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## Meeting Worlds through Words: A Study of Linguistic and Cultural Hybridity in the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali

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### **Abstract:**

The beauty and richness of Agha Shahid Ali's style of expression orients the analysis for the role of three language- Urdu, English and Hindi respectively, in his poetic deliverance. His poetic lines are composite of words and phrases formed out of these three languages. Each language, out of which Shahid Ali elects the words possesses a set of regional, linguistic, historical and aesthetic components. In this paper an attempt is made to understand the poet's use of variety of dialects, idiolects, terms, phrases and idioms to emphasize cultural exploration, isolation and affiliation. His poetic expressions, dwelling upon different geographical and regional affiliations, are functional in nature and these expressions are oriented to draw the relationship between words and worlds in manner of poetic discourse. Thus, it is intriguing to study the reason of selection of certain words, phrases, idioms and references in combination with the others. Selection and combination are two quintessential coordinates to read the signified meaning rendered by the poet, in his various stages of poetic rendition.

**Keywords: Dialects, Idiolects, Cultural hybridity, Selection and Combination of words.**

The role of language in poetry is to create the poetic subject addressing the poetic self that is in pursuit of overcoming emotions. The poet often uses dialects and idiolects from the mother tongue to convey these emotions. In a language system, the concept of dialect refers to the characteristic features of a speaker's discourse confirming one's geographical belongingness. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines 'dialect' as "a variety of language that signals where a person comes from. The notion is usually interpreted geographically (regional dialect), but it also has some application in relation to a person's social background (class dialect) or occupation (occupational dialect)".

A language community of a geographical zone has certain set of grammar, vocabulary, syntax and common expressions. It generally underscores the difference of language formation and variation between the languages of two different zones. This further glorifies diversity within the same language tracing a language pattern (English- Urdu), (English-Hindi) that exists far aloof from the standard form of language. Therefore, the standard form of language makes a different pattern when used with language of a new geographical zone. The beauty and versatility of the new language lies in its unique individual pattern. It is due to regional, political and cultural isolation that a sub-system of speech community arises, which can be termed as a 'dialect'. As Nerys Williams in her book *Contemporary Poetry*

writes “the inclusion of dialect in poetry is often a way of affirming identities- often regional, national, economic and racial- that may be seen in a dialectical relationship with standard English”. (195)

Transforming to modern culture and exhibiting a post-colonial tone, the Indian poets embraced the colonizers’ language even before the period of early nineties which helped them maintain a subtle transition into a foreign language rather than adopting it completely. Ezekiel’s “Miss Pushpa” is one of the many such vibrant examples. It reflects that the poet makes use of the words from regional dialect which could be observed as the creolized form of standard language. As the poet, being an individual presents unique difference within the sub-system of the language, he submits a regional stance to his poetic realm and makes use of idiolectal language in poetry. (Words formed out of English-Urdu and English-Hindi hybridization)

The term ‘Idiolectal poetry’ was first used by Charles Bernstein in his essay ‘Poetics of America’. Nerys Williams maintains, “The word ‘idiolect’ surfaces in Charles Bernstein’s provocative essay of 1996 ‘Poetics of America’, where it is transmuted to ‘idiolect’. In this essay Bernstein argues for an ‘idiolectal’ approach to an American poetry, reliant less on a multiplicity of identities, than a plurality of a language”. (195). Maintaining the same line of thought, Mitali Pati Wong and Syed Khwaja Moinul in the book, *The English Language Poetry of South Asians: A Critical Study* remarks: “The influence of the metaphors and idioms of Indian vernacular languages is noted by poet and critic A.K. Mehrotra, who writes : “Each poet’s ‘continuous language’ or idiolect is constituted differently: Ramanujan’s is of English –Kannada-Tamil, Kolakar’s and Chitre’s of English-Marathi, Ali’s of English-Urdu, Mahapatra’s of English-Oriya, and Jussawalla has in an interview spoken of “various languages crawling around inside his head”.(16)

The adopted language which is English for non-English speaking world appears to stretch out to new domains. It is an exploratory task for the readers and the speakers who are the users of the standard form of language to unfold the differences in meanings conveyed in the work of art. The technical format though remains the same, but the sub-system of language in function altogether offers a new cultural space. The standard language is always in close divergence with the subsystem of language used by the poet to assert nostalgia, identity and alienation.

In doing so, the poet debunks with the conventional mode of writing, marking his trail towards a new canon. The role of existing language in its normative form is therefore, decentralized to create a space for one’s very own linguistic community. Simultaneously, the idiolectal use of language in a work of art strengthens the exotic past of the region and thereby restricts the popular language as the only single mode of expression.

The linguistic behavior of the poet helps to construct the social, personal and literary identities of the region, which in Ali’s case is Kashmir. The Urdu language used by the poet tempers an ethical and national representation, ancestral identity and cultural production which could be recognized as important components of the native language. The spread of

English has helped to shape multilingual setting in transmitting the variants of cultural community. It confines the monolithic model of representation and develops a range of English varieties strengthening cultural and national bonds. “The linguistic and idiolectal features of the poetry of almost all of the poets since mid-twentieth century in Indian English literature are the direct result of the Indian consciousness. Therefore, it is not surprising that these writers in English are conscious of their Indian-ness and, at the bottom of it all, one suspects of a crisis of identity which is evident in the poems in English by the poets who are mostly bilingual”(Ahmad, 6). Such practices help to share regional and communal experiences that were earlier unknown to the world at large. It showcases resistance towards one culture and resistance towards one standard use of language.

This chapter closely examines the poet’s usage of Urdu- English words to understand the meaning and poetic vision regarding the subject of the poems. Agha Shahid Ali tries to claim the past and merges it with the present by using words from language which are peculiar to the region of Kashmir in India. In his reference to Kashmir, in varying manners he creates space from the British Raj period to a maligned dream as referred in French language. In the words of Ali:

“I write on that void: Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir, Cashmir, Cashmire, Kashmere, Cachemire, Cushmeer, Cashimere, Casmir or Cauchemar in a sea of stories? Or : Kacmir, Kaschemir, Kasmere, Kachmire, Kasmir, Kerseymere?” (Ali, 171).

He asserts the variant cultural forms that have lived in colonial times and draws the example from rites and rituals, region and religion, art and literature. It is true that the nature of representation shapes the construction of identity. During the time of independence, the regional identity of Kashmir was constructed out of the political status of the Indian sub-continent. The representation of the land was therefore shaped on political policies which Shahid Ali renders in his poetic voice. His choice of idiom to evoke these images of a place is elusive of silence and rich heritage possessed by his motherland. It is to communicate on a global platform an idea which is both charged with aesthetical and political concerns in the poetic vision of Agha Shahid Ali. He submits that he writes on that void which is yet to be acclaimed before the entire world. Delimiting his text beyond the standard English literary canon, Shaihd Ali moves towards the expansion of the use of English language. In such diverse usage, the language tends to turn different in word formations and recitation of local narratives.

Remarks Agha Shahid Ali, on the relationship between English as standard normative language in the center and the use of sub-continental English by post-colonial writers as a language to explore new cultural centers, “I can use the Indian landscape, and the sub-continent’s myths and traditions, from within, and I can do so for the first time what might seem like a new idiom, a new language – subcontinental English... I have three major world cultures available to me without effort, cultures that I can appropriate, mix and exploit” (Bray, 149)

In his poems, the English, Hindi and Urdu worlds meet, merge and diverge paving ideas and proliferating verses of hybrid etymology to showcase a gradual development in the name of sub-continental English. “In the case of a bi-linguist immigrant writer, his mother tongue and the alien language become a double-edged sword which he is forced to bear as the alien language also take root with its cultural ramifications, making two strange languages co-exist in one synthesized sensibility: “ When Lorca died, they left the balconies open and saw:/ his gasidas braided , on the horizon into knots of Arabic”.(Majumdar,179).This is a celebration of texts and culture and of the different languages adhered by the poet who belongs to tricultural identity.

In reading the poems of Agha Shahid Ali, it can be recurrently collected that his verses are subjected to word play of phrases with the use of compound words. Urdu and English is used in same time to cross national borders and render plurality in language. Towards a newer domain of writing and ahead of traditional manner of following patterns from legendary writers , use of compound words asserts the potential of one nation language with the other. ‘Urdu, a silhouette’ as marked by Shahid Ali in his poem ‘Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz’ is juxtaposed with English to arrest observations of the global audience. In doing so, Shahid Ali offers a cultural intersection and interchange but nowhere shows importance to any single identity. “I have not surrendered any part of me, rather my claims to both Urdu and English have become greater. The way raga and the poem become each other’s for Begum Akhtar, so have Urdu and English become for me”.(Ali). He presents co-texts and contexts from different political and historical dimensions to voice the voiceless. In his practice of poetic forms, allegorical myths, dialect-driven vocabulary, Ali produces a section of non- English center focusing on racial, cultural and religious divisions treading along the history and geography of the Kashmir terrain.

Such sites of cultural mobility where Ali discusses about ‘Bhairavi’ and ‘ghazal’ opens window to rich excavation from the exotic east. In the poem “The Season of the Plains” from his volume *The Half Inch Himalayas* Ali make mention of the ‘Banaras thumri-singers’. The verbal structure relates to an art form which defines the unique style originated in Banaras. The poet’s language here is referential of a region that relates to its musical tradition. For a western reader ‘Banaras thumri singers’ is entirely new zone of experience and knowledge which he/ she is subjected to, by the poet because of cultural mobility that the poet indulges in, through his writing. This entails the transitory state of poet persona who migrates to a foreign geographical space and embraces a foreign language only to induce the foreign readers with his own rich cultural heritage.

Exploring along these lines a foreign reader occupies the idea of thumri as a genre in semi-classical Indian music. The term is colloquial to the word ‘gharana’ in the Indian sub-continent. He mentions about ‘Siddheshwari and Rascolan, their voices longing’ only to bring forth the fact about the style of thumri gharana singers. It fashions the notable feature of this singing style that bears fluctuations with ragas and is usually romantic or devotional in nature.

Another referential stress used by Ali, in the same verse is his mentioning of the legends of Heer and Ranjha, catching the reader's attention towards the unrequited tale of love and the longings of separation. These arrays of multiple images in terms of thumri gharana singer or the legends of Heer and Ranjha, gives emotive function to Ali's poetry. The response for 'longing' sewed from thumri gharana singers and merged with the tales of Heer and Ranjha construct a discourse which abundantly produces a sub-system of standard language in function to speak and explore, beliefs and practices, myths and traditions with the poet's indigenous subjects and the outer world. Ali's poetic imagination makes use of events and places, emotions dear to Kashmiri people to charge a literary conversation among the Westerners about a course of poetry that makes English a material medium to appeal for the other linguistic spaces of non-English speaking world. The subject matter of the poetic discourse is intensely localized, to segment a transformation of a geographical zone and the home of the poet which is Kashmir and in Ali's poem it is a region which is projected as a postcard of 'four by six inches'. Kashmir is linked and imagined in fragmentary images woven with the words taken from the speech community that lived across 'the Jhelum's water'. Ali mentions about his ancestors who travelled to 'Kashmir from Samarkand' and of his grandfather's recitation of Arabic inscriptions. The native culture keeps emerging and re-emerging with the mention of 'holy Koran' or the 'Malika Pukhraj's song' which otherwise would have been minimally captured in the attention of any Western reader.

These symptomatic stances merge and diverge in the poet's criteria of selection and combination all through the rhymes of Agha Shahid Ali. In his volume *The Half-Inch Himalayas* Ali constantly binds the temporal spaces by writing on minimal objects and thereby appealing a universal place for them. Ali mentions about Dacca gauzes, bangles, embroidered robes or a white turban. In these settings of poetic subject, Ali articulates his ancestral legacies through his old home, and talks about his ancestors as 'snowmen' reflecting a sense of loss through ideas of decay and melting. It is recalling the family tales in detailed description from 'heirloom sari' to retrace a cultural backdrop set by the poet and a sense of affiliation with the Indian and Kashmiri cultures. The historical discourse is vivified in pursuit of cultural settings. Ali writes:

'In history, we learned: the hands  
 Of weavers, were amputated  
 The looms of Bengal silenced,  
 And the cotton shipped raw  
 By the British to England".(Ali, 42-43)

Meghana Murlidar, in her article "The Cartography of Culture in Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry" elucidates the role of poetry as diversified object in Ali's poems. Language is a means to shed off the political and cultural concerns of a poet who is anxious to chart his distinct community. Memory becomes assertion of a linguistic setting. The poet's use of this linguistic setting is a mode to travel towards the identity of a community. "Two aspects of Ali's poetry

that stand out about his continuing significance in contemporary writing are his concern with history as a narrative and the role of memory, and language – and by extension, cultural identity- as a mythological rather than historical terrain”. In this context, it is substantial to understand another aspect figured in the verses of Shahid Ali. It is the form and function of English language framing a crucial image of contemporary Indian English poetry. The locations are relocated in the poet’s verbal memorabilia to explore the adoption of language in pursuit of addressing racial and regional differences. It widens the identity of the colonized people and helps these communities produce and introduce literary texts of their own indigenous culture. Shahid Ali, undertakes this gradual and tedious task to translate the oral stories of the Indo-Islamic culture in a foreign mode of expression.

It is a common observation that almost every Indian poet writing in English from Nissim Ezekiel to Kamala Das and further young poets have crafted the metaphor of language in functions to showcase the affiliations with culture. Weaving the similar notion, Shahid Ali, too covertly remarks in his poem ‘Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz’:

“In the free verse

Of another language I imprisoned

Each line- but I touched my own exile”. (58)

Another juncture suggestive in the poems of Agha Shaihd Ali is the references to the aborigines of America. In “Crucifixion” from *A Nostalgist’s Map of America* Ali embraces tribal American descendants and makes mention of ‘Navajos’ a tribe of the South Western United States. In another poem “Leaving Sonora” Ali unites another culture known as ‘Hohokam’. ‘Hohokam’ is a civilization of North-American Indians who belongs to Southern Arizona. It figures as a prominent pre-historic cultural way of living which could be now known in American Southwest. The poems by Shahid Ali in his reference to variant cultural and traditional forms arouse a set of images that moves across the world developing forth the scenes from world archive. For him India and America existed together, and we see him acknowledging this in many of his poems. In the poem “In Search of Evanescence” from *A Nostalgist’s Map of America*, Ali embraces two countries together as one:

‘India Always exist

Off the turnpikes

Of America’. (123)

Such conglomeration of two variant and distinct, vivid and glorious culture celebrate the hybrid tone effortlessly nurtured in his writing. Ali, harmoniously celebrates the meeting of two contrasting nations and ejects the distinctness of each of the nation as well as its pre-historic civilizations.

His poetry holds this action of reference all through the poems inviting readers to discover the world in words. “In Search of Evanescence” he mentions about a tribe from east of the

Catalinas to address the language of tribesmen, which is now in a state of extinction. Ali writes ‘A language will die with me’ urging the agony of loss which is incurable. “The Scraps of folklore” gives to the poet historic shades of a place and tribe, which has lived a set of traditions and customs but now lies dormant and unvisited. The language is a mode of complex transaction in the hands of poet reasserting his regional bond. Therefore, the language in the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali gives place to discourse. It signifies the post-modern spirit to help poetry circulate culture-specific discourse. It is the manner of understanding that the standard form of language is constructed by the relations of power and is not the only mode of expression.

Thus, there is no one conceptual framework. His poems are fractured sentiments supported by diversified terminology. In the poem “Season of the Plains”, the poet mentions about the Banaras thumri-singers and few lines later he alludes to the legends of Heer and Ranjha.

“..the Banaras thumri-singers/  
...their voice longing” (44)

Next Shahid writes about:

“Heer and Ranjha and others  
of legends, their love forbidden”. (44)

The style of Indian classical singing and its subjectivity is amalgamated with the legend of unrequited love. The two-varying center of time and space are intricately woven together in a continuous pattern. The narrative is postulated with discontinuities of two regional centers and thereby reunited in subjectivity. In such poetic assemblage, the reader is subjected to historical change through linguistic taxonomy. The different linguistic space conceptualizes the poet’s multi-disciplinary method of vivifying two digressive experiences. The cultural and linguistic flux could be here measured and judged in poet’s referral to Indian classical style and Punjabi legend.

The use of words, phrases, idiolects and dialects from different languages and the act of drawing parallels from different regional settings suggest the poet’s manner of conforming his multicultural and multilingual belongings. The inclusion of Urdu-Hindi words develops regional stance in his poems. It reflects that the poet loves to explore and encapsulate different cultural settings and various geographies together in the same thematic framework. He attempts to synthesize different cultural and linguistic experiences. It brings the experimentation and expansion of the English language, producing new cultural and linguistic centers. The selection and combination of Urdu and Hindi words produces non-English center elucidating his regional affiliation and an attempt to create universal space for lesser known linguistic circles.

Ali’s poetry is a sort of open system where many cultural and language systems articulate their part in a dynamic manner. His ghazels have specially incorporated in varying couplet-the historical, cultural and linguistic differences. The references are de-contextualised to help

reader go through the inter-generic and intra-generic relations of one language with the other. In such poetic terrain, Agha Shahid Ali has brought a consciousness that poetry can seek its representation from many language systems simultaneously. The expression of one language system can be efficiently enacted through the characters of another language system. Therefore, the poems of Agha Shahid Ali is a promising and progressive platform of linguistic and cultural hybridity.

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