Chapter V


The chapter will discuss Agha Shahid Ali’s technique of writing, various forms of poetic styles used by him and his translation of Faiz Ahmad Faiz. Ali, as discussed in the first chapter of the thesis, was very much influenced by the poetic style of the English modernists like T S Eliot and A E Hume. Ali wrote his earlier poetry in free verse and modernist tone, but his latter poetry became very much preoccupied with the poetic forms like ghazal, canzone, Sapphic stanzas, villanelle and portoum. Besides this Ali uses syncretic language wherein he mixes the English language with the effects of Urdu poetry.

Agha Shahid Ali was born in multilingual environment and wrote poetry in English even though Urdu was his mother tongue. He was born in India in 1949, two years after the end of colonialism in India and grew up in the era of post colonialism when writers, philosophers and theorists were trying to grapple with the idea of post colonialism. They were “writing back to the empire”; disdaining the power of the centre, and trying to revive native culture and literature smothered by the colonial rule. However “post” in the post colonialism does not only mean after colonialism; “it could also mean around, through, out of, alongside and against (Patke, Post 3)”. Agha Shahid Ali might have grown in the postcolonial environment but he is not a typical postcolonial writer who is there to criticize colonialism and write on its repercussions. He is more of a transnational and transcultural writer. However, writers from the third world whether they
are committed post colonialists or not have, to some extent, an urge to revive their
cultural and write about their home.

One way of reviving ones culture is to alter the colonial language and create a
writing diction with inputs from the native culture and language. This is usually achieved,
as Bill Ashcroft et al notes, through abrogation, appropriation, subversion and rejection
of the Standard language. (32-50) Ashcroft et al writes about some methods involved in
doing so; they include glossing, parenthetic translation of individual words,
interlanguage, using untranslated words, syntactic fusion, code switching, vernacular
transcription etc. (7-11) For Ali it is less of a deliberate act of writing in that style and
more of his natural way of writing. He had a pluralistic upbringing; therefore, being a
part of many cultures he writes that way which, as Salman Rushdie says, is the hallmark
of Indian culture:

... the very essence of Indian culture is that we possess a mixed tradition,
a mélange of elements as disparate as ancient Mughal and contemporary
Coca-Cola American. ... Eclecticism the ability to take from the world
what seems fitting and to leave the rest, has always been a hallmark of the
Indian tradition, and today it is at the centre of the best work being done
both in the visual arts and in literature. (Rushdie 67)

When it comes to the use of language, Agha Shahid Ali seems to have used both,
Rushdie’s mixed tradition and the techniques involved in the abrogation of the language.
There are four different methods which Ali put into work: translation of Faiz Ahmad
Faiz, writing “real” ghazals in English, transcreating various phrases, couplets, words etc.

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and using them in his poetry, and editing a book of ghazals written by various American writers. In his poetry one finds a mélange of Western and Indo-Islamic culture and literature. They are so closely woven that they cannot be separated from each other. Talking about this, Ali, in his second edition of *The Rebel’s Silhouette* while make a comment on the prefatory note of the first edition, writes:

This explanation reveals any simultaneous love of Urdu and of English. Neither love is acquired; I was brought up in a bilingual, bicultural (but never rootless) being. The loyalties, which have political, cultural, and aesthetic implications, remain so entangled in me, so thoroughly mine, that they have led not to confusion but to strange, arresting clarity. (Ali, The Rebel xii)

One of the important aspects of the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali is that he tries to foreground his culture through it. In diaspora he tries to recreate his cultural loss and share it with the world. Nishat Zaidi notes that “Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry is a serious attempt to make his culture known to the world (3).” Likewise, Azade Seyhan in his book *Writing Outside the Nation* writes:

Transnational writing can potentially redress the ruptures in history and collective memory caused by the unavailability of sources, archives and recording narratives. By uncovering obscure poetic tradition, discovering forgotten idioms and grammars, and restoring neglected individual and collective stories to literary history, it introduces hitherto neglected cultures in to modern literary consciousness. (13)
Agha Shahid Ali steals some moments of his childhood memories and mixes them with mature thoughts and this mixing of the old and the new culture creates a hybrid identity. One of the important ways Ali does it by using some techniques used by the postcolonial writers. However, as already said, he is not a typical postcolonial writer who is engaged in an act of writing back, but living in the post colonial times he cannot escape the influence: in the postcolonial world English has ceased to be standard or a "pure language but is rather a fascinating combination of tongues welded into a fresh unity" (Ashcroft 39).

One of the techniques used by the postcolonial writers is the abrogation of language: the art of altering the standard language which includes technique like translation, changing syntax structure etc. They include usage of unrelated words, translating native phrases which sometime sound mediocre. One such technique of using the untranslated words has been utilized quite well by Agha Shahid Ali. There are two types of untranslated words used by writers one which have no English equivalent, and second type of words whose equivalent is available. Agha Shahid Ali uses many such untranslated words like Bhaiya, Bhajan, Insha Allah, Jung etc. "You must write my story/ Bhaiya my story" (Ali, The Veiled 262). Ali instead of writing "my story brother, my story" he uses Bhaiya. Word Bhaiya connotes lot of affection and love which the word brother doesn’t although it means the same. There is also a foot note for the word: "Bhaiya: The author’s pet name" (Ali, The Veiled 262), which, however, is not completely right. Thus these un-translated words mean more than what their equivalents stand for. Similarly InshaAllah is an Arabic word which means "If God wishes". It is used often by Muslims from all linguistic backgrounds and it seems to be a regular word
in their language. Ali is using it from that perspective: a regular word, which native reader can easily understand. Likewise he uses many words which do not have an English equivalent like Jama\textit{war} shawl (A special kind of a Kashmiri shawl), bh\textit{ang} (kind of opium), Chinar (huge maple tree that grows in Kashmiri), Phire\textit{n} (cloak used in winter), Ashura (Shia month of mourning). Ali has put all of these words in italics without giving the meaning of these words. “The sleeves of his phire\textit{n} torn” … (Ali, The Veiled 179), “The ch\textit{inar} leaves fall in clusters” (Ali, The Veiled 179), “This letter, Insha’\textit{Allah}, will reach you” (Ali, The Veiled 194), “The Koran … wrapped in a jama\textit{war} shawl” (Ali, The Veiled 200), “We celebrated Ashura with relatives” (Ali, The Veiled 253). Ashcroft et al talks about the use of untranslated word used by the postcolonial writers.

The technique of selective lexical fidelity which leaves some word untranslated in the text is more widely device for conveying the sense of cultural distinctiveness. Such a device not only acts to signify the difference between cultures but also illustrates the importance of discourse in interpreting cultural concepts. (Ashcroft et al 63)

Agha Shahid Ali like many other writers does not provide us with any glossary to explain the meaning. This is rightly done so that the non-native readers keep guessing the meaning of these words and in turn keep on guessing the culture which these words connote. This is an act of mixing the two cultures and the gap in the text shows difference and mélange of different cultures, and it is an attempt to bring the two cultures at par with each other.

Another technique used by the postcolonial writers is glossing: a technique used
for subversion and hybridity which involves a parenthetic translation of the individual words; where both the original and the translation are given together and separated by a small gap. It is this gap which separates and mixes the two cultures, like hyphen. Ashcroft et al furnishes us with an example of “obi” an Igbo word meaning hut: “he took him into his obi (hut)” (61). He further illustrates the point.

The implicit gap between obi (hut) in fact disputes the putative preferentiality of the words and establishes obi as a cultural sign. The retention of the Igbo word perpetuates the metonymic function of the cross-cultural text by allowing the word to stand for the latent presence of Ibo culture. The requisite sense of difference is implicitly recorded in the gap between the word and its referent, a ‘referent’ which (ironically) accords the English word the status of the ‘real’. This absence or gap is not negative but positive ‘real’ (61)


He differentiates between war and jung by inserting “no” with a comma. It may not be typical glossing technique but has similar connotations. Jung means war but it can have many other similar meaning. Standard Twentieth Century Dictionary: Urdu to English has the following entry: “Jung— war, battle, fight, conflict...” As Ali hurries to
add to the meaning of war by writing (no, Jung), he intends to say that, to be more appropriate, he is waging jung which is a bit different from war. Here glossing complicates meaning of the couplet: he can be in conflict beyond English or fighting beyond English and so an. Similarly the best (ar-Rahim) is one of the ninety nine names of God. In the Quran when God speaks about sins and forgiveness he calls himself Gafurur-Rahim meaning the ever forgiving God. “Rahim indicates that which is extremely and continuously loving and merciful... and the One in whom the attribute is constantly and [endlessly] repeated” (The Beautiful). Agha Shahid Ali uses the last part of it, Rahim and translates it as the best which is not very close to the original, as ar-Rahim literary means “Ever-merciful”. Therefore, Agha Shahid Ali bridges the gap but this glossal gap keeps it always open for discussion. Here he brings the Christen concept of God and mixes it with the Islamic concept and the gap indicates the similarity and difference in the concept.

Western literature is situated in context of the Bible and the two are inseparable. King James Version of the Bible is in itself a literary master piece; likewise, Milton’s Paradise Lost is a critique on the biblical version of the fall of man. Most of the western writers have been influenced by the Bible and they directly and indirectly allude to it, so much so that Northrop Frye says that “a student of English literature who does not know the Bible does not understand a good deal of what is going on in what he reads”(qtd. in Leithart). Agha Shahid Ali also refers to the Bible e.g. in the epigraph of the poem “Desert Landscape”. “Who hath measured the water/ in the hollow of his hand— Isaiah 40:11 (160). However, given the Muslim background of Ali, he more often alludes to the Quran than the Bible. He uses it in some poems like “Srinagar Airport” which is about
the funeral of his mother. "There is not got but God –The Koran" (267). The poem also ends with the same words. "There is no God but" (269). Similarly his poem "The Blessed word: A Prologue", a prologue to The country Without a Post Office written on the atrocities in Kashmir has an a verse from the Quran as an epigraph. This verse about apocalypse sets the tone of the prologue and the book: "The Hour draws nigh and/The moon is rent asunder.–THE KORAN, SURAH 54:1" (171). Ali gives exact chapter number and verse number, and instead of using the word chapter he writes Surah, its Arabic equivalent. Likewise, in the poem "Hans Christian Ostro", an elegy on Norwegian hostage killed in Kashmir by the Al-Faran militants, he denounces the killing by quoting the Koran, "Whosoever gives life to a soul/shall be as if he had to all of mankind/ given life" (Ali, The Veiled 236).

Agha Shahid Ali’s privileging the Quran is less of an act of subverting the Bible or the western literary canon, but more of an attempt to bring the two traditions together. This helps him to put forth his culture which is shaped by his religion besides other effects. Thus he brings two Abrahamic religions, cultures and texts together which is more of a cultural hybridization and less of a postmodern pastiche.

Agha Shahid Ali has also used lot of translated and transcreated couplets of Urdu in his poetry. Many times as an epigraph to some poems e.g., in his poem “Form Another Desert”, which has been discussed in detail in the chapter IV, he uses Mirza Ghalib’s couplet “Footprints of blood in the path I traveled/Lit up the desert, a track of crimson parls.”(139) as an epigraph. The poem “After Seeing kozintsev’s King Lear in Delhi” is about the condition of people around old Delhi which once was the capital of Mughal Empire. Thinking of Zafar, he quotes the Emperor-poet who is “being led though these
street” (Ali, The Veiled 50).

‘In exile he wrote:

“Unfortunate Zafar

spent half his life in hope,

the other half waiting

He begs for two yards of Delhi for burial.” (Ali, The Veiled 50)

Zafar’s couplet quoted above is not are couplets but two lines of two different couplets of the same ghazal. Ali brings the two together. “Asking for a long life we got four days/We spent two in longing, and two in waiting.” (Zafar 168, my translation). “How unfortunate is Zafar, for burial/ He couldn’t get even two yards in the land of this beloved.” (Zafar 168, my translation). It is a wonderful way of bringing the two couplets into one making them succinct without loss in the meaning. Similarly Ali alludes in his poetry to a Bollywood film song (246), Kashmiri song (190), Bhajan (25) and Nawah (255) etc. Another method which Agha Shahid Ali uses is called the technique of syntactic fusion which is done by using neologisms. Ashcroft et al writes about it:

... successful neologisms in the English text emphasize the fact that words do not embody cultural, for where the creation of new lexical forms in English may be generated by the linguistic structure of the mother tongue, their success lies in their function within the text rather their linguistic provenance. (Ashcroft et al 70)

The poem “Farewell” is about the exodus of Hindus (Kashmir Pandiths) from
Kashmiri where Agha Shahid Ali mourns their leaving. It ends with the following lines: “If only somehow you could have been mine, /What would not have been possible in the world (Ali, The Veiled 77). These are the regular lines without inverted commas; they echo Momin khan Momin’s couplet, How could you not be mine? Otherwise, what is not possible in the word? (my translation). This cannot be regarded as plagiarism as the Urdu knowing reader will easily discern the original and the translation; it is there to fit the translated couplet in the English language in order to bridge the syntactic and the semantic barrier of the two language; therefore, these lines are novel in terms of their syntax and idea which otherwise is quite unusual in the English poetry. Amitav Ghosh writes about Ali’s line “Mad heart be brave” (206) that “his voice was like none I had heard before, at once typical and fiercely disciplined engaged and yet deeply inward...his was a voice that was not ashamed to speak in a bardic register I know none else would ever conceive of publishing a line like “Mad heart be brave” (2). It can be termed as hybrid poetry where the two languages converge to become one, or what Ramazani calls the modernist bricolage which is “…the synthetic use ... of diverse cultural materials [which] ...has helped postcolonial poets aesthetically encode intersections among multiple cultural vectors. (Ramazani 99) Edward Brathwaite in his essay “Nation Language” talks about the same subject, although in the Caribbean context, but one finds it in Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry.

Nation language is the language that is influenced very strongly by the African model ..... English it may be in terms of its lexicon it is not English is terms of its syntax. And English it certainly is not in terms of its rhythm and timbre, its own sound explosion. In its contours it is not
English, ever though the words as you hear them, would be English to a
greater or lesser degree? (311)

Similarly in his translation of Faiz, Ali used some phrases and internalized them
and used their in his regular poetry: “I declared these stains a new fashion! And want to
mingle with the guests/At my lovers home” (45-49 my emphasis). “You who wear
shirts/Ripped at the collars” (50-51 my emphasis). One thing is to be noted that these
lines are form two different poems. Agha Shahid Ali in the poem “From Another Desert”
writes the following lines which echo these translations. “Cries majnoon/Those in tatters/
May now demand love/I’ve declared a fashion/ of ripped collars’ (Ali, The Veiled, 142
my emphasis)This by no means copying of his own translation but his art of stealing
which only mature poets are capable of, as Eliot’s famous words remind us: “Immature
poets copy, mature poets steal.” (Eliot)

Besides using all these aspects, Agha Shahid Ali chooses one of the most
important feature of his culture— ghazal. Ghazal is one of the foremost features of the
Indo-Islamic poetry as it is not merely written but it is sometimes accompanied by music,
chanting and singing; as G.R. Malik would say “In fact Oriental poetry has become
almost synonyms with the ghazal” (73). Ghazal developed from Arabic poetic genre
qasida. Qasidas were written abundantly in the pre-Islamic period. It is a form of
panegyric poetry usually in lyric form praising and eulogizing great men. The first part of
qasida which is a nostalgic opening is called nisab where the poet reflects on the bygone
time. A common concept is that the poet follows the caravan of his beloved and when he
reaches there, he finds the caravan already departed. Nisab later on broke away from
qasida to become a full fledged genre of its own which came be known as ghazal. Persian
poets internalized the form and took it to the great heights and ghazal became to be known as mother of all poetic genres. Persian literature produced some prolific and everlasting ghazal writers like Hafiz, Rumi, Bedil, Urvi, Saidi etc. From Persian it came to Urdu.

Ghazal like any other poetic genre is both about form and content or subject. Since it is new to the Western Literary tradition, therefore, it is important to discuss the form of the ghazal. It follows the rhyme scheme aa ba ca da and so on. It can have minimum of five couplets and there is no maximum limit. Each couplet of ghazal is termed as sher and each line of sher is called misra. Ghazals have a well knit rhyme and refrain; rhyme of ghazal is called radif, and refrain is called qafia. Both radif and qafia follow the above scheme aa ba ca and so on. First couplet of a ghazal is called matla, where both misras follow the same pattern of qafia and radif. This opening couplet declares the pattern that will be followed in rest of the ghazal. Last couplet (sher) of a ghazal is called maqta where poet refers to himself using nom de plume or takhalus.

As already discussed that ghazal broke from Arabic Qasida whose first part deals with love and longing, using the metaphor of caravan. Ghazal as per dictionary lexicon means the way of mannerisms of women’s talk, or to talk about women or womanly things. However, lots of themes have got incorporated in ghazal but love continues to be its principle theme. Love and longing cannot be separated from ghazal. Agha Shahid Ali comments about it “It is the cry of the gazelle when it is cornered in a hunt knows it will die. Thus to quote Ahmad Ali, the “atmosphere of sadness and grief that pervades the ghazal … reflects its origins in this” and in the form’s “dedication to love and the beloved.” (Ali, Ravishing, 3). Each sher of two misras in a ghazal is complete in itself; it
is an autonomous poem. Second misra of a sher reflects back on the first, completing it usually in a strange manner that we are forced re-think about the first line.

There is no theme or a story in ghazal. One couplet may be serious, another may be a joke, third can be philosophical and so on. It is form that holds a ghazal together. Ali writes about it “A couplet may be quoted by itself without any way violating a context—there is no context as such. One should at any time be able to pick a couplet like a stone from a necklace, and it should continue to shine in that vivid isolation, though it would have different lusture among and with other stones” (Ali, Ravishing 2 -3)

Ghazal made its entry into the Western world in the Victorian era, when some Victorian men of study, who, according to Aejaz Ahmad, “were not poets themselves, nor with “the exception of Fitzgerald, even men of imagination. They knew very little about poetry... (Ahmad xix)”. Therefore, it could not make a serious impact in the West. But, in true sense ghazal made entry in America in 1968 when Aejaz Ahmad published Ghazals of Ghalib. Aejaz Ahmad only did the literal translation of the select ghazals and provided explanatory notes which were converted in to poems by some well known American poets like W S Merwin, Adrienne rich, William Stafford, David Ray, Thomas Fitzsimmons, and William Hunt. They did not follow the formal pattern of ghazal for the editor had given them freedom to deviate as they wished (Ahmad xxvi).

This translation inspired some American poets like Adrienne Rich and James Harrison to write the ghazals in English. However, these ghazals were not written in proper form as they missed the essence, as David Caplan says about Rich that she was “jumping between threatening images [and] ghazal’s fragmentary argumentative structure
..." (49). Likewise Carruth points out "... how could these poets resort to a kind of poetry so remote and alien" (qtd. in Caplan 51). Agha Shahid Ali was quite unhappy with American writers' misuse of the form of ghazal. "The form has really been utterly misunderstood in America, with these free verse ghazals. I mean that is just not the ghazal," Ali insisted. "The ghazal has a very strict formal unity, with a certain cultural location ... what they call ghazals, those are not ghazals, they simply aren't" (Ali, Christine 264-5)." Ali seems to be very strict about the form, rather everything including the pronunciation: "so imagine me at a writers conference where a women kept saying to me, "Oh, I just love ghazals. I'm going to write lot of g'zaals," and I said to her, in utter pain, "OH, PLEASE DON'T!""(Ali, Ravishing 1). In addition, he refutes Paul Oppenheimer's assertion that sonnet is the oldest form still in popular use which dates back to the thirteenth century Italy. Ali traces back ghazal to the seventh century Arabia. (Ali, Ravishing 1)

Adrienne Rich's ghazals lack form; therefore, one cannot differentiate between the different couplets of the two different ghazals as there is no rhyme and rhythm to mark the distinctiveness of a ghazal. The lack of these formal aspects makes these ghazals disjointed, therefore clumsy. Ali, on the other hand, is very strict as far as the form is concerned, so much so that some of his ghazals appear to have been written for the sake of form only. Comparing both, the ghazals of Adrienne Rich and Agha Shahid Ali with each other, it becomes clear that the sentence structure of the English language is not feasible for writing ghazals with their true characteristics.

Form of ghazal is considered to be very strict which restricts its practitioners to give full vent to their thoughts. Scope of ghazal, therefore, is quite narrow. Form of
ghazal is so narrow that even the great practitioner of the form like Ghalib acknowledges the restriction posed to creativity and imagination. "The scope of the ghazal's narrow strait is disproportionate to my passion/ My expression craves for a freer and greater expansion" (qtd in Malik 76) But all great artists have compromised with the form and produced remarkable poetry. G R Malik notes about it:

Consequently there is an inherent contrast in the ghazal between content and form which breeds a dialectical tension. Coming to terms with this dialectical tension constitutes the acid test for the practitioner of ghazal form. In the hands of a successful poet, the two dialectical elements produce an exquisite synthesis while a lesser artist gives it a mere artificiality and lifeless convention. (76)

Knowing all these complications involved in ghazal writing in the English language, why did Agha Shahid Ali choose the form? Perhaps, the answer could be what he states in the preface to his edited book of ghazals, that he wanted to correct the misunderstood form: the ghazal for the Americans.

Agha Shahid Ali, as already discussed, was highly influenced by Indo-Islamic Urdu culture, the language about which he says that "it is the only language I know whose mention evokes poetry" (Ali, Ravishing 1). Ghazal is an integral part of this culture and therefore Ali was acquainted with it from the beginning. Ali’s encounter with ghazals in formal sense came while he was translating Faiz whom he translated in free verse in English. Later on he published two of his ghazals, "Tonight" and "Arabic" in The Country with out of a Post Office(1997); and then went on to write a full book of
ghazals entitled *Call me Ishmael Tonight* (2002). Ali also influenced and motivated various young American and Canadian poets to write ghazals which he edited and published under the title, *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English* (2000).

In this book *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997) Ali wrote two ghazals, “Tonight” and Arabic” besides adapting a ghazal from Makhdoom Mohiuddin. In *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* (2002) Ali edited both of his earlier ghazals. Earlier version of the “Arabic” had *radif* but lacked *qafta*; new version has both *radif* and *qafta*. Changes in the form also brought change in the meaning of these couplets but he made them formally perfect. For example, couplet from the older version reads, “Majnoon, his cloths ripped, still weeps for Laila / O, this is the madness of a desert, his crazy Arabic.” New version of the same couplet is “Majnoon, by stopped caravans, rips his collars, “cries Laila”/ Pain translated is O! more –not less- in Arabic.” These changes brought in the new version shows his maturity as a poet. He is not only concerned with the perfection of form, but he tries to bring the ghazal thematically close to the oriental ghazal. This oriental or Urdu ghazal is written in the India style or Sabk-e-Hindi. Nishat Zaidi writes about it:

The Persian form of ghazal poetry underwent a change when the form travelled to India. It came to be written in what is known as Sabk-e-Hindi. When the form was adapted in Urdu, it drew from Sabk-e-Hindi, which is defined by its metaphoricity, intertextuality, wordplay, and separation of theme (mazmun) and meaning (mana) whereby a poet could use the same mazmun for multiple maani. (Zaidi 58)
Agha Shahid Ali has situated his ghazals in this context of *Sakb-e-hindi* where he uses metaphors, wordplay and meanings of the Urdu poetic tradition, but writes it in the English language. Urdu language has some clichéd symbols and metaphors which are used over again, but the genius lies in using them in such a way so that poetry appears anew. “The Urdu words such as *sagi* (tavern keeper), *sharab* (wine), *mai* (wine), *maikhana* (wine-celler), *paimana* (cask), etc can be used symbolically in multiple contexts to invoke multiple meanings such as divine blessing, beloved’s favour, preacher, metaphysical experience and so on” (Zaidi 59).

To achieve this oriental tinge in his ghazals, Ali has adopted many methods and most important is the translation and transcreation of the Urdu ghazals and couplets. The ghazal “Not all, only a few return” (Ali, The Veiled 270) is an adaptation from Ghalib. The adaptation has proper *radif* but no *qafia*. To be more close to the original he has sacrificed the *qafia* but unlike his free translations of Faiz or Aejaz et al’s free verse ghazals, this ghazal has a proper form. Similarly, many of his ghazals have translated or transcreated Urdu couplet embedded in between his original ghazal. “I am a mere dust. The desert hides itself in me/ Against me the ocean has revlimed from the start” (Ali, The Veiled 339) is transcreated from Ghalib’s verse “*hota hai gard niha me sehra mere hote*” (*Ghalib* 208). Likewise, in his oft anthologized ghazal “Tonight” there are two such couplets which he has translated into a given frame of *qafia* and *radif*. “God limit these punishment days, there’s still Judgement Day/ I’m a mere sinner, I’m no infidel tonight” (Ali, The Veiled 374) is from Ghalib’s “*hed chaye hai saza me ukoobat ke waste*” (*Ghalib* 110), and “My rivals for your love- you have invited them all?/ This is mere insult, this is ni farewell tonight” (Ali, The Veiled 375) is from Ghalib’s “*jamah karte ho kyun raqibu
In some ghazals he has translated the first line of a couplet and changed the second: “Solomon’s throne was a toy, his judgement mere talk/ Only our sins must enshrined from the start” (Ali, The Veiled 339). Translation of the original is “A (child’s) play is the throne of Solomon/ An ordinary thing is the miracle of Massiah in my eyes” (Ahmad 161).

Thus, by adapting all these methods Agha hahid Ali is able to put forth his culture to the world which is embedded in the ghazal. He in his ghazals tries to use metaphors of Urdu poetry and juxtaposes them with the western linguistic patters. Bill Ashcroft et al write:

That overlap of language which occurs when the texture, sound, rhythm, and words are carried over from mother tongue to the adopted literary form ... is something which the writers may take as evidence of their ethnographic or differentiating function— an insertion of the ‘truth’ of culture into the text” (51).

Ghazal, Agha Shahid Ali explains, in the preface to Ravish Disunities: Real Ghazals in English, is not a mere poem or couplets with thematic disunity on a piece of paper, but something very culturally rooted. It is usually mushaira or poetic symposium which is important in the dissemination of this genre of poetry, where the response of the audience enhances the beauty of ghazal. Ali has tried to give the cultural context to the ghazal, the Indo-Islamic culture. Western readers have failed to understand the true nature of ghazal simply because they fail to understand the cultural context.
Ralph Russel a great British scholar of Urdu, whose earlier encounter with ghazal bewildered him as he couldn’t understand it, and put some questions on the nature of ghazals. He could not understand “Why is every verse a separate entity?” (108) Understanding Urdu meter was out of question. He understood these different couplets “not as string of pearls on which are threaded, in apparently haphazard order, pearls, rubies, pretty pebbles, and cheap beads of plain and coloured glass, uniform in size and shape but not in anything else.” (108) These are some of the reasons which hindered the understanding of ghazal in America. Russel at the end of his “pursuit of the Urdu ghazal” began to understand, therefore, made some striking revelations about the same which are very important to understand the nature of ghazal.

... three things need to be carefully borne in mind: first, that the greater part of it [Urdu literature] is a literature medieval in spirit, rather than modern, secondly, that it is the literature of a community that has always regarded itself as an elite and therefore markedly aristocratic in its values and thirdly that it is largely (especially in its poetry) a literature of oral tradition... (Russel 112).

From the above discussion it is clear that ghazal is more than a published poem, and understanding it requires good understanding of the cultural context in which it is written. One of the most important cultural entities of ghazal is mushaira or poetic-symposium. Agha Shahid Ali regards it failure of unrhymed ghazals to generate “the breathless excitement” which is generated in a mushaira. (Ali, Ravishing 8).
Mushaira is a poetic symposium in which different poets get together with audience facing them. It is not a contest in which a winner is declared, but they simply read the poems. Thus audience would participate fully in this drama of poetry and if they like any couplet, they shower praises by raising their hands and saying vah-vah (bravo! Wel idone!), and SubhanAllah (praises to Allah) very loudly. Agha Shahid Ali calls it “Vaah-vaaing and Subhan-Allah-ing.” If they like a couplet they ask the poet to repeat it, shouting Mukarar! Mukarar! (Again! Again!). Therefore in mushaira, like in the Brecht’s Epic theatre, the audience is not passive but actively participates in the completion of the act. However, mushaira or taranum (sing of a ghazal in mushaira) is not oral poetry like ballads, songs etc which is usually referred to as illiterate. Qureshi cautions us saying that “In Taranum “oral” and “literate” elements are combined. (Qureshi 450). This is what makes ghazal somewhat different both from written as well as the oral literature. It is mélangé of the two. Ali attempt is to explain the same and to bring the effects of mushaira in the English language. However, the syntactic feature of the English language is not feasible to provide the same effect as is the case with Urdu poetry.

Another great contribution of Agha Shahid Ali to the world literature is the book Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English (2000). This is a collection of around 140 ghazals written by various American, Canadian and other writers, collected and edited by Agha Shahid Ali. However, all the contributors are not professional writers; some of them are ordinary men interested in poetry and it is therein where lays the beauty of the book. It is for the first time that American writers care for the form of ghazal.

After the publication of this anthology ghazal took a new shape in America.
Earlier, as Agha Shahid Ali points out, American poets wrote normal poems and called them ghazals; but now these new rules of ghazal writing made writers rethink about the form. This traditional form became accepted and the standard of ghazal writing in America. Harvard review of the book comments upon the anthology, “for a long time now, poets have written ghazals in English, badly. Agha Shahid Ali’s anthology is useful, timely and welcome intervention” (Gray 140).

Almost all the ghazals of the book are written in the proper form, but to say that the whole book has been writer for the sake of form would be incorrect as the poets have remarkably widened the canvass of the ghazal. The poets follow the chart and introduction given by Agha Shahid Ali but they take full freedom with the content and approach to the ghazal. Some poets have done away with qafia and only put radif in their ghazals like “Nozzle (110) with radif alone.” “A thousand and three in Italy alone/ He can’t leave women or himself lone.” and then follows “home alone”, “wakes alone”, “are alone “and so on. Almost all the ghazals have titles and most of them are radifs, or some important word, but some have titles which describe the mood and theme of the ghazal; like Dark Ghazal (Ali, Ravishing 102) where the atmosphere is dark, or K N Daruwalla’s partition Ghazals (48-49) deals with Indo-Pak partition of 1947. Similarly Rafia kathwari’s ghazal “In Another Country” is a diaspora ghazal where he is nostalgic about home. Few couplets are note worthy.”In Kashmir, half asleep, mother listens to the rain/In Manhattan, I feel her presence in the rain” “Rafiq” I hear her call over the city din/The kettle whistles: my mother’s scent in the rain (89)”

Andrew Macord (62) has translated Ghalib’s ghazal “lazm tha ke dekho mere rasta koi din aur” and great thing about this translation is that without deviating from the original
it has a proper qafīa and radif which was missing in Aejaz et al’s translation or some translations of Ali himself. Some ghazals truly follow the oriental spirit where one couplet is comic another serious and so on. Important feature of ghazal is that one can always freely quote couplets from any ghazal but they must be precise, succinct and witty. The book has many such couplets which are remarkable and quote worthy. A few examples

Day light, like a poem, fades to end

The poet is the sun. He leaves. (160)

He is like a tide. He comes. He gives

I am always here. life’s anchored with me. (174)

Miniature ghazals by Sara Suleri Goodyear (65) is a beautiful ghazal which reflect back on Agha Shahid Ali’s famous poem “Postcard form Kashmir”, his poems and “In Search of Evanesence” Here she mixes the memories of Agha Shahid Ali with her remembrance of the poet. One of finest ghazal of the book is John Hollander’s Ghazal and Ghazals. It deals with thematic and formal aspects of ghazal. The ghazal deals with how Hollander another fellow American poet dealt and experienced the new form.

For couplets the ghazal is prime; at the end

Of each one’s a refrain like a chime: "at the end."

Each new couplet’s a different ascent: no great peak,

But a low hill quite easy to climb at the end.
Now Qafia Radif has grown weary, like life,

At the game he's been wasting his time at. THE END. (Ali, Ravishing 76)

There are many other ghazals which have something special and different in them. Almost every poet has tried to deal with ghazal the way they liked. Therefore, this is not simply a collection of monotonous ghazals written is same order but each ghazal has different mood, theme and order. To sum up I quote Christopher Merrill:

Reading this anthology straight through is a fascinating experience- what a range of voice and subjects the editor has coaxed into creating ‘cultural transitions’. It is indeed a testament to the openness of American writers to the new and (seemingly) exotic. It is also a marvelous gift to the literary world, and it is safe to that nothing will ever by quite the same in our poetry. (Ali, Ravishing, Back Cover).

Besides ghazal Agha Shahid Ali has also experimented with other poetic forms. His book Rooms are Never Finished begins with a Canzone, Lenox Hill. Canzone as poetic form is difficult to handle and therefore only few English poets have experimented with it. Ali has written three canzones, “Lenox Hill”, The Veiled Suite” and “After the August Wedding in Lahore, Pakistan.” The poet Anthony Heart remarked that Ali should be in the Guinness Book of World Record for writing three canzones which no other poet has done (Ghosh 319). Canzone is an Italian lyric which literally means a “song” which has no rhyme scheme but consists of five key words which determine structure of the poem. There are sixty five lines in a canzone, each line ending with one of the five
keywords which follows a specific pattern. It is usually written in tragic, elegiac, romantic or comic form and ends with a valediction or comment.

Amitav Ghosh considers “Lenox Hill” to be Ali’s greatest poem (319). The canzone, “Lenox Hill” is written in an elegiac mode follows the same structural and thematic aspects as necessitated by the traditional rules. It begins with an epigraph in which Ali’s mother after an elephant dream says that there is proximity between the sound of sirens in Manhattan and the cry of the elephants of a Hun King. A Hun king, Meherkul, conquered Kashmir in 6th century AD and during a military expedition one of the elephants accidently fell down from Pir Panjal Mountains and it’s painful and terrible cry delighted the sadist King so much that he ordered pushing down of all the elephants available in the campaign. Ali refers to this tragic historical incident in the poem and this tragic and painful cry of elephants reverberates in the whole poem, both structurally and thematically.

Five key words around which Ali’s canzone is built are elephant, mother, Kashmir, universe and die. These key words do not only determine the structure of the poem but also subject matter of the poem: “elephant’s” pathetic cry, “mother’s” death, “Kashmir’s” tragedy, “universe” which he finds to be under subject of somebody “plump with fate”, and “die”: poem’s obsession with death. There is a mutual link between these five key words which in turn links the whole poem making it structurally very terse. Talking about the structure of the poem, Amitav Ghosh writes,

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 meter 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. (321)

In the conclusive lines of a canzone all the five key words are put together as is necessary by the formal rules. Ali in these lines tries to share grief of his mother's death and the tragedy of Kashmir, and ends up mothering his homeland, Kashmir where death, grief and ill fate show no signs to abate.

Similarly in the canzone "After the August Wedding in Lahore, Pakistan", Ali builds a tragic story of Kashmir on the edifice of five words—pain, Kashmir, glass, night and sing where Ali has “filled [the] glass with pain” of Kashmir and in the whole poems he sings it in the gloomy night.(My emphasis)

... love departs into 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?

Likewise Ali's, canzone "The Veiled Suite" which has been discussed in chapter four of the thesis has similar structural aspects. However, unlike other two canzones which have written in elegiac and tragic mode respectively, the poem is written in romantic-mystic
mode where he has dealt with the Sufi concept of *Wahdatul Wajood* (Unity of being).

Ali has also written a villanelle. The villanelle is a 19-line poem which has five tercets and a quatrain. It has two repeating rhymes and refrains. The first and the last lines of the first tercet get repeated alternatively in the last lines of the following tercets. In the quatrain which follows the five tercets these lines are repeated as the concluding lines, the third and fourth line. The rhyme (a b) and the refrain (a\(^1\) a\(^2\)) scheme of a villanelle is a\(^1\)b a\(^2\)/ a b a\(^1\)/ a b a\(^2\)/ a b a\(^1\)/ a b a\(^2\). During the Renaissance period Villanelles were written as dance-songs in Italian and Spanish usually with pastoral themes. Then it came to French and from there into English where some writers wrote several beautiful Villanelles like the famous one by Dylan Thomas “Do not go gentle into that good night.” The theme of Villanelles, however, did not remain the same in English Literature.

Agha Shahid Ali’s Villanelle is written in the backdrop of the violence in Kashmir where the refrain “ruins dissolve like salt in water” and “embellish the slaughter” portray the horror of violence in Kashmir. In the last line he juxtaposes the salt and the slaughter where he uses the Urdu equivalent of “adding insult to injury” (which is “adding salt to the wounds”) which makes wounds (slaughter here) very horrible. Thus by altering the structure of the last line he combines the figurative and the literal brilliantly to describe the real.

O Kashmir, Armenia once vanished. Words are nothing,

Just rumors-like roses to embellish a slaughter

these of a columnist: "The world will not stir";

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these on the phone: "When you leave in the morning,

you never know if you'll return." Lost in water,

blood falters; then swirled to roses, it salts the slaughter.

Another important work by Agha Shahid Ali is his translation of Faiz Ahmad Faiz, *The Rebel's Silhouette*. His translation of Faiz has personal and autobiographical reasons behind it. His encounter with Faiz was through music and not though the text. It was Begum Akhtar singing Faiz in raga that enchanted him and made him familiar with the beauty of Urdu verse, particularly that of Faiz. He had strong liking for the both, as he says that "Begum Akhtar comes back to me in strange moments, at times unexpectedly. So does Faiz; often they come back together" (Ali, The Rebel’s xxiv). Agha Shahid Ali thinks that unlike other poets who cloth the word, Begum Akhtar has unclad the words, strip them naked and made them transparent like Dacca Gauzes (Ali, The Rebel’s x); therefore *Rag Bahari*, Begum Akhtar and Faiz go together in him. His translation, therefore, is more of an emotional link with Faiz.

Agha Shahid Ali has translated Faiz “for a mess of reasons” (Ali, The Rebel’s xii): to put forth his culture, and to make Faiz known in the west. (Ali, The Rebel’s xii-xiii). Remembering Faiz, Agha Shahid Ali senses his own diasporic condition and he touches his own exile in these translations. “I thought of you writing Zindan-Nama/Or prism walls, an cigarette packages,/ And torn envelopes…/ In the free verse of another language I imposed each line— but I touched my own exile”(Ali, The Veiled 58). Therefore, this personal exile and pain mingled with translation has helped him to cope with the loss in dispora. Rajev K Patke says that “Translations helps the individual cope
with diaspora, while diaspora enables a collective past to survive and adapt through the individual." (Patke, Diaspora 122) Therefore for these reasons, as already discussed, his translation gains an emotional and nostalgic character. However, besides Agha Shahid Ali, Faiz has been translated by many other writers; notable among them are Noam Lazard, V.G. Kiernan, Shiv K. Kumar, Daud Kamal and Khalid Hussan.

Walter Benjamin talks about the translatability of a text, a specific feature of a work which allows itself to manifest in the translation. "Translatability" he says "is an essential quality of certain works, which is not to say that it is essential that they be translated; it means rather that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability" (Benjamin 16). He further says that it is "by virtue of its translatability the original is closely connected with the translation..." (Benjamin 16). The poetry of Faiz has this specific quality which allows the original to manifest itself in translatability; that is why there are more than ten translations of Faiz in the English Language.

Faiz was a modernist poet or, what Amir Mufti says, "the poet of a late postcolonial modernity" (273) who did away with the classical themes of Urdu poetry. However, he used the classical Persian and Arabic metaphors and symbols and weaved them into new meanings which make them look afresh; consequently he became favorite among the both, the literary elite and the masses. As Edward Said notes about Faiz that "His major... achievement was to have created a contrapuntal rhetoric and rhythm whereby he could use classical forms (qasida, ghazal, masnavi) and transform them before his readers rather than break from the old forms" (qtd in Silhouette 6-7).
Given all these lyrical, modernist and translatability qualities in Faiz, there is still a need of good translation. Agha Shahid Ali has translated Faiz in free verse and not in metrical style or in ghazal form. What Ali aims at in his translation is to bring it near to the aesthetics and emotions of the original. Since both Faiz and Begum Akhtar were with him, as he had “brought them to America” (Ali, The Rebel’s xxv) the task was not very difficult. Even though, Urdu is Agha Shahid Ali’s mother tongue he was not able to read and write it very properly. He took help from his mother Suffia Agha Ashraf Ali whom he acknowledges in the The Rebel’s Silhouette. (xi) She read and explained to him some of the difficult words, phrases etc. Nevertheless, his Urdu background was an advantage for him. He was aware of both source language and target language and translated it artistically. He writes about it.

My distinct advantage was that I could hear and say the originals to myself, as I translated, something Rich and Merwin. Just couldn’t do ... I was responding to the sounds of two languages simultaneously. I had an inwardness with two languages... I always heard the music of the original, and that was fruitful ... (Ali, The Rebel’s xxi-xxii)

Being a poet himself, Agha Shahid Ali has translated Faiz in such a beautiful way that the finished poems end up being rather transcreation than translations. Imagery is the most important part of it and he transcreates it too. A stanza from Faiz’s poem “Tanhai” which has been translated by many writers will throw some light on it. V.G. Kiernan translates it as “Put out those candes, take away wine and flask and cup/Close your high doors that know no sleep, fasten bolt and bar;/No-one, no one will come now, no-one-anymore” (25). And Shiv K Kumar translates it as “Put out the light, /Put away the cups
and wine/One those doors which kept vigil all night, /Lock then all/Nobody will come here now.../ No one! (Shiv K. Kumar 28). Daud Kamal translates it “Fill the cups drinks to the less/The bitter wine of loneliness/Lock up your slumberless doors, dear heart; /For, no one will ever come again” (Daud kamal, 150). Agha Shahid Ali translates it like this:

Blow out the lamps, break the glasses, erase

all memory of wine. Heart,

bolt forever your sleepless doors,

tell every dream that knocks to go away,

no, one now no one will ever return (Agha Shahid Ali 9)

All these translations are quite close to the original but Agha Shahid Ali’s translation has a rhythmic beat and is aesthetically most close to the original. What others have translated literally as candle or light, he translates it as lamp which is not the literal translation, but in translation it connotes the original perfectly. Similarly what others have simply put as taking away wine, Ali makes it “erase all memory of wine.” Erasing of memory does not feature in the original, but in the whole poem the poet struggles with the memory which is connoted through metaphors in the original, and its literal translation does not connote the same. Likewise, in the line “Heart bolt forever your sleepless doors, tell every dream that knocks to go away”, words like heart and dream have been added and do not feature in the original. Heart symbolizes pain and loss which is main theme of the poem, similarly poet is telling passerby to go away, but Ali changes passerby into dream which again is emotionally close to the original.

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Gayatri Chakravoty spivak’s in her essay “The Politics of Translation” deals with the translation from the feminist perspective and writes that the writer who is “genuinely bilingual post colonial now has a bit of an advantage. But... the translator... is not strictly bilingual if she merely speaks her native language” (Spivak 404). Agha Shahid Ali is also not a mere speaker of the native language, although he cannot fully read and write Urdu. He has full knowledge of both source culture and target culture. Therefore his translation of culture through poetry or poetry through culture is genuine and remarkable. As Spivak says that when she translates, she surrenders to the text. (Spivak 398) Similarly, Agha Shahid Ali surrenders to the music of Faiz via Bugem Akhtar and the two cannot be separated in him. It is obvious from reading some his translations like “Yad” which is one of the best ghazals sung by Begam Akhtar. A person who has listened to the ghazal in her voice can feel the same in the translation of Ali.

Desolation’s desert. I’m here with shadows

of your voice, your lips as mirage, now trembling.

Grass and dust of distance have let this desert

bloom with your roses. (Ali, The Veiled)

The poem does not appear in The Rebel’s Silhouette but in his book Rooms are Never Finished, translated as “Memory”. Daniel Jones writes about the beauty of its translation in his forward to The Veiled Suite.

In a later translation of Faiz’s ghazal, “Memory” Shahid chose to work the poem into Sapphic stanzas of all the things. It was an audaciously
intuitive decision, to translate a ghazal... into an adaptation a classical Greek stanzas at least as unforgiving as to ghazal itself. The miracle is that the finished English poem a heart breaking master price. (Ali, The Veiled 17)

There are, however, short-coming (miner ones though) in his translation as he has translated some words (a very few) wrongly. The reason behind that is his inability to read and write Urdu very well. He has misread and misinterpreted some words, for example, he translates tanhai as solitude but it should be lonliness. (Ali, The Rebel’s 9) Similarly instead of “woman who sent me a bouquet of flower in prison” (Ali, The Rebel’s 29), it should be woman who sent me a gift of scent in prison. Given all this, his translation is still among the best translations of Faiz in English. William L. Hanaway Jr in the review of The Rebel’s Silhouette writes:

The translation states that the Reble’s Silhouette is not for purists, and that he has had to adjust the letter of Faiz work, especially in the ghazals. In my opinion, this is not a defect but rather a virtue, for I feel that he has grasper an inner meaning of these poems and allowed them to breathe in the sort of, space with which western readers are comfortable.

The beauty of Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry lies in his use of language where one can always find the traces of Urdu. The mixing of the linguistic features and thematic concerns of Urdu with English has been termed by Ali as “biryанизation of English” (qtd in Ramazani 606) where he tries to bring, as Mehrotra says, music of Urdu into English language. (qtd in Ramazani 606) Agha Shahid Ali started from free verse and went on to
write his latter poetry in strict forms from Sapphic stanzas, Villanelle, canzone, pantoum to ghazal. As Kazim Ali notes that usually poets start with strict forms and end up in free verse, in Agha Shahid Ali’s case it is the opposite. (Ali, Kazim) As Agha Shahid writes that “If one writes in free verse—and one should—to subvert Western civilization, surely one should write in forms to save oneself from Western Civilization?” (Ali, Ravishing 13) However, Agha Shahid tryst with forms does not put him away from the western civilization but it brings different cultures and civilizations together.
Works Cited


