

AGHA SHAHID ALI'S ENGLISH GHAZALS AND THE TRANSNATIONAL POLITICS OF LITERARY SUBVERSION

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Ghazal is performative in nature.¹ A literary piece of writing, universality, centre, periphery and identity—society's identification marks—all are constructed and are performative in nature. Our cultures take great pain in establishing an identity and when an identity is substituted by the majority, the periphery remains upsidedown. Literature may be seen as providing a mirror image of the relative truth, struggle or pain that continually identifies self, individual and society. They are all performative in nature. Ghazal, once highly patronized by several Indo- Persian poets, has been a minoritarian form with the turn of the century. Shahid Ali's ghazals or his translations of Urdu ghazals of Ghalib or Faiz into English have received critical attention in the past decades.² Set as an example for the revival of Indo-Persian literary genre and its presentation to a larger and contemporary audience, ghazals have constantly evoked serious literary criticism (Ali, 2000; Woodland, 2005; Russel, 1992). Focussing on Shahid Ali's experimentation upon the English ghazal form, chiefly published in his most mature collections of poems *The Country Without a Post Office* (2000) and *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2002), this paper argues that a minoritarian poetic form or theme formulates the basis of literary subversion of a transgressive nature.

This paper explores that “performance”, the key term in ghazal, works at multiple levels in Agha Shahid Ali—in the thematic representation of his Indo-American or Kashmiri-American hybrid identity. So does Shahid Ali perform a dual identity in his multiple ghazals—intended for an American or English-speaking audience. Shahid Ali, who declared himself a Kashmiri-American poet rather an Indo-American poet, puts forward an exiled condition of the poetic self and implants Kashmiri struggle within the poems for which he has been recognized by Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and President Clinton.³ Shahid Ali's exiled condition is so central to the mature collections of poems—*The Country Without a Post Office* (2000) and *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2002)—that it is his diasporic identity that is performed within the Kashmiri poems. The exiled condition is a memory of the absence of Kashmir; but in actuality, it is American landscape that justify the poems structurally and thematically. Hence in this paper I centralize Shahid Ali's experimentation of the ghazal form and argue in favour of a postcolonial subversive writing—a poetic composition Shahid Ali undertakes initially to negate western practitioners of the ghazal and then to supplement the sublime of lyrical perfection. While I argue that with the subversive ghazals, Shahid Ali negotiates with canonical writing, I also suggest that the liberty of experimentation with multiple themes that the ghazal allows significantly contributes to the multicultural complexity projected.

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How does a poetic/literary form subvert identity? How does a genre rewrite the erased history of a nation, culture or language? In what ways do postcolonial themes find expressions in revising forms?

In short, this paper seeks to investigate how a minoritarian poetic form, along with an essential political ambition, is rewritten to subvert the overpowering forces which have wiped out the cultural and lingual purity. Introducing Shahid Ali's mature English ghazals, I contextualize cultural renditions of the form in contemporary times to argue that the oppositional poetics of the ghazals renders a transgression. And further, I argue that the exiled condition in the ghazals projects a personal identity that not only approaches the political and cultural loss in the form, it also overlaps and displaces the domain of nationhood.

Shahid Ali, within the boundaries of cultural hybridity, performs intersubjective experiences of living in the American west and composing his English ghazals. An elaborate act of tangible exile projects the intersection of self, nationhood and literary form. It is in positioning intersubjective and multicultural experiences that Shahid Ali chooses the form and style of his ancestral homeland. And further undertaking the task of composing ghazals he negotiates the question of nationhood and mourns the loss of a homeland. Ghazals, practised by a minoritarian group of poets, is the cultural link between an ancestral homeland that is lost in oblivion and the diasporic terrain of an imaginary homeland. Ghazal, the form—an innovative textual site of cultural collaboration—renders the complex idea of selfhood extending its purview to nationhood. In Shahid Ali, hence the form—now on the verge of extinction—brings about a cultural renaissance in literary site. The significance of the choice of ghazal has been two-fold. On the one hand, it is the link between the ancestral homeland, and its culture that are lost and remain only in memory with the exiled son of terrestrial heaven Kashmir. The force of the statement has to be understood within the context of the liberal emergence of ghazal moreover. Politically crucial to cultural memorabilia, the linkage establishes an ancestral exile that for long was patronized in the Indian subcontinent before submerging itself in oblivion. On the other hand moreover the form liberates the poet from projecting a singular thematic condition. Ghazal, the form, is an experimentation with pluralities and suits Shahid Ali's purpose of projecting multiple themes within the structurally unified textual site. Shahid Ali's experimentation with the ghazal form does not come in isolation either. His earlier experimentation with the prosaic poetry, one and two liners, haikus, conversational ballads and lyrics intersect the boundary of ghazal. Just as Homi Bhabha reminds us of Martin Heidegger in the introduction to the *Location of Culture*, a boundary is not that at which something stops, rather—as the Greeks recognized—the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing (Bhabha, 1994: 1). In Shahid Ali composing the multi-ethnic hybrid ghazals expands the boundary of cultural pluralities which needs critical investigation.

In a ghazal entitled “Ghazal” collected in *The Country Without a Post Office*— for the ghazal hardly possesses a title in its strictest sense—Shahid Ali begins in a general tone enquiring about the next victim of agony. His discontentment gets exhibited in almost all the couplets of the “Ghazal.” It begins with a note of sarcasm where the poet seems to have accepted the fate of destruction that has befallen upon Kashmir. Political massacres frequent Kashmir. As it seems to

be the decree of God Himself, the poet enquires about the person who would lose life that very night. ‘Tonight’ is repeated in every couplet that speaks of a sporadic upsurge of fear for loss or destruction that befalls every night without fail. The different couplets of the “Ghazal” carries the poet’s suffering—one for the loss of his lover, next for exile and several other themes exhibit themselves and Shahid Ali introduces thus multiple themes which are in accordance with the collagic structure that is unique to ghazals.⁴

The ghazal can be traced back to seventh-century Arabia. In its canonical Persian (Farsi) form, arrived at in the eleventh century, it is composed of autonomous or semi-autonomous couplets that are united by a strict scheme of rhyme, refrain, and line length. The opening couplet sets up the scheme by having it in both lines, and then the scheme occurs only in the second line of every succeeding couplet—i.e., the first line (same length) of every succeeding couplet sets up a suspense, and the second line (same length but with the rhyme and refrain—the rhyme immediately preceding the refrain) delivers on that suspense by amplifying, dramatizing, imploding, exploding. (2010, 325)

In a ghazal there can be a minimum of five couplets each of which is emotionally and thematically composed as an autonomous entity. If one couplet is comic or romantic, others can be essentially tragic, religious or even highly political in nature. Ali too invokes romanticism in one of his couplets in remembering his beloved, in the other he brings in the political exploitation of Kashmir blending it with religious allusion and cultural disbelief. An individual couplet, complete in itself, can stand on its own; the part can also contribute to the ghazal as a whole in making it a unified composition. Thus in Shahid Ali the couplet is so independent in itself that it becomes a complete entity and further so collective are the couplets with a unifying thematic subjectivity that they collectively articulate a singular theme. Originating from the seventh century Arabic *qasida* it undertakes a variety of expressions yet binding them with an interconnected node of love and separation (1988, 24). Following the stringent rhyming rules of the classical form, the opening couplet of the ghazal, known as *matla*, provides it a rhyme scheme or *qafia* and a refrain *radif* that occurs in both lines of *matla* and has to be repeated at the end of each couplet. Shahid Ali in this “Ghazal” uses the refrain “tonight” to bring about a rhyming unity. A ghazal is generally concluded with a *makhta* or a signature couplet where the writer reveals his/ her identity and completes the composition. In one of his ghazals he concludes with *takhallus* or a pen-name. Shahid Ali writes:

They ask me to tell them what Shahid means—

Listen: It means “The Beloved” in Persian, “witness” in Arabic (2000, 72).

The signature couplet marks the return. Shahid Ali, like the other ghazal practitioners, reveals the meaning of his own name which is marked with complexity between two languages. In other words, the final couplet includes the poet’s impression either in the first or third person. It frequently carries the poet’s own name or derivation of its meaning that invokes melancholy, love, longing or it may even ask metaphysical questions. Ghazal in its original form deals specifically with an illicit and unattainable love.⁵ The Indian ghazals are mostly influenced by Islamic mysticism—love for a higher being or a mortal beloved both of which are metaphoric and ever illusive. Written from the point of view of an unrequited lover upon his unreciprocated love, Shahid Ali moves towards the form while negotiating with the structure. In ghazals, poetic

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expression of the beauty of love goes hand in hand with the pangs of separation due to the loss of the object of love and a similar intersection of loss and love can be located in Shahid Ali's ghazals.

While Shahid Ali imitates the form to the maximum and crucially aspires the lyricism of Urdu and Arabic ghazals, he upsets the boundary of both form and content. While the form—a pre-given cultural trait—articulates just the return of the genre in a different language, the content—hastily reflected by an engagement with historical performance—is submerged in the tradition of ghazal composition. Knowingly however does Shahid Ali become imitative of the genre, and the repetitive act must not be hastily concluded as too genteel and imitative. There is a radical transgression in Shahid Ali's hybrid ghazals and the differences should be examined critically. In spite of complying with the original form of ghazal, yet a visible transition can be seen in Shahid Ali's composition. His ghazals in English show a subversion in both form and content. He deviates a little in delineating his split-self in the middle of the ghazal while personalizing it to the maximum. Disappointed with the existing belief system within which he was raised, he says:

*I beg for haven: Prisons, let open your gates—
A refugee from Belief seeks a cell tonight (2010: 193).*

While religious boundaries intersect relatively a secular ideal, Shahid Ali upsets “the belief” ghazals in general propose to attain. Such a trick, eventually can be located in other ghazals, sets the tone of the making of a trend in Shahid Ali. In yet another ghazal in *Rooms Are Never Finished*, dedicated to the comic character Daniel Hall and written on the death of James Merrill, he begins with “I'll do what I must if I'm bold in real time / A refugee, I'll be paroled in real time” (293). The couplet indicates a state of helplessness in which the poet, with lost love and loneliness, becomes a desolate. With no choice left other than giving in to destiny as that of a refugee a lonely Shahid waits for the right moment when he would be paroled or relieved of his pain of separation with a union whether in space or in memory and the trend continues.

A ghazal in *The Country Without a Post Office* where he rues about the loss of Arabic language, the first couplet reminiscences the memory and urges for return in terms of language. Arabic for him has been the only surviving language that has witnessed a history of loss. It is noteworthy to mention that Shahid Ali's ancestors migrated from Arabia, so the poet perceives an obligatory share in the ancestral culture and its language.

Quoting Charles Simic, Shahid Ali perceives that “No human being or group of people has the right to pass a death sentence on a city” (2009, 194), and accordingly does he conclude: “Where there were homes in Deir Yassein, you'll see dense forests— / That village was razed. There's no sign of Arabic” (226). Born and raised in a Shia Muslim family in India, in Kashmir, for which he has learnt Kashmiri and Urdu but having chosen to write in English, he inherits the hybridity of cultural differences. The second couplet “Ancestors, you've left me a plot in the family graveyard— / Why must I look, in your eyes, for prayers in Arabic?” (Ali, 2010: 225) that follows seems to be a repetition on the outset. It stands for an amalgamation of culture and language, and uses English to represent the eastern form. Both the lines of the couplet remain antithetical to each other. Shahid craves for his homeland, of his ancestors'. The first line

represents a place for him in his ancestral lineage and graveyard which he acknowledges. But the very next idea completely contradicts his nostalgic attitude shown in the first line. He detests his ancestors and wonders why he should be bestowed with their blessings in a language Arabic that is alien to him. Hence a feeling of nostalgia is coupled with a deep sense of anti-nostalgia. Shahid Ali advocates a return to cultural origins as in “Arabic” and goes on to question the return. The duality of meaning is well exemplified in the form of ghazal which provides the multiplicity of themes an apt form. His situation of dilly-dally regarding hybridity and indigeniety gets represented in the repetitive occurrence of refrain in ghazal. The use of refrain, that is a part of first couplet or the origin couplet of a ghazal, marks Shahid Ali’s longing for his original home that often keeps cropping up in spite of his acknowledgement of the fact that power lies with the condition guaranteed by hybridity. Refrain moreover with its every appearance gives a freshness of meaning and perspective. Shahid Ali performs hybrid ghazals—an orthodox poetic composition in English and the idealization of the form is as political as the representation of political massacres that frequent Kashmir.

Shahid Ali’s engagement with the domain of cultural difference may not be taken as an ancestral inheritance in totality however. Homi Bhabha reminds us in *The Location of Culture*: “Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition” (1994, 3). Shahid Ali’s engagement with the ancestral language—its revival and performance—in English shows an intermediary approach towards reviving the lost tradition. The lost form comes back to life. The language, tradition and art—all minoritarian in their being— make a come back. There is a cultural translation juxtaposing the western aesthetics as well as the eastern aesthetics and tradition in the practice of writing ghazals. It certainly seems odd to speak of unity in ghazal in the strictest neo-Aristotelian sense and this is a sufficient indication that the ghazal, unlike the sonnet, shows Shahid Ali’s resistance of western predominance of form and content. It is ironic to certain extent that Shahid Ali returns to his origins only by crossing the bridge hybridised with the confluence of the east and the west with language, culture, genre, form and at the top of it the aesthetics of poetic rendition. He even goes to the extent of re-contextualising the poems with his practice of intertextual blending in his use of allusions those are native Indian and Islamic to the core. So how does Shahid Ali contemporize his ghazals while negotiating with the loss of a tradition and opposing western canonical notions of poetic composition? In what ways does he transgress the idea of traditional to contemporary? What is unique about enacting the English ghazals in performance is that the remembrance achieved in the ghazals renders a transnational and transcultural perspective.

Torn between exact traditional representation of the genre and in a language academically inherited, Shahid Ali in no way seems to be able to side line the influence of cultural and lingual intermingling of his upbringing.⁶ Political turmoil and the subsequent self exile from the terrestrial heaven—Kashmir— present the epic distance of Man from Eden. Perfection and a state of bliss, transgressing man and generating a sense of imperfection, suffering and exile thoroughly predominate the poetic themes. The loss of Kashmir is the loss of homeland that is fragmented physically and textually as Shahid Ali reminisces “PARADISE ON EARTH BECOMES HELL” (2009: 257; author’s emphasis). Almost all the ghazals anthologized in *TheCountry Without a Post Office* and *Rooms Are Never Finished* open with a sense of

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destruction that is brought in its wake a disintegration of a utopian civilization. The ruin has left the poet devastated. The satanic intervention is maligned with the beauty, purity and serenity of Kashmiri civilization, of Arabic language, of love, of poetry and of everything perfect. They have all lost their perfection and have turned into ashes. Left to reside in “Memory’s dim places” (2009, 270) and in rumours, Shahid Ali runs away to take refuge in an adulterated civilization that stands for fusion. As an inheritor of traditional purity, Shahid Ali continues the effort of maintaining purity of the ghazal although he ends up with inevitable influence of modernity upon it. Every couplet completes its cycle—both in existence and in form. It begins with the fall of Shahid Ali from his fragmented homeland or the object of his loss and aspires purity through his past identification and linkage with the pure language ‘Arabic’ and through a traditional ghazal form. In his hypnotic turn Shahid Ali passes through tragic, romantic, religious and political events of the world thereby purging himself from his personal loss and desire. He unites himself with the race of poets who, like the Sufi saints, together has transcended from mundane realities of nature to be in union with the Almighty.

A duality of exiled tradition remains operative in Shahid Ali. On the one hand, it is Urdu-Rekhti tradition of Ghalib, Mir and Faiz that searches the lost home or love and on the other it is the spatial or intellectual exile of Edward Said, Osip Mandelstam and Mahmoud Darwish. Exiled from home, homeland and nation, the poet takes refuge in poetry and in poetry does he negotiate his identity for the lost home, tradition and language. In an untitled “Ghazal” in *The Country Without a Post Office* he creates an inter-cultural textual site where he returns to his desire for cultural roots and for purity. Towards the end of the ghazal, he comes to his origin—origin of his name. His name is divided between two languages, none of which is his mother tongue. By translating the meaning of his name into another non-native language, English, the poet realizes that his origin itself is far from pure. Similarly in another ghazal published in *The Beloved Witness: Selected Poems* (1992), Shahid Ali writes:

*Memory is no longer confused, it has a homeland—
Says Shammās: Territorialize each confusion in a graceful Arabic* (1992, 71).

The homeland, like tradition and culture, does not any more become spatial and negotiates its existence in memory. It gets represented metaphorically in poetry and gracefully in tradition. Though not present in actuality, its existence becomes merely textual. The textual genesis of homeland has to find its expression in form, in ghazal; and in tradition, in Mir and Darwish. The Koranic and Indo-Persian allusion may be interpreted and argued in favour of a homeland that is lost and yet has a performative picture in poetry. Shahid Ali writes:

*Hagar, in shards, reflects her shattered Ishmael.
Call her the desert Muslim—or Jew—of water* (Woodland, 2005: 257)

He refers to Ishmael who is regarded as the “father of the Arab nation” (258). One of the sons of Abraham, Ishmael also was forced to leave his homeland in anticipation of a new nation—of the Arabs with a religion, language and culture of their own. The new nation being a replica of the old would not be the pure representation of the former, rather it would be a subverted image of it. The new identity thus borne across inherently contains a regeneration of it in concrete terms⁷—a place that is not the original but the remake of it with a concocted identity of its own. Ishmael

hence mourns the loss of his homeland, his family, his language, his tradition of which he was an inherent part. Hence history lost is history itself and returning to it in its purest form can only be achieved in memory. It has merely become his-story and return to it remains impossible. Time has stolen its very existence; its impression can only be retained in one's memory. And further, in projecting the loss of the tradition that Shahid Ali implants a highly personalized theme of loss that singularly makes his ghazals exceptional. A similar lyrical quality is achieved in other poems with multiplicity of themes and layers of meanings.

In bereaving for everything dying does Shahid Ali perform an act of rebellion: his mother's loss is a personal act which is blended with Zainab's lamentation; mourning the death of his revolutionary friend is a political act where Kashmiri struggle is centralised; bemoaning for a rare but rich culture, tradition and language is a prophetic act that demands an emancipation of the glorious past. His impulsion in moving across borders in search of fatality is in his interest to establish a relationship, a link or to recall what has been lost from the face of the earth. While Shahid Ali crosses the borders of Kashmir and New Delhi and localizes Petersburg and Massachusetts, themes of loss and exile subjugate the poetic of rebellion. Srinagar's curfew continually has to be represented but the purest sense of bliss still provides a backdrop to the poems. In "The Blessed Word: A Prologue" published in *The Country Without a Post Office* (2000), Shahid Ali alludes to Osip Mandelstam, who centralizes Petersburg and writes:

He reinvents Petersburg (I, Srinagar), an imaginary homeland, filling it, closing it, shutting himself (myself) in it. For there is the blessed word with no meaning, there are flowers that will never die, roses that will never fall, a night in which Mandelstam is not afraid and needs no pass. The blessed women are still singing. (2000, 3)

The Kashmiri women in the poem are left to lament over their dead sons of the soil. Singing the songs of Hubba Khatun, a peasant girl, her distress, her journey from being a peasant girl to queen and later her fall with the exile of her husband by the Mughal King Akbar, their lamentation for the martyrs have continued from the wake of Mughal opposition till today's opposition of the Kashmiris against various atrocities and governmental policies. With each death the women of Kashmir sing elegies in memory of the death of the loved ones as well as in lamentation of a glorious civilization that is coming to an end. It seems as if the image of Kashmir, as a paradise as opposed to its fall from it, is created through texts and songs. It is re-lived in memory and is enacted in ghazals and elegies.

Self-exiled in the American West, in Agha Shahid Ali the theme of exile works in multiple levels towards attaining a metaphysical pleasure through a nostalgic longing for a language, people, culture or nation that was once serene and pure. The theme, along with experimentation with poetic forms, works at various levels in his poetry. Shahid Ali's exiled condition is so central to the mature collections of poems—*The Country Without a Post Office* (2000) and *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2002)—that it is his diasporic identity that is performed within the Kashmiri poems. Why does Shahid Ali centralize the ghazal as a form in his volumes of poetry? Why Kashmir/Lorca/Arabic? What purpose do they serve? Shahid Ali writes in *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English* (2000):

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Finally, I found it tantalising to strike a playful pose of Third-World arrogance, laced with a Muslim snobbery (I hope no one will accuse me, as an editor once did, of playing some kind of wise sage from the East). For a free-verse ghazal is a contradiction in terms. As perhaps a free-verse sonnet arguably, is not? At least those who arrive at free verse sonnets have departed from somewhere: from Petrarchan platforms or Elizabethan terminals (as all the ghazals in this volume, even when not entirely true to the canonical form, reveal departures from a definite place)... (2).

An ancient traditional version of poetry that had once created an up-roar in the eastern world could be one of the major options to experiment upon to help represent his personal situation—of loss and exile. Ghazal as a poetic genre is both personal as well as impersonal. In the words of Ahmed Ali, the ghazal in its form has “dedication to love, and the beloved. At the same time, the form permits, in the best Persian and Urdu practice, delineation of all human activities and affairs from the trivial to the most serious” (Ali, 2000: 3). Generally while composing ghazals, poets perform the act of a romantic hero who is either a passionate and a desperate lover or a visionary prophet absorbed in mystic delights or even an iconoclast who celebrates love for wine and of drunkenness. In contemporary times, the composers express their radicalism and revolution for freedom in their suffering in solitude that receives relief through short visions or memory envisioning utopia and hence deriving ecstasy. The desperation for abstracts, divine or even of human objects which are inaccessible is made accessible with metaphorical representations, memories, and the objects of desire. Shahid Ali in his ghazals tries to reach his object of desire into the object of his want and he personifies himself as the desired object itself. He searches for a pure homeland and re-lives his Kashmir, its culture, its martyrs through language and metaphor but not in the temporal of space. Later he settles down with the fact that man is an alien on earth—his origin is impure and is marked with loss of homeland and security, so he is no different. Enlightened with a fact of life that speaks of the world being a bivouac for every human being Shahid Ali comforts himself and moves on to derive pleasure in remaking the history lost through his poetry.

The search is futile, but can achieve perfection, purity, security only through death. Thus a duality of existence and non-existence remains central to the ghazals. Usually in a ghazal the poet in guise of a lover expresses his own experiences and passion. So also does Shahid Ali in his ghazals where he lays open his nightmarish experiences along with his passion for his lost homeland, culture, language, poetry, music, beauty and every other thing that is a personification of perfection. But at the same time his ghazals deviate a little; he makes his presence felt not with his expressions as a lover rather as a beloved.

What is Mandelstam’s Petersburg is Shahid Ali’s Kashmir, Srinagar. Places are thus portrayed as metaphors for dying civilizations. Shahid Ali’s ghazals and poems carry his vulnerability and sadness for the decaying civilizations which were once marked with religious diversity and cultural peace. In “The Correspondent” he equates the condition of the city of Sarajevo during the Bosnian war of independence with that of torn Kashmir, a historical city famous for its traditional, cultural and religious diversity. Equating his self-administered exile with Mandelstam’s exile or his cross-border associations relating to political sieges of ancient cities, Shahid Ali unifies personal losses with the world’s losses. His nostalgia for a lost Kashmiri youth is visible in his chase for Irfan when he says in “The Blessed Word: A Prologue”: “”We shall

meet again, in Srinagar,” I want to answer Irfan. But such a promise? I make it in Mandelstam’s velvet dark, in the black velvet Void” (2000, 3). And hence occasionally Shahid Ali implants human characters to portray the devastation upon and traditions that lack a sense of human historicity. The real characters portrayed are so synonymous with a metaphorical subjectivity that it is almost impossible to synonymise them with living beings, rather it is ideal to locate them as metaphors for a condition that the poetic representation of “being” renders to the historical loss.

The transition of Shahid Ali from his childhood to adulthood—from loss of homeland to its being a memory—is a voyage he undertakes in a boat, the culmination of which can be located in “I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World” (2010, 313). He would undertake a boat ride continuously, but in memory too innocence remains missing. Gula, the boatman and Rizwan, the keeper of Paradise, would return again in the epic. And the epic struggle would need a mock-epic form and the narrative technique is in need of serious subversion. The underworld created is a sign of ghost—a signifier of non-existent reality— of Paradise, of Kashmir, of mother and of innocence. The predominant themes of loss and exile continue to empower the varied experimentations in form and structure. “The Blessed Word: A Prologue,” a poetic prose, for instance, introduces the theme of loss and the on-going political turmoil in Kashmir and as we proceed with *The Country Without a Post Office*, the loss becomes explicitly political. The ghazals housed in the collection imitate the loss of love as in Ghalib, who un-patronized and deserted, laments his internal exile in verses. So does Shahid Ali lament the un-housed and de-territorialized sons of the homeland, the nation-state Kashmir. In another unnamed ghazal Shahid Ali remembers his lost / dead lovers who made love to him beside the Shalimar. Memory is then torn apart as he thinks he is exiled in prison where he is tormented due to his personal losses. He pleads to take refuge in haven—a place which is safe and serene. Comparing himself with Ishmael, Shahid Ali goes on to nomenclature himself as Ishmael for he has become a destitute with no home—no territory and no nation to call his own. Ali sets on an experimentation with the different forms of poetry—one-line poem, two-line couplets, prosaic poems and ghazals. He alludes to historical and religious elements to universalize his plight. For instance, the poem “I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight” lays open of the poet’s dream of Kashmir, his homeland, that is devastated because of political catastrophe. He mourns his friend’s loss and loss of Kashmiri youth. His helplessness within the geographical space of exile props up every night in his dreams of Kashmir and of his community clamouring for help. The loss of homeland is the loss of language which in turn presents the loss of a cultural tradition. The lament for the loss of his ancestor’s language—‘Arabic,’ a language as ancient as history—is “the only language of loss left in the world” (2000, 71). The poem, characterised by a gentle irony, revolves around thematic, cultural, historical, religious as well as linguistic spheres. An element of nostalgia moreover allows the poet to escape from the present insecurity, from the memory of death and loss.

Reference to a dying language, a historical loss, remains central to even *The Country Without a Post Office*. Seen from a larger perspective, the poet attempts to raise his personal loss to the universal loss. Referring to other literary personnel Yehuda Amichai, Anton Chammas, Garcia Lorca, he succeeds in presenting their common love for an extinguishing language, Arabic, and laments the power of expression with which mankind suffers. In a poem “In Search of Evanescence” in *A Nostalgist’s Map of America* (1991) Shahid Ali recollects the memory of the death of an eighty-year old who was the last surviving person to speak an ancient language called

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Oubykh (which has a Turkish origin). He sees an ancestral connection among the language, the dead man and himself. His paternal ancestors were Turks and his first name Agha signifies a Turkish lineage. He is able to find similarity and link across the world. Death of a person for Shahid Ali signifies death of a tribe, the death of landscapes and the death of a language.⁸The theme of loss is presented in the classical ghazal form, a form that itself is lost in tradition and oblivion. It helps to release an individual from his personal impulses by finding similar traits in historical and religious events. Not necessarily that the sense of identification would be apparently found only in man and similar beings but also in waning languages, cultures and civilisations which have witnessed suffering and of which man is a mere representative. The last collection of poetry *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001) has an elegiac tone. Yoking personal as well as political tragedy, Shahid Ali experiments with the form again—ranging from lengthy poems to his oneliners, “On Hearing a Lover not Seen for Twenty Years Has Attempted Suicide” and “Suicide Note”.

The conceptual category of form needs to negotiate with a grand narrative technique and the grand narrative in turn has to articulate a popular cultural subject. The mock epic form thus negotiates with other poetic forms such as lyrics and elegies and the prosaic poetry to narrate the tale of Zainab, the witness of the battle of Karbala. Shahid Ali introduces the weeping Jesus, who in answering his disciples, predicts that “At this site the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) will one day be killed.” (Ali, 2010: 250) And Jesus wept. The frightful tale of Zainab—of the righteous battle of Karbala—is adequately an epic subject Shahid Ali attempts to project in his writing. The ghazal, being closed in its approach, thereby is supported with other forms to portray the saga of religious martyrdom. The Koranic image of exile comes into picture, to be retold in poetic performance and to bring back the grief of a civilization which has its performative implication even today. A Shia Muslim, Shahid Ali alludes to the martyrs of Karbala, and its survivors who were left to tell the tale of atrocities and oppressions meted out to them in the battlefield. After the battle of Karbala, Zainab the sister of Hussain—the slain martyr and the grandson of Prophet Mohammad—is taken as prisoner along with Hussain’s son Zain-ul-Abedin. They reach Kufa and from there they are taken to Damascus. Wherever they go, they address people and narrate the cruelty and atrocities that are committed at Karbala by Yazid. Zainab is vociferous to denounce Yazid and his claim to be the representative of God. She raises her voice and gives many orations on how Hussain is killed. The invocation they carry for the slain sons—of Karbala in actuality and in Shahid Ali its purview includes the sons of Kashmir—remains an indicator of the grand tale of exile. Zainab thus sings and mourns in Shahid Ali:

*So weep now, you who of passion never
made a holocaust, for I saw his children
slain in the desert,
crying for water.
Here me. Remember Hussain,
what he gave in Karbala, he the severed
heart, the very heart of Muhammad, left there
bleeding, unburied. (256)*

Water and thirst are central metaphors in the grand tale of Karbala and are constantly evoked in Islamic tradition. Hussain leads his soldiers against Yazid and fights till the end. He is about to

bring victory when he hears a voice from the skies reminding him of the childhood promise to sacrifice his life for the cause of Islam. He is permitted to offer Namaz-e-Asr and is slantreacherously the moment his head bows to God. Zainab narrates the heart-rendering incident of the battlefield. She narrates the monstrosity and brutality and how drinking water is stopped for the supporters and the family of Prophet Mohammad. Such a brutality takes many lives of the young and the old. The youth too find it difficult to survive and so they are asked to leave and move towards safety in the dead of the dark night by Hussain himself. Many leave and a handful unflinching supporters of Hussain remain—lesser than a hundred. Made weak by their thirst, they still fight without surrendering. After the battle is over, one of Hussain's wives Shahrbanu, the princess of Persia, vows not to drink water till the rest of her life. It is left upon the mourning Zainab to immortalize the martyrdom in her tales. The legendary sacrifice of Hussain is made a legendary epic event in Islamic civilization. The incident possesses such an effect that "water" becomes a religious and cultural symbol: "Mourners beg for water," Shahid Ali would write, "—the martyrs' thirst. They wound their head, and "the green grassy field" where their processions end "becomes bloodied and looks like a field of poppies" (253). In commemorating the martyrdom, Islam takes such a vow across nations, languages and cultures never to deprive any living being—whether friend or foe—of drinking-water. Zainab raises her plight of sorrow from Kufa to Damascus—performing *marsia*—and a new culture of Islamic elegy comes into existence. In immortalizing the grand-tale of Karbala does Shahid Ali pays homage to the forms and he would constantly evoke Zainab's suffering in most of the poetry collections: "from Karbala to Kufa to Damascus. / You are wearing black. The cry of the gazelle / fills the night. It's Zainab's cry" (258). The departed souls or the martyrs of the land have to be remembered. The bloodshed at Karbala not only remains a historical act but its importance increases manifold with each year's performance during Muharram.

Memorializing the battle through storytelling or the performance of the *marsia* becomes a phenomenon essential to existence in all ages and centuries and it has its continuation even today. Shahid Ali intends to transgress the bloodcurdling incident by narrating devastation in Kashmir parallel to it, personalizing it and thereby universalizing it. An attempt as grand as this can give the political massacre in Kashmir, the burning of Deir Yassin and even the political catastrophe in Palestine—a phenomenon of destruction or mass murder that gives a scar to the human civilization or the whole mankind. And hence Shahid Ali goes on to quote Charles Simic, "No human being or group of people has the right to pass a death sentence on a city" (194). Zainab's exile from Karbala to Kufa to Damascus parallels Shahid's mother's movement from city to city looking for health-care. His mother's plight stands for a woman's grief who in general bears the burden of retelling the story of martyrdom. Being the survivor she undertakes the responsibility of carrying the tradition forward by singing *marsia* year after year without fail. Everyday massacre in Kashmir retrieves the events of Karbala. Zainab's personal lamentation could find a space in historical, cultural and religious lamentation over the sacrifice of Hussain—the Shia martyr resurrected as Shai Prophet. Shahid's mother and her elegies could exceed their geographical boundaries and relocate the plight.

Influenced by Faiz Ahmed Faiz and James Merrill, Shahid Ali in his poetry celebrates and laments love and loss simultaneously and maintains its sacredness in form, content and theme. The poems in *Rooms Are Never Finished* take the readers in two directions—one a centripetal journey towards the purest form of culture as in the unnamed ghazal:

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*What was I to prophesy if not the end of the world?
A salt pillar for the lonely lot, even the rain (2000, 57),*

and the centrifugal journey of loss, mourning, death, exile and the end of the world as in “I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World”:

SO IT’S ANOTHER CHRONICLE OF LOSS...
AND LOVE. “Whose voice was that, fine out of” CLEAR DARK BLUE?
(2000, 97; author’s emphasis)

A journey that is centripetal and at the same time centrifugal is significant of the movement of the Sufi dervishes of Konya. The Sufi dance illustrates the binary opposites—receiving God’s grace with one palm cupped upward while the other hand cupped downwards signifying the emptying of the grace of God onto the world. A whirl of the kind makes each dervish to see his own reflection on the other. Shahid’s whirling—one towards the heavenly purity and the other towards earthly impurity, leads to transcend himself into the metaphysics of abstract or divine where he could feel the reflection of perfection in the imperfect world (Yarshater, 1988: 205-206).

Central to Shahid Ali’s themes is thus exile and central to form is the ghazal. Be it a loss of the personal self, as in death of a friend or the loss of a tradition, language, identity and self, they are highly significant in restructuring the performative nature of his identity. Tragedy being the basis of performance, Shahid’s ghazals are an epitome of tragic element:

*What will suffice for a true-love knot? Even the rain?
But he has bought grief’s lottery, bought even the rain. (2010, 282)*

The highest form of drama ends in *catharsis* where the poet or the beloved is purged of excess of emotions bringing him back to a healthy and balanced mind making him one with the serene and the ultimate Soul:

*If my enemy’s alone and his arms are empty,
Give him my heart silk-wrapped like a child by exiles.
Will you, Beloved Stranger, ever witness Shahid—
Two destinies at last reconciled by exiles? (2010, 298)*

A stream of diversity of thought remains operative in Shahid Ali, so also the multiplicity of forms. The ghazal form is introduced so that a degree of liberty can be exploited in projecting multiple themes where as the lyrics and narrative poems through metaphors project multiple themes. A reader should be conscious of the transition of stances in Shahid Ali and at the same time the reader has to be so attentive to the form that each metaphor can be made meaningful as he resides in an imaginary homeland. That it is difficult to locate the complexity of a singular thought remains essential to Shahid Ali. To Shahid Ali’s idealized phrasing “contrapunctal rhetoric” moreover one should highlight to understand that the cultural loss, the memory, the exiled condition and the absence of women, lamentation over the dead are all performances that

Shahid Ali projects to put forward a state of mind that has no similar thought, expression or form to project the same.

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