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Transcultural and Diasporic Consciousness in Agha Shahid Ali's *The Veiled Suite*

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Diaspora— desire to return to the original 'Homeland' has now come to incorporate meanings as varied as 'exiles', 'émigrés', 'expatriates'. A native place has major significance in defining the identity of an individual. He never felt a sense of loss gaining double vision which characterizes his identity. In this context, Agha Shahid Ali never thought himself rootless. His hyphenated identity as an Indian-American, a Kashmiri-Indian, and a Shia-Muslim did not prove to be a depriving one. He, in fact, reached to the status of the cultural ambassador of the country. Being a member of South Asian Community in America, he was conscious of his responsibility toward his culture. He does not show his interest in politics. On the other hand, he raises a strong voice of protest against political repression and the plight of the laymen in the valley. He assimilates into the composite culture of India and the images used in his poetry such as images of Radha, Krishna, Laila, Majnoon, Imam Hussain and Zainab affirm his involvement with the composite culture of India. Moreover, Ali is inspired from various writers as Ghalib, Fai Ahmed Faiz, James Merrill and Lorca. Displacement, whether forced or self-imposed, often leads to nostalgic outpourings on the part of a writer. Yet the writers in their displaced existence generally tend to excel in their works, as if the changed atmosphere acts as a stimulant for them. To quote Joseph Brodsky in *The Condition We Call Exile*:

One more truth about the condition we call exile is that it accelerates tremendously one's otherwise professional flight—or drift—into isolation, into an absolute perspective: into the condition in which all one is left with is oneself and one's own language, with nobody or nothing in between.¹

There are many poets, who from their nullity found the capacity to create newness. So it seemed for Dante, and so too it seemed for the Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali, as his collection of poems, *The Veiled Suite*, demonstrates. The newness that Agha Shahid Ali created emerged from the chaos of Kashmir, the disputed territory straddling India and Pakistan. Born on February 4, 1949, in New Delhi, India, Agha Shahid Ali was raised in Kashmir, but left in 1976 for the United States. Ali never permanently returned to Kashmir, up until 2001 and just before he died that same year, he refused the title US citizen, instead of he preferred the title immigrant, and, in his poems, exile. *The Veiled Suite*, published in 2009, encompasses the thirty years and six volumes of poems Ali completed in the US, poems that obsessively explore the anguish of displacement through memory, history, symbolism, and a unique blend of European and Urdu poetic traditions.

For Ali, exile, loss, and the related yearning for home remained the primary concern. In these poems, a veil is the curtain between life and death, between this world and what is hoped for in the next. Moreover, the veil represents the gauze through which Ali views the past and through which he yearns for his lost homeland. Ali admits the difference between what he yearns for and what actually exists. His diasporic sensibility for a lost homeland provides the thematic skeleton for his entire oeuvre. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, by combining European form with content that typically refers to his Kashmiri and Indian background, Ali's poetry itself becomes a metaphor for the cultural amalgamation of the immigrant. There is a perfect amalgamation of European and Islamic prosodic devices including quotations and allusions from both cultures. He did his M. A. from the University of Delhi and PhD from Penn State and an MFA from the University of Arizona. He began his academic career in 1987 at Hamilton College in New York and moved to the University of Massachusetts-Amherst in 1993, where he served as director of the MFA creative writing program. In 1999 he became professor of English and creative writing at the University of Utah. He was a visiting professor at Princeton University and in the Graduate Creative Writing program at New York University. Ali was awarded Guggenheim and Ingram-Merrill Fellowships and a Pushcart Prize and his collection *Rooms Are Never Finished* was a finalist for the National Book Award in 2001. Ali died of brain cancer on December 8, 2001 and was buried in Northampton in Amherst, Massachusetts. The University of Utah Press awards the Agha Shahid Ali Poetry Prize in memory of the celebrated poet and beloved teacher. Ali enjoys the benefits of three cultures – Muslim, Hindu and Western.

Ali's poems are like his conversation and undoubtedly are remarkable for range and variety of sources. He took his inspiration from the literatures of several continents, Bollywood, Hollywood and art-house cinema, classical European music and American pop. Islam in his poetry proves to be a powerful gravitational force. He had a very deft touch for light verse which can be seen in the poems of his chapbook, *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages*. About his philosophy, Ali is of the view that: "I don't have philosophy; I have a temperament."² Ali was quite close to his mother and he remembers her again and again in his poems. The death of his mother due to brain cancer shook him to the core and the pitch of grief as expressed in his poems is almost unbearable. Ali expressed his love and concern for the people of his native country in *The Country Without a Post Office*, written with the Kashmir conflict as backdrop. He translated the Urdu poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz as *The Rebel's Silhouette; Selected Poems*. He was the editor for the Middle East and Central Asia segment of Jeffery Paine's *Poetry of Our World*. He compiled the volume *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English*. His book *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* is a collection of English ghazals. His poems are featured in *American Alphabets: 25 Contemporary Poets* (2006) and other anthologies. There is immense amount of love in his poetry – in the four major collections, *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987), *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991), *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997) and finally, *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001). The poem "Postcard from Kashmir" opens with the line "Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox, / my home a neat four by six inches."³ The place rests heavy on his memory. He began as an immigrant poet but when he died, he was a poet at home, conscious of those in exile.

In this sense, he was different from Edward Said or Eqbal Ahmad or Mahmoud Darwish or Faiz Ahmed Faiz – all whom he cites and writes for in his *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001). In fact, Kashmir is his orientation that pins his poetry – the map of his motherland.

By the end of his tragic and short life, he emerged as a voice singing the full-throated songs of Kashmir out to the world. He wrote for New York, for Delhi, for Srinagar and Amherst and for other poets still he is read only through one lens i. e. his longing for Kashmir. In the poem, the poet describes receiving a postcard from his native land, Kashmir, a region of the Indian subcontinent, the parts of which are controlled by India, Pakistan and China. The disputes between India and Pakistan about the territory are long-lasting and unsolved. The postcard contains a photograph of Kashmir, his native land. Though he is geographically away from his native land, he uses the word as his “home”. The word has ironic implications as he is apparently away in some Western country yet he mentions that he “always loved neatness” – a trait that emphasizes the irony that he can now hold “the half-inch Himalayas in my hand”.⁴ The massive mountain range has been reduced to a small, tidy picture. The speaker holds the postcard as he has more literal ways lost touch with land he loves. Perhaps the most enigmatic lines of the poem are:

This is home. And this the closest

I'll ever be to home.... (5-6)⁵

Ali is the most eloquent Kashmiri-English poet. He is a writer of unmatched elegance and virtuosity, a chronicler of pain. His poetry reveals beauty, loss and redemption. In this respect, he can be compared with other regional writers who shot into fame after derecognition of normative Western or standardized versions of culture and language. These writers share a rootedness in place and native landscape. Seamus Heaney from Ireland, Derek Walcott from the Caribbean and Mahmoud Darwish from Palestine are the poets in whose works we find art surcharged with the politics of their native countries.

Ali's transnationalism or hyphenated identity can be clearly seen in his works as his works are wedded to the politically volatile nature of his native Kashmir. Through his poems, Ali gives a scathing account of the trauma the valley of Kashmir felt during the nightmare of nineties when the beautiful paradise valley turned into death and destruction. The most appropriate term that describes Ali is cosmopolitan. The word nostalgia does not define his attachment to his native place. In fact, he passed through a tormented phase of his land's history. There is an urgency to narrate the saga of violence that has become endemic to Kashmir. His is an exile that nourishes passion for the homeland. Ali prefers to be called an exiled or immigrant. *The Veiled Suite*, published in 2009, is a record of his emotionally felt experiences of thirty years and six volumes of poems Ali spent in the U. S. These poems explore the anguish of displacement through the means of memory, history, symbolism and a unique blend of European and Urdu poetic

traditions. *The Veiled Suite* is Ali's final work but becomes the first. The title poem starts the volume. The Canzone is a 65-line medieval Italian form related with sestina without any rhyme scheme. Every line of the poem ends with one of five keywords that must appear in a prescribed order. Ali's use of the difficult Italian form to imagine his own death reveals his ability to straddle divergent cultures along with his unflinching bravery.

In Rooms Never Finished, the last collection published before his death, he mourns the loss of his mother though there is the hint of losing his homeland underlying in it. The poem "I Dream I am the Ghat of the Only World", there is a blend of personal grief of mother and the homeland. In the poem "Snow on the Desert", from *A Nostalgist's Map of America*, he writes:

And just before the lights did flood her
again melting the frost
of her diamond
into rays, it was, like this turning dark
of fog, a moment when only a lost sea
can be heard, a time
to recollect
every shadow, everything the earth was losing,
a time to think of everything the earth
and I had lost, of all
that I would lose,
of all that I was losing.⁶

After listening the song of a singer in New Delhi, Ali recollects his homeland Kashmir that he lost during Kashmiri violence. Ali's poetry is densely symbolic and at the same time, his symbols are fairly ordinary – water, sea, air mirror, veil etc. water is a medium through which Ali dreams and refers to lost memory. He asks in wonder, "this dream of water – what does it harbor? ("I see Chile in My Rearview Mirror").⁷

The title poem *The Veiled Suite* is symbolic of border, a veil is the curtain between life and death, between this world and what is hoped for in the next. Through this veil Ali views his past. The poem "The Blessed Word: A Prologue" equates Ali to the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam who died in exile during Stalin's purges Petersburg (I, Srinagar) to confine himself in it. Ali cites his fellow exiled poets in fact to describe his own plight as Mandelstam and Mahmoud Darwish,

a Palestinian poet who spent his exile in both Arab and European cities, in *Rooms Never Finished*, Ali translates deceased poet's longer lines in the volume enhances the symbolic significance of the sentences in the poems. Because of his brilliant amalgamation of European form with the content of his Kashmiri Indian background, Ali himself becomes a metaphor for the poem "In Search of Evanescence" from *A Nostalgist's Map of America* traces the loss of a friend to AIDS. In fact, the structure of the poem is neither Urdu nor European. It suggests the ghazal, the Urdu poetic form that is always written in couplets without containing it. Section ten is an address to the poet himself – "Shahid, you never/ found Evanescence../ And how could / you have? " this is another signature of the ghazal to underline the suggestions.⁸ Ali has been proved a primary promoter of the ghazal. He has edited a broad collection of ghazals written in English by a host of noted poets called *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English*. He has his own collections of ghazals *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* to his credit, published after his death and included in *The Veiled Suite*. Ali combined the distinctive couplets of the ghazal with the language of European and American culture to create something new. These ghazals are dedicated to or written after writers, majority of them are American and one is dedicated to Lawrence Needham, a critic and reviewer of Ali. Ali incorporated in these ghazals the titles of books, quotations from the writer's work, and even direct address into the poems. This composite tradition makes the ghazal. The exploration of dual times, spaces and identities that was previously handled through Ali's short lines and the delay caused by abrupt line breaks in his free-verse poems would seem to lead directly to the appropriation of the ghazal form. The ghazal yokes unrelated couplets to coexist through a unifying refrain and preceding rhyme.

Interestingly, the multiplicities can coexist peacefully, and the tension is merely the momentary delay, through the long lines, in the reconciliation of the refrain at the end of the couplet. This poetics runs in tandem with speakers who have fallen out of time. "A Lost Memory of Delhi" places the speaker in a time where "he is not born" and his watching of his newly-wed parents: "his father / He is younger than him" and "his mother is a recent bride." Moreover, "They don't they won't / hear him", making it clear that the speaker has come unpinned from time and has floated back to a memory that could not possibly be his and in which he is attempting to interrupt the night of his being. But this is true of the parents, too, even though they are bound in a more discreet time and space where they are able to interact with each other. The house that they enter "is always faded in photographs" and oil lamp that lights it that speaker "saw broken in the attic."⁹ The past-perfect, in this case, is treated like the present. In this space where the past coexists with the future and the future coexists with the past, it is the present that is absent, the present from which the speaker has fallen out into a non-presence, where he cannot be perceived.

Ali has rightly been called the prophet of America. He goes poem after poem to his roots that roam through his background. He has many poems to his credit in which he expresses his diasporic sensibility. On the whole, *The Veiled Suite* collects the life's work of Ali with an identity of a Kashmiri-American poet. He draws his themes from a remarkable range of sources

that span continents and cultures. The volume is quite definitive and is regarded as Ali's indelible legacy. It is a testament to the revolutionary voice that introduced the form of ghazal to the American poetic lexicon and brought the landscape of Kashmir both emotionally and physically. The volume, as a whole, moves through themes of mourning and loss. There is a poignant nostalgia for Kashmir but it is also tinged with rage and despair as far as political turmoil of the country is concerned. Ali also sketched the geographical and psychological terrain of his second home in *A Nostalgist's Map of America*, thus defining the role of a cartographer and stargazer who meditates on themes of journey and exile, myth and politics, history and loss. The poem "Lenox Hill", in particular, expresses the loss deeply and truthfully as the poet mourns the death of his mother. In fact, *The Veiled Suite* is a tribute to the work of a beloved poet, Ali for making us acquaint with beauty of the place and its cultural significance. To quote Carol Muske-Dukes (Los Angeles Times):

What is timeless in these poems is the power of grief – sheer cliffs and drops of despair that he masters and spins into verse with astonishing technical virtuosity.¹⁰

On the whole, Ali's poetry revolves round various locations, histories and literary traditions in to a rich and complex "calligraphy of coils" (to use his own phrase). He incorporates within his narratives inter textual references to a variety of canonical poets ranging from Ghalib and Faiz Ahmed Faiz to W. B. Yeats, Wallace Stevens, Gerald Manley Hopkins, Osip Mandelstam, Mahmoud Darwish, James Merrill and Emily Dickinson. They actually express his assertion of his multicultural heritage. Apart from taking inspiration from Arabic legends and Greek and Indian myths, Ali uses allusions from many British and American poets. In fact, different national, cultural, religious, mythological and literary traditions interweave in a textual space in Ali's poetry. Though these traditions intersect each other and do not fall in to fixed categories, they forge new alliances and thereby create new semantic fields and lexicons to redefine their contemporary ethos. Ali engages with the past and the present in a recurrent pattern. His choice of poetic forms is unique as the use of forms such as ghazal, sestina, villanelle or Sapphic stanza is based on complex refrain. Thus Agha Shahid Ali's poetry bears a mark of cultural eclecticism and hybridity.

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