of fire and water in: “In a mansion once of love I lit a chandelier of fire ... / I stood on a stair of water; I stood on a stair of fire” (2003, 34). And again, the simultaneous use of the metaphoric and literal meanings of the word “exile” in the following lines where the poet addresses Mahmoud Darwish: “In Jerusalem a dead phone’s dialed by exiles. / You learn your strange fate: you were exiled

by exiles” (*ibid.*, 28).

Apart from these stylistic features of the traditional ghazal form, these ghazals also reflect a pronounced awareness of international politics, in particular an awareness of the political scene on the Indian subcontinent. There is a unique contemporaneity alongside the metaphysical anguish: “The birthplace of written language is bombed to nothing. / How neat, dear America, is this game for you?” (*ibid.*, 26). Again referring to the politics of Kashmir, Ali says, “And who is the terrorist, who the victim? / We’ll know if the country is polled in real time” (*ibid.*, 32).

In addition, references in these ghazals include Mansoor, Shammās, Kali, Lorca, Ishmael, Majnoon, and others, ranging across the civilizations the poet has been a part of. Ali has also assiduously written *maqtaʿ*s (last couplet of a ghazal where the poet introduces his own name or *takballuṣ* (penname)) in almost all of his ghazals. He also introduced into English poetry the ghazal tradition whereby poets write ghazals on the *zamīn*, or ground, of another poet’s writings. Thus a *miṣraʿ* or *qāfiya*, or both the *qāfiya* and *radīf* used by any other poet is taken and improvised, adding new possibilities to it. Ali wrote ghazals taking lines from other poets, such as Wisława Szymborska.

Thus, Ali’s ghazals did not just bring a new poetic form onto the scene of English poetry, they introduced a new idiom of expression, a new vocabulary, semantic range, and metaphoric and rhythmic possibilities.

Translations by Agha Shahid Ali

Besides writing ghazals himself, Agha Shahid Ali also translated ghazals by masters such as Mirza Ghalib, Ahmad Faraz and Faiz Ahmed Faiz. In his introduction to *Ravishing DisUnities*, Ali explains that it is not possible to stick to formal ghazal restrictions in translations because “it would be impossible to sustain a convincing *qafia*—given the *radīf*—when translating couplet after couplet” (2000, 11). In translations, the constraints of language force the poet to introduce lexical nodes that are not there in the original in order to make the poem work in the target language. He must invert the order of lines to create some semblance of rhymes, etc.

The casualties in all this are the suspense/resolution schema, which the two-line ghazals have. For example:

yūn hī gar rōtā rahā Ghālib to ay abl-e jabān
dēkhnā in bastiyōn kō tum ke vīrān hō gaʿīn

(If Ghalib continues to shed tears like this, O fellow beings

Watch out your dwellings, they will soon become deserted)

World, should Ghalib keep weeping you will see a flood
drown your terraced cities, your marble palaces

(2003, 52)

Here the translator uses lexical items such as flood, drowning, and marble palaces, etc. that are not explicitly mentioned in the original Urdu *sheʿr*, thus restricting the scope for interpretations. Again Ahmad Faraz’s lines:

*kis kis kō batāʾēṅgē judāʾī kā sabab ham
tū mujh sē khafā hai tō zamānē kē liyē ā*

(Who all will I explain the reasons for separation

You may be angry with me, come back for the world’s sake)

Not for mine but for the world’s sake come back.

They ask why you left? To whom all must I explain?

(*ibid.*, 48)

Here the sequence of lines has been reversed, again impacting the suspense/resolution schema. However, if these translations are read as independent pieces, no one can deny their poetic worth and beauty. This perhaps explains why Ali himself does not use the word “translation.” He only says “after Ghalib,” “after Ahmad Faraz,” and so on.

Ghazals by American Poets Collected by Agha Shahid Ali

As a member of the Asian-American diaspora, Ali was always very conscious of his debts and his duties both to his host country and to his homeland. This double allegiance led him to invite American poets to contribute to an anthology of ghazals. In doing so, he insisted that they should be “real ghazals,” not those “arbitrary, near-surrealistic exercises in free verse” which Ali found amusing (2000, 1). But this insistence on form does not simply imply structure, but rather the poetic possibilities that this structure opens up. He assures American poets that this formal restriction may lead to “further refinement of thought” (*ibid.*, 13). What results is a new range of expression. This is best exemplified in a ghazal by John Hollander which is about the ghazal form itself. Here I quote its opening and closing couplets:

For couplets the ghazal is prime; at the end
Of each one’s a refrain like a chime: “at the end.”
[...]

Now Qafia Radif has grown weary, like life,
At the game he's been wasting his time at. THE END.

(*ibid.*, 76)

These couplets are remarkable not only for their formal structure and their beautiful pseudonymizing at the end, but also for their metaphysical content and their ability to expand the semantic range of words. Some of the couplets in the collection exhibit the same wordplay, discovery of new themes, and so on that are part of the tradition which the ghazal form is rooted in. Examples include these couplets by William Matthews and Teresa Pfeifer:

By the people. For the people. Of the people. Grammar—
but politics is an incomplete sentence, after all.

(*ibid.*, 105)

Pausing for ecstasy at the shore tomorrow?
Love, you will find quicksand for a floor tomorrow.

(*ibid.*, 131)

It is this feature that Sara Suleri refers to in her “After Words” to the collection when she says, “There are poems in this collection that touch upon precisely that point of translation that converts the simple imitation of form into an opening [...]. Cultural transitions take place” (*ibid.*, 180). This is what Agha Shahid Ali always aimed at—“gift” his two loyalties to each other, on an equal footing, without any hierarchy. Thus he attempts to break the “exotic” notions of ghazal and make it real.

Conclusion

Agha Shahid Ali explored the dialogic possibilities in the poetic form whereby tensions and contesting claims of diasporic identity could seek synthesis and cohabit. He situated his diasporic identity on the site of the ghazal form where the twin identities could negotiate without any appropriation of one by the other. In this he also influenced the center by expanding the realm of linguistic and semantic possibilities.

Speaking of the role of the diasporic writer as a cultural visionary, Azade Seyhan points out,

[...] the participation of the diasporic subject in the cultural life of the host country registers the moment when other literary and artistic forms of expression enter (Western) history. Through this dialectic (in its original

sense as a dialogue), the distance between the ports of departure and arrival appears to collapse; the migrant, exile or voyager not only crosses the threshold into another history and geography but also steps into the role of an itinerant cultural visionary.

(2001, 14)

Ali's innovative use of the ghazal form reaffirms the dialogic possibilities in dialectically juxtaposed cultural spaces. In sharing his experience of multiple—linguistic, geographical, and historical—dislocations, and allowing his contemporary American poets the same experience of border crossing by inviting them to write in a poetic form completely new to them, Agha Shahid Ali asks his readers to see culture not as a static, fixed or given entity, but as something dynamic in its interaction with other cultures. He demonstrates the performative processes of cultural engagement. □

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