Chapter IV

Transnationalism, Cultural Plurality, and Sufism in the Poetry of

Agha Shahid Ali

Migrations and resettlements have been taking place from the times immemorial. People have always travelled in search of a suitable place for many reasons, be it an urge for a better living, or migration forced by untoward situations like famine, war, weather etc. Living away from home has given the people a strong sense of alienation and nostalgia which is usually termed as diaspora (which has been discussed in the third chapter of the thesis). Migrations continued during the colonial era in the form of the enslavement of blacks from Africa, their sale in the United States, and the migration of entrenched labourers from India and Africa. The term diaspora, however, became current due to globalization, when, after the colonialism, immigration to the capitalistic centers like Europe and America became a norm, which continues to this day. The term has thus become more complicated as it has acquired multiple meanings like exile, migration, global mobility, dispersal etc. The chapter will attempt to read Agha Shahid Ali as a transnational poet, who cannot be categorized as a poet belonging to certain area and writing about something particular. The chapter will discuss some of his poems in detail in order to discuss multiculturalism, plurality, diaspora, métissage, creolization, transculturation in his poetry, and how it shapes his plural identity. The chapter will further discuss Sufi influences and exilic consciousness of Ali and the link between the two in his poetry.

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The migration and dispersal of the people across the world reached the high point in the post second World War era, particularly, after the fall of the Colonial Empire. The postcolonial age can be thus considered as the age of movement where people got dispersed on a large scale for various reasons; the chief among them being capitalism. Capitalism has made the movement necessary; for the people from the rural areas have been moving to the cities and the people from the Third World moving to the First World for better living. Migration of people from various communities has given rise to a large number of people with different languages, cultures and religions living together. This diverse group of people living together has given rise to a society which is generally called a multicultural society. The settling of these people into other lands gave them a sense of alienation and cultural loss which they tried to compensate by sticking to their own culture. In this new multicultural home, the life of the immigrants has not been easy as they confront a new environment and face xenophobia. This in turn alienates them from the host culture and leads to the formation of new cultures along with the old cultures, giving rise to a multicultural society. A multicultural society is one which has in it various cultural group, mostly from the non-white immigrants. However, the fundamental problem with the word "multiculturalism", according to Watson, is that different scholars apply different meaning to it" (qtd. in Prato 3). Multiculturalism is, therefore, a very political and relative term; for instance, The Commission's Report: The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, states "Britain is both a community of citizens and a community of communities, both a liberal and a multicultural society, and needs to reconcile their sometimes conflicting requirements" (Commission). The statement is uncertain and ambiguous trying to accommodate the immigrants, but not fully. This is
usually referred to as liberal multiculturalism. Left-wing multiculturalism aims at opposing the liberal multiculturalism and is called critical multiculturalism. It tries to do away with European monocultural hegemony which they consider to be ethnocentric and racist. (Multiculturalism)

Living in a multicultural and plural environment gives a hybrid identity to the émigré. Hybridity is a postcolonial concept regarding the mixture or mélange of cultures, a kind of transcultural variety created when people from different cultures converge. It is actually a term from horticulture, referring to the formation of a hybrid crop by the scientific method of cross breeding which yields a better crop. The term was made popular by Homi K Bhaha who used it in the study of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. He contends that a space is created when these different cultural systems come face to face with each other, which he terms as the “third space of enunciation” or “in-between space” (Kuortti 8). “This ‘Third Space’ allows us to conceive of the identities of cultures in terms that transcend the binary dialectic between ‘us/them’, ‘insider/outsider’, ‘inclusion/exclusion’ (Hybridity). “Sometimes this in-between space or third space is called the “mediation space”: “a contact zone within which different cultures come in contact” (Farahzad, and Monfared). However, in the context of literary theory, the implication of the term has become somewhat complicated, as a result the term has come to carry multiple meanings. As Prabhu states that “In theoretical discourse, hybridity has spawned a variegated vocabulary, including terms such as diaspora, métissage, creolization, transculturation” (1). This hybridity and plurality of culture is quite apparent from the literature produced by non natives who
write in the language other than their mother tongue. These features are quite evident in
the writings of Agha Shahid Ali.

Agha Shahid Ali's upbringing in a multilingual and multispacial environment
gave him a pluralistic identity which would not conform to any particularity. This blend
of different cultural traditions and identities is widely reflected in his poetry. In an
interview he talks of his identity thus: "I would say that because of certain kinds of
historical forces, I am lucky to be imbued with what I'd call permutations of Hindu,
Muslim and Western cultures," (Ali, Interview 267). Ali wrote his poetry under the
influence of this hybrid consciousness.

call me a poet
dear editor
they call this my alien language
i am a dealer in words
that mixes cultures
and leave me rootless (Ali, Bones 12)

His poem "From Another Desert" is one such classic example of the mélange: it
shows how Ali internalized various cultural traditions resulting in the development of his
pluralistic identity. The poem tells the story of Laila and Majnoon, an old Arab tale of
love based on the true story of Qays ibn al-Mullawah. Laila was a beautiful girl from a
rich family and Majnoon was from a poor family. Both fell in love, and Majnoon asked
for Laila’s hand in marriage which was out rightly rejected by Laila’s father stating Majnoon’s economic status as the problem. Laila was married to another man and, as a result, Majnoon left home and began wandering in the forests. He became mad, or love-possessed, therefore “Majnoon” in Arabic means somebody crazed by love. He kept yearning for Laila, writing her name on the sand, and wrote poetry in her separation and love. Laila also couldn’t bear the separation and died of a broken heart. Majnoon later on came to know of her death, and he also died and was buried near her grave. The tale has become very popular in Arabian, Persian and Urdu literature; many prominent poets and writers have alluded to this story in their writings. This tale has also been quite popular among the Sufis who have derived the meaning of spiritual love from this human love story. “Mystics contrived many stories about Majnun to illustrate technical mystical concepts such as fanaa (annihilation), divānagī (love-madness), self-sacrifice, etc” (Syed). Sometimes revolutionaries have made Majnoon a rebel by giving political dimensions to the tale. (Ali, The Veiled 139) Agha Shahid Ali has carved out a poem from the cultural context of this story. The poem begins with a couplet of Ghalib—the famous Urdu poet who, in his poetry, has alluded to the tale many times. The allusion to Ghalib’s couplet, which develops around imagery of a desert and symbol of Majnoon, suggests the cultural context in which Ali is situating his poem—Persio-Arabic. The poem opens with the cry of Majnoon, the mad one, seeking the beloved:

It is a strange spring
rivers lined with skeletons
Wings beating
the cages

letting the wind hear
its own restlessness

the cry of gods
and prisoners

letting me hear
my agony (Ali, The Veiled 139)

This cry of Majnoon has multiple connotations, be it his agony of the pain of love, a spring without blossom— “strange spring” (Ali, The Veiled 139) connoting independence without freedom, as wings are beating in the cages and we hear cry of gods and prisoners. (Ali, The Veiled 139). The poem is a kind of wasteland set in a desert where in “… strange spring/ rivers are lined with skeletons” (Ali, The Veiled 139). The waste land is quite different from the one sketched by Ali in Bone Sculptor which has been discussed in the chapter I of the thesis. The wasteland sketched by Ali in Bone Sculptor is skeptic and pessimistic with no hope and desire. On other hand “From Another Desert” is also pessimistic, but there is also desire and hope. It is a kind of postmodern reading of the modern wasteland where Sufism, politics, love, desire and defeat are juxtaposed together. The poem, however, has characteristics of being both modern and postmodern: modern because it echoes the style of T S Eliot’s The Waste Land, and postmodern for being a parody of a famous Persian tale of Laila and Majnoon,
or, to be more appropriate, it is a modern poem with postmodern touch. Nonetheless, given the subject and style of the poem it echoes the subject of Persio-Arabic poetry, which is also the theme of many Urdu poems and other writings written in Sabke-Hindi-the Indian style. (Faruqi)

Part II of the poem takes us to the ruins of temple where we find broken statues and gods without vermillion marks. The return of gods does not provide any relief or solace to the resting beggars of the waste land, but we see god “clings to his marrow/ frozen in the bones of his worshippers” and “he extends the earth/ like a begging bowl/ in the grief of broken flesh” (Ali, The Veiled 141). It represents the desperateness of situation which faces helpless god, Majnoon and the people.

Part III of this wasteland is set in heart where he tries to draw upon the Sufi concept that heart is the centre of gnosis. The line “Each statue will be broken/ if the heart is the temple” (Ali, The Veiled 141) reflects a Sufi doctrine according to which every heart is full of idols which are to be broken and be filled with nothing but the love of the Beloved, God. The tale has been used by mystics to connote the spiritual love in which Majnoon is the seeker and Laila is the reality (Beloved) who is sought. Part IV develops into a romantic desire, and images like “jasmine”, “moon” and “window” make it an elegiac longing, representative of Majnoon’s desperation. (Ali, The Veiled 142)

Thus Ali commingles various things together, but this mélange is not a salad bowl mix, rather it is syncretism, where it becomes difficult to differentiate between various cultures and traditions. As Homi K. Bhabha says, “This 'part' culture, this partial culture, is the contaminated yet connective tissue between cultures - at once the impossibility of

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culture’s containedness and the boundary between. It is indeed something like culture's 'in-between', bafflingly both alike and different" (54).

This "translation of cultures" (Bhabha 54) is perfectly assimilative in case of Agha Shahid Ali and it generates "cultural-sympathy" rather than "cultural clash" (Bhabha 54). It is quite apparent in the Part V of the poem. Here Ali juxtaposes postmodern American "hippie" culture, where wearing ragged clothes is a fashion, with ragged identity of Majnoon: "I've declared a fashion/ of ripped collars" (Ali, The Veiled 142). The attire of Majnoon, the lover, and Sufi, the seeker is quite the same: ragged and torn. Ghalib's couplet describing the attire of Majnoon is quite handy here; "Every amateur lover clad himself in beautiful attire. / But Qais remains naked even on the canvas" (Ghalib, my translation), making nakedness of Majnoon a sign of his great love. Thus, he juxtaposes modern American cultural sensibility with the 7th century old Arab desert and legend. As Patrick Colm Hogan notes, "It is not the Arabian desert of Majnoon, but a desert in the United States, a desert with specific implications of postcolonization, exile and homelessness— and, of course, a desert that, along with these implications, extends and reparticularizes the standard ghazal image of separation" (211). Thus, Ali mixes two different cultures of two different places and of two different times resulting in a poem which becomes hybrid and cross linked. Regarding the hybridization due to cultures separated by different times, Bakhtin answers the self put question, what is hybridization? "It is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation, or by some other factor" (358). Thus Ali does not only mix the two sensibilities, but two
geographies also, separated by both, time and space, giving the poem a hybrid nature both at a spatial and temporal level. This done, Ali goes back to the image used in Urdu poetry and then shifts from Urdu tradition to postmodernism:

I am waiting
for a greater madness:

to declare

my self

to the Hangman. (Ali, The Veiled 143)

In Part 6 of the poem, Majnoon, the lover, attains the qualities of a rebel who is now concerned with the world’s sorrow and his rebellion will burn down the arches of the palaces. But the rebellion fails and the defeat is followed by betrayal and sorrow. Now Majnoon again surpasses “the rupture of every mad lover” (Ali, The Veiled 143). In part 9 of the poem the Persian glass (Jamsheed’s Goblet which reveals the future) and miniatures show how Majnoon’s father is desperate to know about his son. In addition, it talks about Mughal Emperor Jehanghir who is busy with his “royal hunt” (Ali, The Veiled 146) and too high to dismount in Majnoon’s “wilderness of sorrow” (Ali, The Veiled 147).

In part 10 of the poem Ali alludes to the version of the fall of man in which Iblis the Satan is shown as the true lover who does not bow to Adam, a mere mortal because he is the true lover of God; he does not worship anybody but God. Majnoon is compared to him to show the greatness of his love. Ali thus gives a mystic connotation of the love
of Majnoon who surpasses every lover, and is not ready to worship anybody but the Beloved (God). Thus Ali brings Blake’s opinion regarding Milton’s Paradise Lost that he was “of the devil’s party without knowing it” (qtd in Werner 58), together with a Sufi concept of Satan: according to some Sufis Satan is not evil but true lover of God who did not prostrate before Adam because he thought that to be idolatry. The poem ends with Majnoon, yet again, seeking the beloved. Like a possessed lover he asks the wind and streams to take his message to the beloved: “Tonight the air has many envelopes/ again. Tell her to open them at once/ and find hurried notes of my longing/ for wings.” (Ali, The Veiled 150)

Ali’s poem from part 1-13 takes us from one realm to another, one culture to another, one geography to another; thus becomes a mixture of love, sorrow, rebellion, etc. Majnoon’s multifaceted or multicultural identity hints towards Ali’s own identity, which like Majnoon’s is exilic, full of longing, and full of love—both mundane and divine. Majnoon’s journey is also Ali’s journey from one place to another, from one culture to another and like a restless rebel and lover he witnesses a series of events and experiences. Ali’s longing for wings is his desire to fly back home, and his mixing of this desire with Majnoon’s Sufi desire gives his longing a universal appeal which according to Bruce King “sounds as much Islamic fatalism as postmodernism” (258). This ultimately makes Ali’s nostalgic and exilic consciousness like that of Ishmael—the prophet, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

Given the Sufi elements in the above discussed poem and many other poems of Agha Shahid Ali, Amitav Ghosh says about him that he writes in the tradition of Rumi and Kabir. (322) However, the statement is critically improper as far as Ali is concerned
as Ali is only commenting upon the spiritual and there is neither personal mystic way of living like Rumi and Kabir nor any such mystic experience. While debating on the different aspects of mysticism, Edwyn Underhill makes a distinction between mystic experience and mystic attitude. Underhill defined mysticism as “the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendent order; whatever be the theological formula under which the order is understood” (8). Likewise, Spurgeon says that that the term mysticism has been “irresponsibly applied in English” and is “used semi-contemptuous way to denote vaguely any kind of occultism or spiritualism, or any speaking curious or fantastic views about God and Universe.” “Mysticism”, he further writes, “is, in truth a temper rather than a doctrine, an atmosphere rather than a system of philosophy” (Ch I).

This misuse of the term is quite apparent in the critical assessment of Emily Dickinson’s poetry to which Agha Shahid Ali has alluded to in many of his poems, particularly in The Nostalgist’s Map of America. She is considered by many a mystic as her poetry is full of mystical themes making use of symbols which are akin to mysticism, besides a great influence of Buddhism (on Buddhist mysticism) or her. (Thackrey 33) But some critics like Donald E. Thackery does not consider her a mystic poet but rather one with a mystic attitude. He says, “The essence of this aspect appears to be an attitude which permeates her poetry, and which I should call a mystic attitude (29)”. Genevieve Taggard also writes categorically about Dickinson that “She is not a mystic poet...” (qtd in Thackrey 30). Richard P Blackmur says about Dickinson’s “mystic” poetry: “It is not mysticism itself. It is an attitude composed partly of the English Hymnal, partly of instinctively apprehended Puritan Theology, and partly of human sensibility bred with
experience to the point of insight.” (qtd in Thackery 30). Ali’s inclination towards Sufism/mysticism is not as acute as in Dickinson; it is far less, rather it seems to be mechanical. Dickinson’s mystic inclination was due to her Christian Puritan upbringing and Buddhist mystical influence. Ali, on other hand, has the influence of Eastern mysticism, particularly Islamic mysticism, popularly known as Sufism. In the case of Ali it is mostly a cultural influence of Sufism.

Sufism is an English equivalent of Tassawuf which refers to the process of attaining nearness to God through some spiritual practices. F. A. D. Tholuck coined the term Sufism for Tassawuf in 1821 (Hasan 1). Masoodul Hasan in the introduction of his book Sufism in English Literature gives a brief history of the term Sufism and says that Sufism has as many definitions as there are a number of Sufis, but hurries to add that Islam and Sufism are inseparable and the Sufi always sees himself in light of the Quran and teachings of Prophet Muhammad (1-5). Sufism, thus, is related to these spiritual realities rather than being a kind of folk tradition related to occultism, spiritualism or magic. However, as stated above, spiritual practices are sometimes confused with occultism and spiritualism, making mysticism a relative term. It is very true of Sufism also, as Patrick Colm Hogan says that Akbar was a Sufi from Chistiyyah order (219), on the other hand some Naqshbandi Sufis have declared him a heretic (Burman 20). Therefore the term is quite relative; hence Al Hujwari, an 11th century Sufi, has divided Sufi practices into three categories:

The Sufi practices safā (purity); has died to the ‘self’ and lives to the Way of Truth ...
Mutasawwif seeks to become a Sufi by modelling him/herself on the example of the Sufis.

The Mustawif is one who imitates the Sufis for the sake of personal gain, be it power, money, or worldly advantage, but has no knowledge of tasawwuf. (qtd in Baldock 61)

Given all this relativism, Sufism, however, as a way of living, has had influence on whole gamut of Islamic culture, art, architecture and literature. This influence is apparent on most of the Muslim writers through the ages. The literature produced by the Sufis like Rumi, Attar, Jami has influenced even the secular literature over ages. Masoodul Hasan’s book *Sufism and English Literature Chaucer to the Present Age: Echoes and Images* gives a detailed account of the influence of Sufism on English Literature beginning from Chaucer to the present day, covering writers like Salman Rushdie and Doris Lessing. The meeting of the West and Islam began with early trade followed by conquest of Spain (1492) and the crusades. This meeting carried some knowledge and stories from the Muslim world to the West. Hasan finds proximity between some famous English writings and old books by Sufis; like Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowls*(1343?) and Fariduddin Attar’s Sufi poems *Conference of Birds*(1177); Shakespeare’s Fools(1564-1616) and anecdotes from the life of Sufi Mullah Nasrudin (13th Century); a story in Addison’s *Spectator* (issue no 94) (1711-1712) and Shahabuddin Suharwardy’s *Awarful Ma’rif* (13th century). He tries to see these books as influenced by earlier Sufi writers.
In the 20th century Sufism was popularized in America by Idris Shah, and the writer who was influenced most by his teachings is Doris Lessing. She considered Idris Shah her teacher. Her books like *Under my Skin* and *Walking in the Shade* give an account of a spiritual struggle, besides dealing with a human struggle. She, like Dickinson, was highly inclined towards Sufism/mysticism but by no means a mystic in the true sense. She once said in an interview, “I have an inclination towards mysticism (not religion) even when being political. It is not an uncommon combination” (Galin).

Sufism, however, as a practice has many things attached to it which are culturally followed by the people; though, often missing the essence. This cultural tradition of Sufis which they carried from the *Sunnah* or tradition of the Prophet Muhammad has now become the cultural tradition of Islam throughout the Muslim world. Since Agha Shahid Ali grew up in the cultural environment of Islam, therefore, one finds quite vivid effect of the same in his poetry. Ali’s early poetry does not have any inclination towards religion or Sufism, but his outlook is somewhat that of a skeptic as his “voice cracked on Chalib/ and ... forgot the texture of prayer” (Ali, In Memory 21), but in his later poetry the mystical influence is quite apparent. Besides this cultural upbringing his interest in Urdu poetry (which is highly influenced by Sufism) also shaped his outlook. (Ekram)

Much of Ali’s poetry is a mélange of the Urdu literary tradition and the Western literary tradition. Given the Sufi context in which most of the Urdu poetry is written, Ali could not escape the influence. Urdu language and literature have been strongly influenced by Persian literary tradition of which Persian Sufism is an integral part. Urdu poets have used a lot of Sufi symbols and metaphors in their poetry. Not only did the poets like Mir Taqi, Khuja Dard, Rafiq Sauda, Asgar Gondvi etc. write in the Islamic
Sufi tradition, but many secular poets too followed the tradition, even though the subject of their poetry was not Sufism. Most important among them is Ghalib who wrote mostly secular verse, but some of his couplets dealing with Sufism are at par with the poetry of the great Sufi poets like Rumi, Attar and Saidi.

In “Prayer Rug” Ali apparently describes religiosity of women but that ends up in describing a spiritual exercise: “... women’s foreheads / touching Abraham’s/ silk stone of sacrifice...”, “... my grandmother/ also a pilgrim/ in Mecca she weeps/ as the stone is unveiled” (Ali, The Veiled 41). Similarly in poems like “Cracked Portraits” Ali tries to look for prayers in the eyes of his grandfather who is described as hashish smoker and “reciting verses of Sufi mystics” (Ali, The Veiled 36). In “In the Mountains” Ali refers to somebody counting “on a cold rosary/ God’s ninety-nine Names in Arabic” (Ali, The Veiled 79) in the mountains, and talks about the hundredth which he thinks “rises in calligraphy”. “Ninety-nine names”, “rosary” and “calligraphy” are important Sufi symbols which have a spiritual significance. Ninety Nine names are very important in the Quranic tradition in general and Sufi tradition in particular. While commenting on the tradition of the Prophet Muhammed that “God has ninety-nine names, one hundred minus one; He is the Odd and loves the odd number. The one who numerates them enters Paradise” (qtd in Al-Ghazali). The great Sufi Al-Ghazali writes “Perhaps this stress upon the odd number is only another indication that the God is absolutely unique in respect of His essence, with no other being like Him” (qtd in Al-Ghazali). Likewise rosary which has ninety nine beads is used by Sufis to count the ninety nine names of God. Similarly, calligraphy also has Sufi significance; for example, most of the Turkish calligraphers were from Sufi orders (Schimmel 242). A Schimmel notes that “Calligraphic devises and
mystical interpretations are conjoined from the very first centuries of Islam, and letter mysticism developed from the very first centuries of Islam ...” (244). Thus Ali’s reference to these Sufi symbols is deliberate.

For Sufis and Mystics symbols are of great importance, as they find it difficult to explain metaphysical concepts in ordinary words As Spurgeon notes, “Symbolism is of immense importance in mysticism; indeed, symbolism and mythology are, as it were, the language of the mystic (Ch I).” Therefore symbols act as signs for the metaphysical concepts which cannot be explained easily. “In order to be a true symbol, a thing must be partly the same as that which it symbolises” (Ch I). Baldock notes some symbols Sufis use to signify the Divine; they are beauty, cup, wine, tresses, kisses, tavern etc. (77-78)

Ali’s reference to breaking of idols in the heart is taken by some as referring to the breaking of idols in a temple etc. (Ramazani, 104). In Sufism heart symbolizes the epicenter of gnosis. When Ali says my “heart is a temple”, he is referring to this Sufi dictum. Some Sufis refer to the incident, in which the Prophet broke idols of Kaba as a symbolic act, and every man’s heart is a Kaba and he has to conquer his heart and break all the idols there. (Frager) This symbol has also been used as a political symbol to represent the rebel and the revolutionary. (Ali, The Veiled 139)

In Agha Shahid Ali’s poem, “The Veiled Suite” Sufi influence is fairly obvious. The canzone is about his dream-vision which talks about the veil and the desire to see. The poem is influenced by the Sufi doctrine of Wahdat-ul-Wajood which states that God is the ultimate reality and there exists nothing except the reality. The doctrine, however, looked upon by some as pantheistic, but refuted by many.
The doctrine of *Wahdat-ul-Wajood* asserts that everything that exists can only exist because it is an aspect of Divine Reality, hence an aspect of Divine Unity itself. However, Sufi doctors assert that although *Wahdat-ul-Wajood* may be interpreted that Sufism see the face of God everywhere, it does not mean that it has reduced God to everything. God remains supremely transcendent, even though everything which arises and exists resembles him (*tashbih*). He resembles nothing but himself (*tanzih*) (*Wahdat ul Wajod* vs *Wahdat ul Shahood*).

There is also another concept called *Wahdat ul Shahood*, given by Indian scholar Sheikh Ahmad Sarhindi who has criticized Ibn Arabi’s concept of *Wahdat-ul-Wajood* (the Unity of being), declaring it a blasphemy. *Wahdat ul Shahood* or Unity of vision states that God is the Ultimate reality and the universe only gives us the signs of reality. Another Indian scholar Shah Walliullah Dehelvi has reconciled the two concepts saying that both mean the same thing, and difference is only in the semiotics or a verbal controversy. (What is *Wahdat-ul-Wajood*?)

Agha Shahid Ali echoing this concept Ali puts a question, “Where isn’t he from?” (*Ali, The Veiled 23*) and to answer it he juxtaposes sky, Vail, Colorado (a state in west central United States), Ganges of Varanasi, a holy river from the holy city, desert, music of French impressionist Debussy, and a “song from New Orleans” (*Ali, The Veiled 23*). Thus hinting towards the Sufi doctrine that God is all we see. Ali uses the image of night, abject darkness, fog and veil: all with same colour, therefore, not differentiable. Images like “fog”, “night” and “veil” heighten the negation of difference, a key concept.
in Sufism. Saying “For after the night is fog, who’ll unveil whom?” Ali echoes 13th century Sufi poet Malmiid Shabistari, who says: “Thou art like the eye and He the light of the eye, / Who has ever been able to see with the eye that with which the eye sees? (qtd in Nasr 39)”, or what the originator of the concept of wahdatul wajoood, Ibn ‘Arabi who said, “Glory be unto Him who hides Himself by that which is none other than He”(qtd in Nasr 44). Ali says the same thing in these words: “Whether one is one with night or agent of night/ I’m still alive, alive to learn from your eyes/ that I am become your veil and I am all you see” (Ali, The Veiled 25). Thus Ali’s in the poem talks about very crucial point in the Sufi sense which is not touched upon by many people.

Likewise, migration and travel have a very important connection with Sufism. Seyyed Hossein Nasr says about travel that “when one travels with consciousness, one realizes that one’s home is not a particular street, ones place is not a particular place; it is in God; travelling outwardly is supportive of travelling inwardly” (qtd. in Al Ghazali). This is quite evident in many of the Sufi writings like that of Fariduddin Attar’s Conference of Birds in which different birds travel across seven valleys and they find each valley with a different name and different setting. This travel ultimately leads to the spiritual regeneration. Javed Majeed while talking about Attar’s poem notes, “The poem also includes an elaborate allegorical geography, divided into different vales representing different states of minds and emotional landscapes, which the birds have to pass through” (111). However, in the postcolonial age travel and exile have become a necessity which may or may not lead to a spiritual realization. This migration from the homeland, as discussed in the opening of this chapter, has led to human, economic and cultural
relations between these various countries which have made the borders more loose and exchanging. This relationship came to be known as transnationalism.

The term transnationalism was earlier used specifically for the economic flow between the countries, but it is now used for migration and diaspora studies also (Pacific Migration). The term Transnational was coined by Randolph Bourne “in 1916 to characterise an American identity formed through the hybrid collation of diverse peoples anticipates current concerns to revise the essentialised status of the nation as the source and site of legitimate personhood” (Manning and Taylor 17). Agha Shahid Ali’s concern with travel and exile is acute, which is to be seen both at physical and spiritual level, and where the former, with his exilic consciousness and diasporic longing, is more prominent.

The terms transnationalism and globalization are accompanied with cross border relationship between various nations; Vertovec writes that “transnational migration is inextricably linked to the changing conditions of global capitalism and must be analysed within the context of global relations between capital and labour” (Manning and Taylor 23). He further marks that “transnationalism is a process by which migrants, through their daily life activities and social, economic, and political relations, create social fields that cross national boundaries (Manning and Taylor 27).

Agha Shahid Ali’s border crossing gave him the new permanent home and the longing for the lost home, which provided a link between the new and the old home. Ali’s multiple homes, (be it the primary one in Kashmir, or his stay in Delhi, or the new one in the United States), get linked together as he always travels back to his home. While living in America, Ali would spend his holidays in Kashmir with his parents. The link from one
home to another gave him a transnational status, identity and, above all, a transnational sensibility. Thus, Ali many times tends to mix up the two different geographies: be it seeing Kashmir from New Delhi (Ali, The Veiled 178), or linking various American states with Latin American states while describing Indian Americans in *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (Ali, The Veiled 161). This transnational sensibility of Ali is beautifully woven together in his poem “Rooms are Never Finished.”

The poem, “Rooms are Never Finished” is a dramatic monologue in which the speaker journeys through the rooms, which are themselves in a process of getting furnished, and the usher lets us know that he has “brought the world indoors” (Ali, The Veiled 279). A dramatic monologue is a type of lyrical poem where a single person (not the poet) makes the speech which builds a poem and it is only through the speaker we come to know about everything the poem describes.

The poem, “Rooms are Never Finished,” has nine stanzas besides an opening line and an end line, and all these stanzas and the two lines begin with the word “in”. The one man audience is called “in” as the speaker has “brought the world indoors” (Ali, The Veiled 261). The speaker of the poem, who is also the usher, makes the listener go through the refurbished rooms which are not yet finished. We come to know, as usher reminds the listener, that listener was some time back “led through all the spare rooms” (Ali, The Veiled 229). Now rooms represent the world and travel begins from China, and through China wall and silk route, passing laughing Buddhas and a Chinese lantern. The movement is not only the movement in the present but a movement through history. The imagery of the poem portrays the movement which suites the travelling poem. The image of a galloping horse hints towards the earnestness and speed of travel which accompanies
the border crossing; and the speed of time and history: “a galloping flood, hooves iron by the river’s edge. / O beating night, what could have reined the sky/in?” (Ali, The Veiled 280). The listener is led through a suite of rooms, each room representing some area of the world. From China rooms take us to Russia passing Ural Mountains of central Asia followed by the far country in North where “one longs for all one’s ever bought, / for shades that lighten the scene”(Ali, The Veiled 280). These rooms ultimately lead us to a weepy conclusion where the fate: “… small hands. Invisible. Quick…” (Ali, The Veiled 281) do not allow the walls to be mirrors so that the world “in” “would be / mere mirrors cut to multiply, then multiply/in.” (Ali, The Veiled 281) Thus rooms always remain a work in progress: a continuous link between various nations brought together; and history and time entangled in fate.

This transnational connection is also found in some other poems of Agha Shahid Ali, like “In Search of Evanescence” where he juxtaposes two Calcuttas, of Indian and America: “When on Route 80 in Ohio/ I came across an exit/to Calcutta” (Ali The Veiled 123). Calcutta was the colonial capital of British India and now a metropolitan city. Name of the city- like the name of many other Indian cities- has changed to do away with the colonial legacy. It is now Kolkata. As Rajghatta notes that “The United States in general, and the state of Ohio in particular, seems extremely fascinated with exotic places, always naming towns and cities after foreign places” (qtd in Mai 8). Exotic fascination makes them to name a place in Ohio as Calcutta. Ali talks about the poem in an interview, “What happened when I was en route to Ohio and I saw the sign for Calcutta” (Ali, Interview Agha) and he juxtaposed it with the Indian Calcutta, even though, as he says, he has never been to Calcutta ( Ghosh 314). Here Ali sees the
connection between these two cities and tries to reveal the transnational link between India and America. “India always exists/ off the turnpikes/of America” (Ali The Veiled 123).

“Transatlantic studies”, says Manning and Taylor “is by nature eclectic; (8)” transnationalism is often associated with a fluidity of constructed styles, social institutions and everyday practices. These are often described in terms of syncretism, creolization, bricolage, cultural translation, and hybridity” (Vertovec7) Agha Shahid Ali’s ghazal “Tonight” is one the finest ghazals in the English language. The ghazal depicts his plural multicultural upbringing and his internalization of the oriental form, and how he fashions it into the new western tradition. One finds all these elements like syncretism, creolization, bricolage, cultural translation, and hybridity associated with transnationalism in this ghazal. The ghazal moves from the normal oriental subject of ghazal to other western subjects resulting in the mélange of different traditions. The form and subject are so beautifully merged that it seems that oriental subject, language patterns and form is written in the English language. The theme of the ghazal, as is the nature of the form, keeps on changing from one couplet to another; it moves from the East to West; from one religious background to another; and from love to loss. This mixture or mélange of two different varieties of something have been extended to various other forms like language, culture and politics. In language it has given rise to the terms like creole and pidgin. Bricolage was originally used by Levi Strauss to show the relation between human beings, animals and things around them, and how various myths originated from different societies. “Métissage a form of bricolage, in the sense used by Claude Lévi-
Strauss, but, as an aesthetic concept, it encompasses far more: it brings together biology and history, anthropology and philosophy, linguistics and literature” (Prabhu 8).

The first couplet of the ghazal, “Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight? / Whom else from rapture’s road will you expel tonight?” (Ali 374) begins with longing and a plea to the beloved. The plea is a typical and prominent theme of ghazals. It does not only pave a way for the rest of the ghazal but, thematically, also defines the ghazal itself. The opening couplet is a set of three questions put appealingly to the uncaring beloved, who is quite similar to the cruel beloved of Elizabethan poetry. These questions need no answer, but instead reflect the pain and misery of love. They are apparently not rhetorical questions, but their end result is so: the answer is not to be given, for the beloved does not care and thus the questions are a sigh of pain addressed to the fellow people. This kind of technique may not be new to the English tradition, but the art of rendering is totally novel. In addition, the undercurrent of Urdu tradition is not lost, but the couplet is not the translation of some Urdu verse either. It is a confluence of two distinct languages which is reflected by the couplet and the whole ghazal. The confluence of two traditions gives a different style to his writing, which has been termed as ghazelesque. (Singh) Different couplets of the ghazal are written in the same pattern, but thematically they are different. Their difference has not only to do with the structure of a ghazal, but also the different themes which interest Ali.

Me to adorn --- How --- tell---

Trinket --- to make me beautiful ---

Fabrics of Cashmere

Never a Gown of Dun --- nor ---

Raiment instead --- of Pompadour ---

For me --- My Soul --- to wear (qtd in Wardrop 95)

Third couplet of the ghazal, "I beg for haven: Prisons let open your gates—/ A refugee from belief seeks a cell tonight", (Ali, The Velled 374) turns the subject from Dickinson’s spiritual union to Faiz’s rebellion and revolution cornered by the enemies. Refugee of belief refers to one who has been defeated, not in love, but in rebellion. In Ali some times, like Faiz, beloved refers to revolution rather than a woman or any other person. In the following two couplets Ali’s subject changes from rebellious love to pro-Satan stance which is a common stance in many couplets of Ghalib and some other Urdu poets.

    God’s vintage loneliness has turned in to vinegar---

    All the archangels – their wings frozen- fell tonight.

    He’s freed some fire from ice in pity for Heaven.

    He’s left open- for God- the doors of Hell tonight. (Ali 374)

These two couplets reflect not only mockery towards the orthodox view of God, but raise some basic questions related to free will and God’s will. In Urdu poetry,
particularly in Ghalib, this comic way of addressing God is not particularly addressed to
God, but to the Cleric who paints God as didactic and rigid. The sixth couplet of the
ghazal has a similar thematic concern. Satan is shown to be the ruler of hell, and heaven
is said to be quite a cold place where God resides alone. God is feeling cold and it is
Satan who has freed some fire so that God can warm himself up. Is Ali mocking
orthodoxy or religious belief, or is he just skeptical about the ordinary persons image of
God which is opposite to the Sufi version of God where, as already discussed, the
concepts of Unity of Being and Unity of Vision define the nature of God. It can be any or
both, given the Ali’s Sufi-Skeptic vision of Islam. This theme in Urdu poetry is
reasonably common quite similar to Milton’s portrayal of Satan in The Paradise Lost.

Ali alludes to the Biblical story of Elijah and Jezebel. Jezebel was the daughter of
the King Ethbaal, and one of the wives of Ahab, King of North Israel. She is described as
as a worshiper of the god Baal and the goddess Asherah, and as an enemy of God’s
prophets. She is responsible for many killings. Elijah, the prophet of God, seeing her on
the killing spree prophesies that she will be killed and the way dogs licked Naboth’s
blood (whom Elijah got killed), dogs will similarly lick her blood too. The prophecy
comes true. Ali does contrary to the Biblical teaching; he sides with Jezebel and damns
Elijah the Prophet. “Executioners near the women at the window./ Damn you, Elijah, I’ll
bless Jezebel tonight” (Ali 374). Bringing in a Christian tradition in the ghazal is Ali’s
best example of syncretism and how the subject of Urdu poetry is brought into English
with Western allusions rather than the eastern one.

“Lord, cried out the idols, Don’t let us be broken; / Only we can convert the
infidel tonight” (Ali, The veiled 374). The incident, according to Kazim Ali, refers to the

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incident in Islamic history when the Prophet Muhammad conquered Mecca and removed and broke all idols from Kaba. (Ali, Kazim). The idols are shown pleading and showing their subservience to God, rather than being gods themselves. Here Ali is not condemning the act nor praising it, but only noting it. In another couplet, “In the heart’s veined temple, all statues have been smashed. / No priest in the saffron’s left to toll its knell tonight” (Ali 374), the subject shifts from Islam to Hinduism. Saffron is a Hindu colour and the couplet has double meaning; plight of priest after the idols have been destroyed, and joy of a mystic after he has been able to overcome his ego by destroying the statues in his “heart’s veined temple” (Ali 374).

In the couplet of the ghazal, called maqta author writes his takhallus or nom de plume name. Ali in the maqta uses the takhallus Shahid but asks the reader to call him Ishmael: “And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee—/God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight.” Thus Ali sees himself exiled like Ishmael.

Melville’s Moby-Dick begins with the sentence “Call me Ishmael tonight.” It is a kind of command which the narrator gives us. But nobody calls him by this name throughout the book. Melville’s Ishmael is “a young, white, American man... educated, a little stuck up... He’s prone to depression, and when he gets really melancholic – or emo – he likes to hire himself out as a common sailor” (Ishmael). Ali’s Ishmael is both Ishmael of Melville and Ishmael of Judo-Christian-Islamic tradition; however, Melville’s Ishmael also carries the legacy of the exile of Ishmael the prophet. The Biblical and the Quranic story where Abraham informed his son, Ishmael about the vision he saw in which he offered him in sacrifice. Ishmael submits to God’s will with patience but when the time of sacrifice came God called out at Abraham. “Thou hast already fulfilled the
vision!” (The Quran 37: 105), which Ali refers to as “God sobs in my arms” (Ali, The Veiled 375). God sobs in my arms gives us image of Gods longing and love for Ishmael for his exile suffering and patience. Given this Quranic allusion Ali hastens to add the biblical allusion from the Book of Job. “While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, “The fire of God is fallen from heaven, and hath burned up the sheep, and the servants, and consumed them; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee” (Job 1:16 King James).

In the echo chamber of this final stanza, Ali commingles Job (“only am escaped [alone] to tell thee”), Moby-Dick (“Call me Ishmael” and the Job quotation), and Islamic tradition (Ishmael as ur-ancestor). In this further example of what I term the dialectics of indigenization, Ali re-invigorates both the “native” and the foreign, both the Urdu-Persian form of the ghazal and the Western modernist mode of mythical syncretism, bracing them together through their homologous conjunctures and fissures. When ghazalified, modernist syncretism, hardly a disabling imperial influence, functions for Ali as a counterweight to tyrannies closer to “home”—the religious and nationalist absolutisms that have ravaged Kashmir. As required by the ghazal, the poet names him-self (the takhallos), but he then gives himself another name, Ishmael—an intercultural node in which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam inter-sect, as they have in the poem’s formal junctures and syncretic layerings. (Ramazani 105)
Thus Ali’s multicultural upbringing and living gives him a pluralistic identity which is quite apparent in his poetry. Ali’s genealogical preoccupation which includes the origin of his ancestry and their settling in Kashmir form his core identity, and this genealogical identity always holds on to him. In the poem “Snowmen”, Ali tries to relook at his identity, beginning from his ancestors who migrated from Samarkand to Kashmir. Ali uses the metaphor of whale bones as his ancestors carried “a bag of whale bones” (Ali, The Veiled 34) which is an heirloom for him. Ali is quite intrigued by the absence of women in his genealogical map as if they never existed. This he states in an interview while referring to this poem “I’m thinking about my ancestry and the lost women in this ancestry who we never hear about. I know everything about my father, his father, his father’s father and so on for nine generations. But I know nothing before my grandmother. So I am trying to find these lost women.” (Interview, Ali Calligraphy). His ancestor “froze women in his embrace. / His wife thawed into stony water, her old age a clear evaporation.” (Ali The Veiled 34) The women of his ancestry have evaporated from the scene as if they never existed.

Ali’s burden of identity is his heirloom, a treasure and a haunting past demanding a responsible future: “This heirloom, /his skeleton under my skin, passed/ from son to grandson, /generations of snowmen on my back” (Ali The Veiled 34). This burden of inheritance haunts Ali like anything and Ali alludes to the Wuthering Heights, as he says in an interview that the image of window, “They tap every year on my window” (Ali The Veiled 34) is an image taken from Emily Bronte’s Wuthering Heights, (Ali, Interview, Calligraphy) where the ghost of Catherine haunts the house and speaks, “Let me in” ...“I’m come home” (Bronte 48). Ali feels same about his home. Thus, his genealogical
identity from Samarkand to Kashmir forms his core identity, and with it he carries multiple identities including the peripheral American identity. But Ali promises to carry this burden and even if he is the last snowman, he will "ride into spring on their melting shoulders" (Ali The Veiled 34). And ultimately, his travel from Samarkand to Kashmir to America makes him Ishmael: always in exile longing for home and the bygone time with pain and despair.
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