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Agha Shahid Ali: The Master of Canzone

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Abstract:

This piece of paper is an analysis of the canzone (a literary form) written by Agha Shahid Ali who has mastered this form. During his life time he has written three canzones which is a unique and a great contribution in Kashmiri literature. Ali has lived a diasporic life. The poet originally belongs to Kashmir and later settled down in America. In his poems he portrayed what he felt for his motherland Kashmir from his childhood to his exile. The poet originally belongs to Kashmir. His two canzone *Lenox Hill* and *After the August Wedding in Lahore, Pakistan* are totally based on the Kashmiri conflict while the third one *The Veiled Suite* is different.

Keywords: canzone, mother, Kashmir (motherland) death, loss, pain, exile, night.

Agha Shahid Ali, a Kashmiri-American diasporic poet, was born in New Delhi and was brought up in Kashmir, later he left for United States in 1976. He grew up under the instruction of renowned educationists, his father Agha Ashraf Ali and his grandmother Begum Zafar Ali. Agha Shahid Ali got his early education from Burn Hall School and his higher education from the University of Kashmir and the Hindu College, and the University of Delhi. He also earned a Ph.D. and an M.F.A. from Pennsylvania State University in 1984 and from the University of Arizona in 1985 respectively. He also got different fellowships from the Pennsylvania council on arts, the Bread Loaf Writer's conference, the Ingram-Merill Foundation, the New York Foundation for the Arts, and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. He has mainly taught at Hamilton College and the University of Massachusetts-Amherst but except them he also has taught at Princeton, Binghamton, New York University, University of Utah, Baruch College, and Warren Wilson College. He also got Pushcart Prize. He has written several collections of poems as *Half Inch Himalayas* (1987), *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001), *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997), *The Beloved Witness: Selected Poems* (1992), *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991), *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* (1987), *In Memory of Begum Akhtar and Other Poems* (1979), and *Bone Sculpture* (1972). He has written *T.S. Eliot as Editor* (1986) and translated *The Rebel's Silhouette: Selected Poems by Faiz Ahmed Faiz* (1992). He has also edited *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English* (2000).

Being a diasporic poet Ali has filled his poetry with the sense of self. In his life time Agha shahid Ali has used many traditional forms like Ghazal, Terza Rhima, Villanelle, Sapphic stanzas, and Pantoum. He also experimented on Sestina and Canzone. Here we will only discuss

Canzone. Canzone is an Italian or Provençal song or Ballad. It is such a type of lyric that denotes Madrigal. It was developed by the Sicilian and Tuscan poets before Dante. Petrarch Francisco has a great command over this. John Milton also has written one canzone (sonnet 03: canzone). W. H. Auden also wrote one canzone. An original canzone consists of five stanzas of twelve line each followed by a five line envoi. It has no rhyme, instead it consists five key words that provide the structure of the whole poem. The entire sixty-five lines end with one of the five key words and all these five key words are put together in the last paragraph envoi as the last words.

According to Lennard a canzone is an “Italian Renaissance form of sixty five lines comprising five douzaines and a pentain envoi using only five end-words... each douzaines rhymes a b a a c a a d d a e e and each end-word must serve in turn as each rhyme-letter” (rampages.us/msaucer/2017/03/02/lenox-hill). Dante called it “the most excellent Italian verse form, the one which is worthy vehicle for those “tragic” compositions which treat the three noblest subjects: martial valor, love, and moral virtue” (Preminger 169).

According to (Dictionary. com), canzone is a “lyric poetry in the Italian style of Provençal origin, that closely resembles the madrigal and secondly it is a poem in which each word that appears at the end of a line of the first stanza appears again at the end of one of the lines in each of the following stanzas” (www.dictionary.com).

His canzone may be in some way called his true masterpiece firstly because of its unparalleled format difficulty and secondly no other writer has composed its equals in English. It is essentially a much more difficult version of sestina. According to Anthony Hecht “Shahid deserved to be in Guineas Book of records for having written three canzones – more than any other poet” (Ghosh 319). All the canzone of Ali portray his love for his country, sense of loss, pain for losing the dear ones, etc. Ali’s first canzone *Lenox Hill* is a tragic portrayal of his mother after getting the treatment at Lenox Hill Hospital, which can be seen in the epigraph of the poem. The poem follows the typical Italian canzone form as it is split up into five stanzas of twelve line each followed by a five line envoi which comprises all the five key words as the end word with a rhyming scheme a b a a c a a d d a e e. Ali intelligently used all these key words because these key words consist a story in itself and provide different stanza a different significance. Here in this poem these key words are ‘elephants’, ‘mother’, ‘Kashmir’, ‘Universe’, and ‘die’. Here the focus is on ‘Kashmir’ and ‘mother’. Ali regards Kashmir and mother above all and by doing so Ali wants to convey his grief over the tragic and untimely death of his mother with his own detachment from his ancestral family and culture. It also denotes his love for his mother and his motherland that he transcends everything. Here the first key word ‘Kashmir’ symbolizes his love and passion and grief for the lost relations, identity, friends, culture and the crisis occurred in Kashmir. In the forth stanza he talks about the wish of his mother to die in Kashmir.

The second and third key word ‘mother’ and ‘die’ respectively can be correlated because here Ali talks about the death of his mother after the treatment of brain tumor at the Lenox Hill Hospital. He doesn’t want to let her die but the condition of his mother is so much critical that he

wished her to be dead because he knows very well that there can be no improvement in the health of his mother so for her relaxation it is better that she should die. The key word in the envoi “the beloved leaves one behind to die” resembles as if Ali gets pre knowledge of her upcoming death due to brain tumor. Here ‘the beloved’ is his mother who left him to die after her.

The forth keyword ‘elephant’ has a full story within. Here Ali presents the similarities between the sound of the sirens in Manhattan and the cry of the elephants belonged to a Hun warlord. When his army invaded Kashmir via-a pass high in the Pir Panjal Range, one of the elephants lost its balance, stumbled off the path and trumpeted in plaintive horror. The warlord was simulated by the shriek that he immediately ordered his men to drive all the elephants one by one from the Pir Panjal Range. It denotes the crisis of Kashmir so far. Ali mentions the word elephant to make the poem much more painful.

Ali used the last word ‘universe’ to make his own grief universal. His personal grief is compared with the grief of Buddha to make his grief universal by filling the canzone with a quotation from Buddha in which a mother is brought to Kashmir for burial. (asapjournal.com)

Thus we can see that all the key words are mutually linked with each other which enable the poet to write such a well structured poem.

That stunned the abyss? Ivory blots out the elephants.

I enter this: *The Beloved leaves one behind to die.*

For compared to my grief for you, what are those of Kashmir,

and what (I close the ledger) are the griefs of the universe

when I remember you—beyond all accounting—O my mother?

(Ali, Rooms 19)

In this poem Ali somewhere used modulated words of the key words ‘universe’ ‘die’ and ‘Mother’. He used traverse and verse at place of ‘universe’ and dye and dia-monds at the place ‘die’. Ali used father at place of mother. He writes:

Through nomads still break news of those elephanrs

As if it were just yesterday the air spread the dye

(“war’s annals will fade into night/ Ere their story die”),

.....

Months later, in Amherst, she dreamt: She was, with dia-

monds, being stoned to death.

.....
Master of Disease, “in the circle of the traverse”

.....
is my poem. What did they expect? For no verse.

.....
She’s watching, at the Regal, her first film with father.

(Ali, Rooms 17-18)

According to Amitav Ghosh:

In *Lenox Hill*, the architectonics of the form creates a soaring superstructure, an immense domed enclosure.... The rhymes and half rhymes are the honeycombed arches that thrust the dome towards the heavens, and the metre is the mosaic that holds the whole in place. Within the immensity of this bounded space, every line throws open a window that beams a shaft of light across continents, from Amherst to Kashmir, from the hospital of Lenox Hill to the Pir Panjal Pass. Entombed at the centre of this soaring edifice lies his mother. (Ghosh 319)

In the same way his second canzone *After the August Wedding in Lahore, Pakistan* conveys the tragic story of Kashmir. The title of the poem is centered on the wedding of Ali’s cousin-niece in August. The poem symbolizes the commitment of Ali to form not as a vehicle of poetic expression but as a figure to examine the lyric mode. The poem is also based on the five key words. It also follows the typical Italian form of canzone, five twelve line stanzas followed by five line envoi with a b b a a c a a d d e e rhyming scheme. Here the five key-words are ‘pain’, ‘Kashmir’, ‘glass’, ‘night’, and ‘sing’. The words ‘pain’ and ‘Kashmir’ are interconnected. Ali wants to convey the terror of bullets and interrogation in Kashmir. Here the pain is the pain of not finding Kashmir as it was. It is totally brutalized by the terrorist activities. It is all about pain for not having love all around and loss of humanity. In the valley, there is no love at all anybody can be killed without any delay and hesitation. Kashmir is burning with the fire of inheritance. There is the thirst of freedom in the people of Kashmiri people, which resulted in the insurgency in Kashmir. The next word ‘glass’ symbolizes heart which is full of torture and suffering after seeing the crisis in Kashmir. The heart is continuously weeping for its lost ones and its lost relations. Somewhere Ali symbolizes his body with ‘glass’ to convey his own exile from Kashmir. The next word ‘night’ is the symbol of sorrow felt by Ali in his past life. His compares his previous life with darkness. This darkness is so much deep rooted in him

that the night of wedding is also dark for him. He is unable to enjoy the wedding night. Night also hints towards the interrogation operations that were horrible which never let Ali to live a common life after leaving Kashmir. The dreams of Kashmir were haunted in his mind every time. The last word ‘sing’ denotes him as a poet. Through the songs (poetry) he conveys his sorrow and thoughts. As he get us known the crisis of Kashmir. Through the medium of writing poetry he tries to console himself. And the reminiscences of his Kashmir provide somewhat relaxation to him. And he feels that he is not totally alienated from his Kashmir.

From which love departs into all new pain:
Freedom’s terrible thirst, flooding Kashmir,
is bringing love to its tormented glass.
Stranger, who will inherit the last night
of the past? Of what shall I not sing, and sing?

(Ali, Country 91)

At some places these key words are modulated as the word ‘pain’ is modulated as campaign and pane. As he says, “Order’s dry campaign/ had glued petals with bullets to each pane” (Ali, Country 89). His loving word (motherland) ‘Kashmir’ is pronounced differently at many places as:

“Where Thou art—that—is Home—/ Cashmere—
or Calvary—the same”! In the Cašmir
and Poison and Brute air, my rare Cashmere
.....
“Butterflies pause / On their passage Cashmere—”

(Ali, Country 90-91)

At some places sylvanite, tonight, and midnight, are used in place of the word ‘night’.

All my words sylvanite
.....
What hints have been passed in the sky tonight
.....

Book Shop that left me stranded, by midnight.

(Ali, Country 89-90)

And the word 'sing' is changed with the word dan-cing, Sing-apore, promi-sing, mena-cing, witness-sing, and focu-sing in a unique way. We can see the examples:

That thirst haunts as does the fevered dancing

Flames dying among orchids flown in from Sing-

apore! Sing then, not of the promising

.....

To be forgotten the most menacing!

.....

just of love then, or was love witnessing

.....

That chandeliered boat barely focusing.

(Ali, Country 89)

The third canzone *The Veiled Suite* is written one year before his death and is published posthumously. In this poem Ali conveys his dream seen just after he was diagnosed with brain cancer in 2002. The poem is also collected as the final poem in *Till I End My Song: A Gathering of Last Poems* by Harold Bloom. According to Bloom:

The title poem of his last and perhaps his strongest, a shapely canzone founded upon a personal dream of dying that is also an encounter with an erotic double. I can hear the influence of James Merrill but assimilated to Ali's own rich cultural heritage. It is one of the most haunting of all last poems. (nptel.ac.in)

As it is pre discussed that it is a canzone and has all the parameters of a canzone with the same form and meter as other two. In the poem the key words are 'night', 'veil', 'sense', 'eyes', and 'see'. The very first word 'night' is the symbol of sorrow and sadness which is resulted by his separation from his dear ones. It can be correlated with his own exile from Kashmir. Ali is focusing on the veil that dominates the whole poem as the title suggests. He presents here the veil as the symbol of his self-image that cannot be perceived by a mortal man. It only can be unveiled by his immortal lover. Here the second key word 'veil' is suggesting a veil which is used by the two lovers to separate each other and one lover is the veil of the other. The next word 'sense' symbolizes imaginative writing with little wisdom. The alternative word of 'sense'

essence is the symbol of sweet memories of the lover that gives him the odorous feeling. The fourth key word ‘eyes’ is pointed out the doom or misfortune that seems in the eyes of the lover. The last word ‘see’ denotes the moment in which he dotes upon the face of the lover. The alternative word of ‘see’ which is sea is the symbol of knowledge expression and depth of love. Ali somewhere modulates the word ‘night’ as tonight, and ignite that can be seen in the following lines:

I ask, “can you promise me this much tonight:

.....

And the prophecies filming his gaze tonight

.....

Perhaps our only chance will be to ignite.

(Ali, Veiled Suite23-26)

At some places the key word ‘veil’ is replaced with prevail, vale, and vail to denote the depth of the love of a lover. He writes:

Where is he not from? Which vale

.....

Where isn’t he from? He is brought the sky from the vail,

.....

Something has happened now for me to prevail.

(Ali, Veiled Suite 23-27)

Ali used essence, license, fluorescence, magnificence, crescent’s, and incense in place of ‘sense’ to carry on the rhyming scheme. We can see the examples here:

Then a song from New Orleans in the crescent’s

time nearing Penn Station. What’s of essence?

.....

Kept hidden so long in his eyes, what essence

of longing? He can kill me without a license.

.....

What is left to polish now? What fluorescence?

.....

This is our only chance for magnificence.

(Ali, Veiled suite 23-27)

We can easily find some other modulated words of the key word 'eyes' as realize, ice, and crystallize. The examples are as following:

There's just one thing left to consider, the night

In which we will be left to realize

.....

If he, carefully, upon this hour of ice

Will let us almost completely crystallize

.....

But now is the time when I am to realize.

(Ali, Veiled Suite 23-27)

In the same way he modulated the last key word 'see' as urgency, fantasy, Varanasi, sea, Debussy, foresee, and galaxy. There are some examples related this:

When he random assassin sent by the sea,

Is putting, and with no sense of urgency,

The final touches on—whose last fantasy?

Where isn't he from? He's brought from the sky from Vail,

Colorado and the Ganges from Varanasi

in a clay urn (his heart, measures like the sea).

He's brought the desert too. It's deep in his eyes

when hasn't he planned? For music Debussy.

.....

Not time, not time, no, not time. I can foresee

.....
midnight polishes the remains of a galaxy.

(Ali, Veiled Suite 23-25)

Thus to conclude it can be said that the above discussed canzones are masterpiece in English language. These canzones proved him no less than Dante, Petrarch, John Milton, and Auden in English language. Ali plays with this form as it is a game for him. His canzones are incomparable with the sense of love for his mother land, sense of loss and pain. It cannot be hyperbolic to call him the master of canzone because he composes a large number of canzone which is a very unique and typical literary form. These canzones are a beautiful and unique contribution to because the key words used in them are not only words but a story about his mother and mother land, which make his poems different from other writers.

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