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Villanelle: A Reviving Literary Form: A Comparative Study of *The First Day of Spring* of Agha Shahid Ali and *Mad Girl's Love Song* of Sylvia Plath

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the journey of villanelle to become a traditional literary form comparing the villanelles of Agha Shahid Ali and Sylvia Plath. Technically both the villanelles have similar form and theme. And both the poets are trying to convey their loss, loss of hopes, pessimistic philosophy, and melancholic situations through the medium poetry. The first portion of this paper will discuss villanelle as traditional form its advent and its way to reformation. The second portion of the paper will consider the analysis of *The First Day of Spring* of Agha Shahid Ali as a traditional Villanelle. The third portion will try to examine the poem *Mad Girl's Love Song* by Sylvia Plath. And the last portion of the paper will be the comparative study of the villanelles of Agha Shahid Ali and Sylvia Plath.

Keywords: Villanelle, tercet, quatrain, refrain, rhyme, Kashmir, exile, loss of identity, loss of hopes.

A villanelle is a traditional form introduced in English language in late 1800s from the imitation of French form of poems. Usually, a villanelle is a nineteen lines literary form that contains five tercets followed by a quatrain. The term is named after the name of a French poet François Villon (1431-1474). The name 'villanelle' has been derived from the Italian 'villanella' denoting a rustic song or dance (www.languageisavirus.com). Etymologically the word is related to the pastoral subjects. The form was originated as a ballad-like song without any fixed form containing refrains. In the poem there are two refrains and two repeating rhymes. The trend of villanelle writing established in English in late 19th century, which treats the subjects of obsession. According to Philip K. Jason "villanelle is often used and properly used, to deal with one or another degree of obsession" (wiki/Villanelle).

(I)

The villanelle was first introduced in France in 16th century. It had pastoral subjects with a refrain without rule. According to The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics the term was standardized in 17th century with Jean Passerat. His poem "Villanelle (J'ay Perdu ma Tourterella)" about turtle dove is the earliest known villanelle in the modern form and became the base of the fixed form of upcoming villanelles. It was first time written with two refrains in 19 lines. The rhyming scheme of it was A1 b A2/ a b A1/ a b A2/ a b A1/ a b A2/ a b A1 A2 (Preminger 1358). In spite of being a French form the majority of villanelles have been written in

English. Edmond Gosh and Austin Dobson popularized the form in England and with Edmond and Austin, Oscar Wilde, Andrew Land and George Payne were among the early practitioners of it. After getting rejection in 1890s the form get revived by James Joyce in 1914, William Empson in 1930s, W. H. Auden, Dylan Thomas, Theodore & Roethke, and Sylvia Plath in 1950s and 1960s, and Elizabeth Bishop in 1976. Auden in *If I Could Tell You* and in *Miranda Song*, Dylan Thomas in *Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night*, and Roy Fuller in *The Fifties* and in *Magic* have experimented the capacity of villanelle to deal with serious and metaphysical subject sticking with the 19-line model (Preminger 1358). In the process Empson, Plath, and Roethke also took part. It reached unpredictable levels of popularity in 1980s and 1990s. Villanelle followed no established meter yet. The villanelles of the 19th century followed tri-meter and tetrameter while the villanelles of 20th century followed pentameter (wiki). But the writers are permitted to make alteration of the refrain line. The villanelles were also revived by French Poets in the later 19th century who treated it as a stanza type while the English counterparts regarded it as a fixed form Austin Dobson presented villanelles as found in Banville because there was no restriction in the stanzas of villanelles. His compatriots rigidly struck to the 19 line Passerat's model popularized by Joseph Boulmier (Preminger 1358). Some 20th century poets have often used it in reaction to free-verse like Edwin Robinson, Dylan Thomas, Elizabeth Bishop, William Empson, Theodore Roethke and Sylvia Plath. Among the above poets Wilde, Austin, Dobson were amongst the first English practitioners (www.languageisavirus.com).

A well structured villanelle consists nineteen lines with two repeating rhymes and two refrains. The whole poem is formed with five tercets followed by a quatrain. The first and third lines of the first stanza are repeated as refrain alternatively in the succeeding stanzas as the third line and the refrain is used in the final stanza as the concluding lines. Here the capital letters are used for refrains and the lower case letters for the rhymes. A1 b A2/ a b A1/ a b A2/ a b A1/ a b A2/ a b A1 A2. The form of Villanelle is very rigid but it was not started as a fixed form instead it were Italian and Spanish dance-songs. T.S. Eliot pointed out “to use very strict form is a help, because you concentrate on the technical difficulties of mastering the form, and allow the content of the poem more unconscious and freer release” (wiki).

In French language poets did not apply any specific rhyming scheme or refrains. At that time villanelles spoke of simple, pastoral or rustic themes. According to Stephen Fry:

“Villanelle is a form that seems to appeal to outsiders, or those who might have cause to consider themselves as such”, having a “playful artifice” with suits “rueful, ironic reiteration of pain or fatalism”. (inspite of this), villanelle has also often been used for the light verse, as for instance Louis Untermeyer's “Lugubrious villanelle of platitudes”. (Wiki)

Contemporary poets have tackled with the loose form of villanelle to experiment variations on the refrains like Auden, Wilde, Heaney, Shapiro, Plath, etc.

According to Julie Kane:

The refrain in each stanza indicates that the form descended from a “choral dance song” wherein a vocal solocist—frequently female—semi-improvised the “unique” lyrics of each stanza, while a ring of dancers—all female or male and female mixed—chimed in with the repetitive words of the refrain as they danced around her in a circle. (wiki)

This paper attempts to compare the Villanelle *First Day of Spring* by Agha Shahid Ali and the villanelle *Mad Girl's Love Song* by Sylvia Plath. Here the focus will be on the poems as villanelles, their rhyming scheme, pessimistic philosophy of the poets and melancholic situations discussed in their poetry. In the poem *First Day of Spring* Agha Shahid Ali is trying to console his inner self by giving some similar examples from the Greek mythology. He is very much depressed seen the crisis in Kashmir during the unrelenting violence and terrorism. The questions of the exile of Kashmiri Pundits, Kashmiri Muslims, loss of identity, peace in the valley, and physical and mental torture of his country people are always haunting him. He at first has some hope that one day everything will be all right but gradually he lost his faith on God too, which we will discuss in this paper. In the same way Sylvia Plath also lost her faith on God.

(II)

Agha Shahid Ali born on 4 Feb, 1949, is a Kashmiri-American poet who was migrated to America. His identity is hyphenated. He was born in Delhi, brought up in Kashmir and after left for America. That's why he is called a Kashmiri-American poet. Basically he is a diasporic poet whose main concern is Kashmir and its burning problem. His poems revolve around his native land Kashmir and its crisis. He has written many collections of poems like *The Half Inch Himalayas*, *A walk Through the Yellow Pages*, *Bone Sculpture*, *Nostalgist's Map of America*, *The Country without A Post Office* and *Rooms Are Never Finished*. He also translated *The Rebel's Silhouette: Selected Poems by Faiz Ahmed Faiz*. In his lifetime he got many fellowships from different institutions and has the experience of teaching in nine colleges and universities like Delhi University, Pennsylvania State University, University of Arizona, University of Massachusetts, University of Utah, Princeton University, Warren Wilson College, Hamilton College, Penn state. He obtained a degree of Ph.D. from the Pennsylvania State University in 1984 and an M.F.A. from the University of Arizona. Following the death of his mother he died on 8 Dec, 2001.

The poems of Ali resemble Kashmir in its backdrop. Kashmir has been the central locus of his poetry. His poems always denote his concern for his motherland Kashmir, friends, and family members living in Kashmir. We can say that Kashmir is the recurrent theme of Ali's poetry. If we talk about the poem *The First Day of Spring*, we see that it is a perfect villanelle following the traditional 19-line model. The poem carries 19 lines divided into five tercets followed by a quatrain. There are also two repeated rhymes and two refrains as: A1 b A2/ a b

A1/ a b A2/ a b A1/ a b A2/ a b A1 A2. Here two repeated rhymes are 'a' and 'b'; and capital letters denote the refrains. The first is "perfect for forgetting God" and the second is "word for God". In the poem we can see that the first and the third line of the first stanza are alternatively repeated in last line of the following four tercets as refrain and these refrains are repeated in the last stanza which is a quatrain as the concluding lines. These lines (refrains) are not copied thoroughly but a little part of it is used as Ali writes:

1. On this perfect day, perfect for forgetting God, A1
 2. why are they—Hindu or Muslim, Gentile or Jew— b
 3. shouting again some godforsaken word for God? A2
 4. The Angel, his wings Flailing—no, burning—stood awed. a
 5. The Belovéd, dark with excessive bright, withdrew b
 6. and the day was not perfect for forgetting God. A1
 7. On a face of stone it bends, the divining rod: a
 8. Not silver veins but tears: Niobe, whereunto b
 9. your slain children swaddled dark with the Names of God? A2
 10. And now on earth, you and I, with longing so flawed a
 11. that: Angel forced to grow not wings but arms, why aren't you b
 12. holding me this day—perfect for forgetting God? A1
 13. You spent these years on every street in Hell? How odd, a
 14. then, that I never saw you there, I who've loved you b
 15. against (*Hold me!*) against every word of God. A2
 16. The rumor? It's again the reign of Nimrod. a
 17. Whoever you are, I depend on your message, but you— b
 18. Angel I suspect no longer of God— A1
 19. are still bringing me word from (could it be?) from God A2
- (Ali, Country 77)

The diasporic imagination of Ali longs for his birth place. He laments the loss of his native land Kashmir, the predicament of Kashmir at present, the destruction because of militancy, loss of the dear one's, lack of communication, painful condition of the people who are the victims of the terrorism in Kashmir. Most of the poems of Ali are torn between the remembrance of the past, love, and longing for his native land Kashmir. In the present poem he is not talking about Kashmir but its problems and his diasporic imagination remains behind all the melancholic examples presented in the poem. In the poem we can clearly see the obsession of Ali on the point of Kashmir. In the first stanza Ali criticizes the people who are fighting with one another on the name of God. In other words we can say that he is very much moved to see the brutality during Kashmiri Insurgency. He wishes that one day everything will be all right with the help of God. But God despaired him that's why he wants to forget God. In 8th line of the poem Ali is comparing his own loss of his motherland and the loss of faith in God with the loss torture and grief of Niobe on who was the daughter of Tantalus and Dione of Sipylus in Greek

Mythology. His father is known as the “king of Phrygia”. Because of her extreme pride, she was punished by Leto who was the daughter of Titans Coeus and Phoebe and the mother of Apollo and Artemis. Once Niobe boasted for her large number of children to let down Leto who had only two children, so on the occasion of annual celebration in the honor of Latona (Lato) and her offspring, Niobe commented in a very haughty way:

What folly, is this! To prefer beings whom you never saw to those who stand before your eyes! Why should Latona be honored with worship rather than I? My father was tantalus, who was received as a guest at the table of the Gods: my mother was a goddess. My built and rules this city, Thebes; and Phrygia is my parental inheritance. Wherever I turn my eyes I survey the elements of my power; nor is my form and presence unworthy of a goddess. To all this let me add a have seven sons and seven daughters, and look for sons-in-law and daughters-in-law of pretention worthy of my alliance. Have I not cause for pride? Will you prefer to me this Latona, the Titan’s daughter, with her two children? I have seven times as many. Fortunate indeed am I, and fortunate I shall remain! Will any one deny this? (wiki)

Hearing this in revenge Leto sent her children Apollo and Artemis to slay all fourteen children of Niobe. Her children were laid unburied for nine days after they were slain and Niobe was abstained from food.

(III)

On the other hand Sylvia Plath is an American poet novelist and short story writer. She was born on 27 October, 1932 in Boston. She was married to Ted Hughes and both had a very short married life from 1956-1962, together. Both of them were separated in 1962 and in 1963 she committed suicide. She is well known for her two collections of poems, *The Clossus and Other Poems*, and *Ariel*. Her *Bell Jar*, published before some time of her death, was a semi-autobiographical novel. She got Pulitzer Prize posthumously in 1982 for her *The Collected Poems*. She also got Full Bright Scholarship and Glascock Prize in 1955. Sylvia has written some poetic collections like *The Colossus and Other Poems* 1965, *Ariel* 1965, *Three Women: A Monologue for Three Voices* 1968, *Crossing the Water* 1971, *Winter Trees* 1971, and *Ariel: Restored Edition* 2004 with some novels like *The Bell Jar*, *Letters Home: Correspondence*, etc. (wiki)

The poem *Mad Girl’s Love Song* is an early and tender poem of Sylvia Plath. It is a perfect Villanelle written in 1951 at the age of twenty. The song is included in the biographical note affixed to Plath’s novel *Bell Jar*. Like the villanelle of Ali it also follows the typical 19-line modern form of villanelle. It also has two rhymes and two refrains which are ‘a’ and ‘b’ and the two refrains. The rhyming scheme of it is A1 b A2/ a b A1/ a b A2/ a b A1/ a b A2/ a b A1 A2. And the two refrains are “I shut my eyes and all the word drops dead” and “I think I made you

up inside my head". These two refrains (the first and the second line of the first stanza) are repeated alternatively in the following four tercets as the final line and both of them are repeated in the quatrain (the final stanza of the villanelle) as the penultimate and as the last line in her villanelle. We can see the example here:

1. I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead; A1
2. I lift my lids and all is born again. b
3. (I think I made you up inside my head.) A2
4. The stars go waltzing out in blue and red, a
5. And arbitrary blackness gallops in: b
6. I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead. A1
7. I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed a
8. And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane. b
9. (I think I made you up inside my head.) A2
10. God topples from the sky, hell's fires fade: a
11. Exit seraphim and Satan's men: b
12. I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead; A1
13. I fancied you'd return the way you said, a
14. But I grow old and I forget your name. b
15. (I think I made you up inside my head.) A2
16. I should have loved a thunderbird instead; a
17. At least when spring comes they roar back again. b
18. I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead. A1
19. (I think I made you up inside my head.) A2

(www.languagevirus.com)

The poem *Mad Girl's Love Song* looks like a love song of despair and lost hopes of the poet. The opening lines convey the nothingness around Sylvia Plath as "I shut my eyes" seems that it is the end of the world for her and it reminds the reader the isolation of Plath as she shuts herself into her own mind. And on the other hand "I lift my lids and all is born again" the world gets an end for her at that time, but all in vain because the person she loves is not in front of her eyes. It is all about the disappointed hopes. So the poem is a song of totally broken love with frustration and insanity. The recurring lines also point out the mental illness and madness of Plath's mind. The refrain (the first and the third line of the poem) denote the obsession of Plath's inner self and when these lines are repeated constantly, it means Plath (the narrator) is very much stuck within her own obsession. Red and blue colors represent power and coldness (death) respectively.

Her 'dead' word indicates her own issues related to her own mental health and her related atmosphere.

Both the poets have some freedom in using the form.

(IV)

After the deep study of both the villanelles it can be concluded that both the poems follow the same pattern of form. The villanelle of Sylvia Plath carries perfect 19-line while the villanelle of Ali carries 19+1/2 line in a unique way. The refrains in the poem of Sylvia Plath's villanelle are repeated as it is while Ali made some changes in it and used a small part of the refrains. The rhyming schemes of both the poems are same. If we talk about the themes of the poems, we see that these are somewhat similar because both the poems express the melancholic situations and disappointed hopes for the loss of both the writers. Ali expressed his loss through the example of Niobe and Nimrod who were tortured on the name of God and who have lost their faith on God. In the same way Sylvia Plath also tried to convey her own pessimistic philosophy, who has lost her faith in God also after the death of her father. Both the poems are emotional as well as troublesome. These poems are based on the broken love and frustration. In both the poems there is a sense of alienation with an abiding love that represents the battle of both the poets with depression. The refrains (the repeating lines) in both the poems represent the depressing attitude of the speaker. In their poems poets are trying to emphasize on the point that there is nothing in their life and the world has become an empty black place full of uncertainty and devoid of love. The refrains of both poems are full of obsession which is the main feature of a villanelle.

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