Chapter I

Agha Shahid Ali and the Modern Indian English Poetic Tradition.

This chapter will attempt to briefly introduce the modern Indian English poetic tradition and try to situate Agha Shahid Ali in it, and compare him with some of the modern Indian English poets. The chapter will further focus on his engagement with India while he lived in India, and in diaspora; besides looking at the early influences of modernism on him. In addition, the chapter will deal on the subject of his marginalization by the Indian critics.

Indian literature in English came into being with the publication of Dean Mohmet’s Travels (1794) which is a mixture of autobiography and memoir, in which he describes several important cities of India along with Britain’s military conquests. Similarly, C V Bohiah’s Accounts of Jains(1808) and Raja Ramohan Rao’s Oeuvre(1817-1833) contributed to the early prose writing in English. With Macaulay’s minutes English language became firmly rooted in India as “a class of persons Indian in blood and colour and English in taste, opinions and morals...” began to grow (qtd. in The Victorian).” Coming to poetry, C V Ramasawami published an English translation of seventeenth-century Sanskrit poem viswagunadarshana in 1825; but it was only a translation and not the original. Henry Deroza(1809-31?) is considered to be the first Indian English poet. He published the Fakeer of Jungheera, Poems, The Metrical Tale and Other Poems; all of them in 1827. Michael Madhusdan Dutt (1824-730) wrote two long poems in English: The Captive Ladie, and Visions of the Past both published in 1849. He alluded to all the
greats of English writers like Spencer, Shakespeare, Milton, Scott, Byron, Wordsworth, etc.

The Three Dutt brothers, Govin, Giris and Hur collaborated to write a book of poetry, *The Dutt Family Album* (1870). Toru Dutt (1856?-1877) is considered to be the first true Indian English poet. She is the first Indian poet to use Hindu philosophy and Hindu myths like karma, pantheism etc. explicitly and with an ease in the English language. Her poems like “Our Casuarinas Tree”, “The Lotus”, “Ancient Ballads” etc are remarkably wonderful. Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950), commonly known as Sri Aurobindo, was sent to England at the age of seven, therefore, received English education from the very beginning. His main poetic concerns were spiritual and mystic, which he took from the Hindu tradition; as a result, he produced a great epic, *Savitri*, whose theme is man’s realization of the divine. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was one of the greatest men of his age: being a poet, short-story writer, dramatist, novelist, painter, composer, educationist and nationalist- all at the same time. He first wrote in Bengali, and later on translated some of his devotional lyrics into English, and published them under the title *Gitanjali* (1912) which won him the Nobel Prize in 1913. His poetry like Aurobindo’s is devotional and mystic.

Sarojni Naidu (1878-1949) sailed to England at the age of sixteen, studied at Cambridge, was highly influenced by the Rhymers’ Club, and received encouragement from esteemed persons like Arthur Symons and Edmund Gosse. Within the period of ten years she published three books: *The Golden Threshold* (1905), *The Bird of Time* (1912) and *The Broken Wings* (1917). She was influenced by both, English Romanticism and the Urdu-Persian tradition; and she celebrated both the Hindu and the Islamic legends in her
poetry. Her favorite subjects are love and nature; therefore, she came to be known as the Nightingale of India. With Sarojini Naidu, the era of Indo-Anglian Poetic tradition came to an end and modern poetry began to take roots.

Nasim Ezekiel was the harbinger of the modern English poetry in Indian as he brought modernism in it. Consequently, poets after Ezekiel no longer went back to Shelley and other Romantics for inspiration. Now inspiration was T S Eliot and the modernist movement in the West. It influenced almost all the Indian poets including Agha Shahid Ali.

Modernism as a literary term has a wide application. The term became current when writers like T S Eliot, Ezra pound, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce etc. came to the literary scene during the first part of the twentieth century. Various movements like Naturalism, Symbolism, Impressionism, Post- impressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Imagism, Vorticism, Dadaism, Surrealism, which became popular during the age, came to widely used in literature, arts, paintings etc. As a result they enhanced the growth of modernism. Modernism thus refers to the experimental literature produced during the early part of twentieth century. It had its impact on all forms of art: literature, painting, music and criticism. Modernism was influenced by aestheticism, an art movement which gave the slogan “art for art’s sake” (Aestheticism 3) which emphasized that art had no didactic or utilitarian role, but was an end in itself. English aesthetes like Walter Pater, Charles Swinburne and Oscar Wilde believed that art was an end in itself and has no social responsibility at all. (Aestheticism 3-4) Their movement influenced the most important writers of modern poetry like Eliot, Hulme and Pound. Modernism like any other movement didn’t begin on particular date but it is usually accepted by critics
unanimously that modernism in poetry began with the publication of T S Eliot’s *The Waste Land* in 1921. Ezra Pound puts it: “Eliot’s Waste Land is I think the justification of the “movement”, of our modern experiment, since 1900,” (qtd. in Whitworth). If the most important poem of modernism is *The Waste Land*; in terms of criticism the most important piece of writing is “The Tradition and the Individual Talent”, an essay in which Eliot challenged the traditional Wordsworthian notion, according to which poetry “is the emotions recollected in tranquility” (Eliot). But now for Eliot, “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (Eliot). This anti-romantic perception of poetry laid the foundation of the poetry that would be written after that, and modern poetry in India was no exception.

Just as T S Eliot’s poetry changed the poetic scenario of the English tradition, Ezekiel brought about changes on the Indian poetic scene. He changed the devotional and romantic tone of the pre-independence era poetry and brought it to a realistic mode. The poetry began to focus on subjects of day to day life like love, desire, poverty, sexuality, social relations etc. Ezekiel did not merely change the subject of poetry but the form also. His poetry turned more towards free verse; he used poetic devices like irony and humour very normally; and it focused mainly on the Indian urban culture. All this makes him a typical Indian poet. In his poetry “Rhetoric is eschewed. Emotional indulgence is avoided... [and poetry is] personal, modest, self-deprecatory, ironic, urban, sceptical—for subsequent poets to emulate or heed (Patke 247).” He is the one who taught Indians how to write about the city, and to do away with the emotions; whose measure erstwhile was the standard of measuring the worth of a poet. He sketched the urban life of his city,
Bombay, and this city for him became more than home—a metaphor, a commitment. "I have made my commitments now. / This is one: to stay where I am.../ My backward place is where I am (Patke 248)". What London was for Eliot, Bombay became for Ezekiel; thus he made talking about the dirty, busy, cramped and noisy place the subject of his poetry, which was not found in the Indian English poetic scene, before. "Ezekiel is thus a small flame, unlikely to startle into incandescence, but not easily snuffed out." (Patke 247).

In the beginning Indian English poetry was not very well received by the native readers. However, not to let the movement down, poets like Dom Moraes (1938-2004) began to write in the late 50s. Similarly, poets like P Lal and Adil Jussawala also began to write in the early 60s. Most important step in the development of Indian English poetry in English took place in the mid 50s as many poets, editors and litterateurs committed themselves to the upliftment of Indian English Poetry. Nissim Ezekiel joined PEN in 1955 and The Quest in the same year. The Quest was quite a success as top most poets of the time like Kamala Das, A K Ramanujan, Dom More, Kotalkar, contributed to the journal. Another significant step towards the development of the Indian English poetry was P Lal's founding of the Writers Workshop in 1958. Writers Workshop has become very important in promoting English Literature in India, publishing for more than 50 years now, it has published more than 3000 books. Ezekiel who had gained popularity came in the 60s also published his book The Exact Name with the Writers Workshop. Agha Shahid Ali published two of his early books Bone Sculptors and In Memory of Begum Akhtar with the writers Workshop. Like Agha Shahid Ali, many poets who later became famous first began with the Writers Workshop: some important names are
Kamala Das, K N Daruwalla, Arun Kolatkar, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Jayanta Mahaputra, Gieve Patel, Meena Alexander, Shiv K Kumar etc.

Another milestone in the development of the Indian English poetry was the recognition of English language by Sahitya Akademy which began giving prizes for Indian writing in English. In the 1963 Indian poets like Kamla Das, P Lal, Nissim Ezekiel were included in Margeret O’Donnell’s An Anthology of Commonwealth Verse, published in London; which was a great achievement. P Lal later on published Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology and a Credo an anthology which clubbed hundreds of poets and most of them minor poets. It made the anthology very crude and one failed to distinguish between the better and the ordinary poets; therefore, the poet-critic, Saleem Peerdina criticized the credibility of the anthology. (King 31) The most important Anthology which is still widely read and prescribed as syllabi in various Indian Universities is Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets published by the Oxford University Press, 1976. The Anthology established a canon and the book put the best ten Indian English poets together: all eggs in one basket. The poets included Nissim Ezekiel, K N Daruwalla, Shiv K Kumar, R Parathasarathy, A K Ramunajan, Kamala Das, A K Mehrotra, Gieve Patel, Arun Kolatkar, Patel, and Jayanta Mahaputra. Agha Shahid Ali at that time was only a budding poet and could not find the place in the anthology. It was only with the publication of A K Mehrotra’s Twelve Modern Indian English Poets that Agha Shahid Ali entered the canon of Indian English poetry in the 1992.

Given all these efforts, Modern Indian poetry in English still did not receive as much critical attention as poetry from other erstwhile colonies acquired. There are many reasons for this; one, that it came to be written after independence (1947), and it did not,
like poetry from other nations, dedicate itself for the process of “writing back”\(^2\); rather it focused mainly on day to day issues like relationships, poverty, sexuality, urban life etc. Second important reason is that Indian English poetry has been overshadowed by the quantity and quality of fiction written by Indian writers which include at least four Booker award winners.

English in India has for most of its users been, as Raja Rao notes, the language of “Intellectual make up”, rather than the language of “emotional make up” (296). Language of their emotional makeup is generally the mother tongue. This to some extent puts the writers in a fix, as Parthasarathy notes, “The Indian who uses the English language feels, to some extent, alienated. His development as a poet is sporadic. (3).” But still the writer chooses to write in English, as for Ali “English in many ways a South Asian language,” and “it was only natural that the language of his pen turned out to be English” (Ali, Interview 262), even though his mother tongue is Urdu. Ramanujan writes in English because he had his formal education in the language, and, in addition, he has been staying away from his mother tongue for more than twenty years now. (Ramanujan) Thus writing in English for Indian poets is a matter of choice. Most of them are usually bi-lingual and like Ramanujan have their formal education in English.

Zulfikar Ghose, a pre-Partition Indian poet describes the effect of colonial language in his poem “One Chooses a Language,”

The English alphabet dangled it’s a

_for Apple when I was eight in Bombay._

I stuttered and chewed almonds for a cure.

My tongue, rejecting a vernacular
for a new language, resisted utterance.

Alone, I imitated the accents
of English soldiers. (qtd. in Katrak 10)

The language which started as a colonial obligation, however, was accepted and internalized by the writers of the later generation. Kamala Das tells us in An Introduction about her language and nationality, being Indian and multilingual, she chooses to write in English—which is not her mother tongue. Even though she was cautioned not to write in the language, she chose to write in the language which became hers.

The language I speak

Becomes mine...

It is half English, half

Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest ... (Patke 252)

When it comes to Indian Muslim poets writing in English there are not many; a few of them are Saleem Peerdina, Agha Shahid Ali and Tabish Khair. Agha Shahid Ali was born in Delhi, had his early schooling there; he studied in a college at Srinagar and did his MA from Delhi University. He later on taught at Delhi University, and during his early period he published two books, Bone Sculpture (1972) and In Memory of Begum Akhtar (1978) with the Writers Workshop, Calcutta. Thus his early period of development was rooted in India.

Ali started writing poetry in the 1970s when modern poetry had found its roots in India and there was a crop of Indian poets: Nassim Ezekiel, A K Ramunajan, R
Parathasarathy, Kamala Das, A K Mehrotra, Arun Kolatkar, Gieve Patel, and Jayanta Mahapatra. This was the post Ezekiel era, and Kolatkar’s book of verse Jejuri had won the commonwealth poetry prize in 1977.

Agha Shahid Ali received less impetus from the traditions set up by Ezekiel and others, rather it was his engagement with western modern poetry, particularly that of T S Eliot that shaped his early writing. Ali’s tells about his influence in the poem “Introduction”: at fifteen he was influenced by the English Romantics particularly Shelley. It was only at the age of eighteen “A PhD from Leeds/ ... brought the wasteland”, (Ali, In Memory 13) and this had a great influence on his early poetry. Images of bones, death, graves, and desert are found through and through in Bone Sculpture, Ali is so much obsessed with death that “Death punctuated all ... [his] poems” (Ali, In Memory 13). T S Eliot’s poems like “The Waste Land”, “Gerontion”, “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “The Hollow Men” reverberate in Bone Sculptor. His distrust with modern city life as a teenager found an apt metaphor in the poetry of T S Eliot and other modernists; however, Shelley kept on intruding time and again. Modern poetry is usually obsessed with death and the image of death, which according to Triggs, has been derived from T S Eliot’s and other modernists influence of Dante. Triggs notes that Dante’s influence on the modern English poets is even more than that of Shakespeare and Milton, particularly his image of death; so much so that T S Eliot went on to call his style as a “universal school of style” (Triggs1).

In T S Eliot’s “The Hollow Men” death strikes everywhere beginning from the famous sentence of Joseph Conrad’s novel Heart of Darkness “Mistah Kurtz—he dead.” It goes from “death’s other Kingdom”, “death’s dream kingdom”, “death’s twilight
kingdom”, “dead land”, to “dead man’s hand.” In Agha Shahid Ali death follows the similar pattern: for him, “the Years are dead (Ali, Bone 11)”, “Death fills the years (Ali, Bone 11)”, “stubborn to death (Ali, Bone 19)”, “carving the stillness/of dead leaves(Ali, Bone 21)”, “Share this death of Another/time with me(Ali, Bone 23)”, “whisper the/smile/ of his death(Ali, Bone 29)”, etc. Atmosphere and sensibility of the poems like “The Waste Land” and “Gerontion” is quite evident in the poems like “Another Desert” and “Autumn in Srinagar.” “Another Death” is full of words like death, bones, skeleton, stones etc; the mood is somber and influence of Eliot is apparent (Ali, Bone 23). Likewise “Autumn in Srinagar” sketches the atmosphere “like Sybil suspended in a jar or Gerontion seated on the garbage heap…” (Needham 12). The mood of the most poems of the book is like that of Gerontion where the old man is at the “final stage of human misery when there is nothing to do but brood over what little remains of a life that came rather early to have no principle of direction except its worldly interests; and to wish and wait for death, which is imminent, as its perfect ending”(Tate 138) But Ali is only twenty, he feels the angst and is “still alone” with “Death fill[ing] the years”( Ali, Bones 11). Ali’s ennui is modernistic where he is trying to grapple with the question of life, and the world before him is full of strangeness where nothing happens. The narrator of the poem Gerontion is not named “as geron, who is any old man, but as gerontion, a little old man, shrunken in body and soul.”(Tate 145) Therefore, Ali is not geron, the old man, but the man fed up with the world which for him is full of meaninglessness. Bones and death represent the waste land which Ali, a gerontion, a hollow man, feels around himself. He is distrusted with the world around him which appears to him like a desert devoid of growth, vegetation and beauty. Thus Ali, following Eliot, is “mixing/ Memory and
desire” (Ali, Bone 11), and “mixing blood with mud, memory with memory” (Ali, Bone 11). And notably there is a cause of his ennui: “I’m still alone” (Ali, Bone 11).

Although, Agha Shahid Ali was greatly influenced by T S Eliot, still to some extent, he could not do away with the influence of the English Romantics, particularly that of “Shelly the Prophet (Ali, In Memory 13).” It is quite evident in his second book of poetry, In Memory of Begum Akhtar. The book, moreover, is marked by strong distrust with religion, mainly because of his early education where he was influenced more by Marx and Freud and less by the religious scriptures.

No one taught me the Koran.

My father mouthed Freud and Marx,

...........................

Mother had long since discarded the veil.

We ate pork secretly. (Ali, In Memory 20)

The angst and ennui which we see in his early verse now develops in the strong distrust with religion. “Dreams of Islam crumbled for” (Ali, In Memory 21) him when servant’s shoe was lost in the mosque and he gave no heed to the call of prayer. As Lawrence notes that it is the “convenient occasion” for Ali’s previous distrust with religion (Needham 13). And as his “voice cracked on Ghalib/ And ... forgot the texture of prayer (Ali, In Memory 21)”; his grandmother could say nothing but ““My grandson is lost to us”” (Ali, In Memory 20).

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Thus, *In the Memory of Begam Akhtar* presents Ali as a secular-Marxist. Marxism was not quite apparent in the modern Indian English poets like Ezekiel and others. Ali on other hand was highly influenced by the Urdu writers, particularly Faiz who was an important member of the progressive writers association (PWA), and whose writing was more socially inclined. The movement had waned during the 70s when Ali came on the scene; but Faiz was still reverberating through the voice of Begum Akhtar, Iqbal Bano and others. Ali had internalized him by listening to these great voices. His socialist influences are quite clear in the book. The poem *THE WALLED CITY: 7 POEMS ON DELHI* ((Ali, In Memory 29-35) focuses on the beggars and their hunger. In the part he even sees Allah in rags-

From tomb to tomb

I chew the ash of prayers

Won’t poetry happen to me?

Caught in the lanes of history,

don’t I qualify now?

I have seen Allah in rags

extend the earth like a begging bowl. (Ali, In Memory 29)
In the part 3 “the streets light up/with the smiles of beggars” (Ali, In Memory 31). In the part 4 the poet carries “the beggar women’s hunger” (Ali, In Memory 32) in his hands while he is in the coffee house; she is “eating morsels of her night” (Ali, In Memory 20). In the part 6 while looking for the old man with “ancient beard” (Ali, In Memory 34) who used to be there in all seasons in the dirt corner; the sweeper informs him that “he took him away/with the morning garbage” (Ali, In Memory 34). In the part 7, the poet is in the air conditioned restaurant drinking beer, he keeps himself away from the outside stench and “outside the beggars/laze in empty tins, /peeling the sun” (Ali, In Memory 35). These poems try to show the poverty, destitution and the growing gap between rich and the poor on the streets of Delhi, which is somewhat similar to the concerns of the progressive writers. However, his socialist concerns did not find a permanent place in his poetry as his subject kept on changing.

Agha Shahid Ali came from a culturally rich family where, besides English, Urdu and Persian poetry and literature were talked about in abundance. He was brought up reading and listening to the poetry of greats like Hafiz, Ghalib, Mir, Faiz etc. His upbringing in a culturally rich Islamic milieu had a lasting influence on his poetry. His poetry concerned with the Indo-Islamic culture is both a lament and nostalgia. His poem A Butcher (Ali, The Veiled 47-48) depicts his lament of the Indo-Islamic-Urdu tradition. He talks about the butcher shop in the “lane near Jama Masjid”. Jama Masjid represents the old rich Indo-Indian tradition, and the mosque built by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan used to be the cultural centre of the pre-partition Indian Muslims. Ali deliberately talks about the mosque and the area around it which is still Muslim dominated, but the “Beggars now live here” (Ali, The Veiled 50); thus mosque becomes an apt metaphor to
lament the lost culture. Similarly a butcher hacking festival goats, wrapping “kilos of meat” (Ali, The Veiled 47) also represents Muslim culture— the meat eating culture instead of Hindu vegetarian culture. In the poem he, in fact, laments the loss of the Urdu language, or to be more appropriate, the Urdu script. The butcher wraps meat in the used Urdu newspaper and,

    the ink of the news
    stains his knuckles,

    the script is wet
    in his palms: Urdu,

    bloody at his finger tips,
    is still fine on his lips,

    the language polished smooth
    by knives

    on knives (Ali, The Veiled 47).
Ali talks about script and not the language as it is the script which is more important than the language since there is not much difference between Hindi and Urdu. Hindi uses some Sanskrit words and metaphors from the Hindu culture, while Urdu uses some Persian-Arabic words and metaphors, besides using some glottal and nasal sounds which can only be represented in Urdu script. Therefore, script of the language represents culture in this case. The script “wet in his palms” (Ali, The Veiled 47) represents the not very old tradition but at the same time diminishing; and “Urdu, bloody at his finger tips” (Ali, The Veiled 47) connotes the bloodshed of the partition which left thousands dead; and because of this bloody freedom Urdu language and culture suffered immensely in India particularly in the erstwhile cultural epicenters – Old Delhi and Lucknow; and governments step-motherly treatment towards the language made it worse. Urdu “fine on his lips” (Ali, The Veiled 47) hints towards the peculiarity of the language using glottal and nasal sounds besides being a bit formal which makes it a “sweet-language”.

Then Ali talks about quoting Mir and Ghalib who are the representative figures of the Urdu literature, whose poetry has passed through a generation of oral tradition by quoting them quite often, and through singing. People instead of making a statement or a comment quote a couplet which speaks volumes. Ali talks about quoting a Ghalib line and butcher completes it, and he later on completes the Mir line quoted by the butcher. This is also a kind of mannerism in Urdu speaking elite, a person quotes a line, stops, and allows the addressee to complete it, knowing that he knows it; or addressee quotes the second line before the speaker could complete the first just to show that he knows it too. Shaden M Tageldin compares Sakkina Boukchedenna’s novel Journal:<<National-
Immigrate with Ali’s one and a half page poem “A Butcher”. She looks at the
conversation between Ali and Butcher as one between Ali and his alter ego. She further
notes about the poem.

Here the metrics of the body and the metrics of poetry converge. For this double
measure of flesh is, indeed, a poetic measure: it is the embodied equivalent of the couplet,
the very form on which the Urdu ghazal—so important to Ali’s poetics—depends. ... 
Ali’s “A Butcher” explicitly constitutes the broken coupling of the migrant and the never
left as a broken couplet—a default on a contract of shared cultural memory that
transpires, briefly, between the returned émigré and the rooted native. (253)

Thus, in the poem, Ali mixes his exilic consciousness with the partition of the
subcontinent and with the vanishing Urdu culture of India; where the butcher, the
continent and the language become, for him, “the other.” A The poem ends with Ali
handing over money to the butcher and “The change clutters our moment of courtesy”
(Ali, The Veiled 48). The change certainly refers to money but it also represents the
change of the tradition after the partition, and “moment of courtesy” refers to the talk
which was in a polite behavior (as the word courtesy means so) which quite becomes the
Urdu language the “sweet-tongue” it is. This change snaps or breaks the language in the
mid way here in India and which leaves Ghalib’s Ghazals unrhymed. (Ali, The Veiled
47) The last line concludes and magnifies what he has been saying throughout the poem.
“Ghalib who is to Urdu what Shakespeare is to English, Dante is to Italian” (Ali, The
Veiled 270), and his Ghazals are epitome of the Urdu tradition; hence his Ghazals being
left unrhymed adds pathos to the poem, rather culminates the tragedy of Urdu in India.
Ali is not writing from political point of view condemning partition or step-motherly
treatment of Urdu in India. He is a poet of loss and he simply laments the bygone Urdu tradition, the tradition in which he grew up and the language which is his mother tongue.

This idea is also found in Ali’s early poems “Learning Urdu” and “After the Partition of India”. The latter, he says, is the revision of the former. “Learning Urdu” is for mohd. ramzan malik (sic) who seems to be the person in question in the poem. He comes from Jammu region which saw the bloodiest catastrophe, the “victim of a continent broken” (Ali In Memory 27) in the 1947 as more than two lakh were killed and lakhs forced to leave the region. (Bloodied Massacre of Kashmir) The man remembers nothing, he says, but “half the word/ that was my village” (Ali In Memory 27). He “who knew Mir backwards/ and the whole of Divan-e-Ghalib, /saw poetry dissolve into letters of blood.” (Ali In Memory 27). Therefore the fate of the people and the language was same: it was divided and killed. Urdu was amputated, divided and murdered by the partition; the way it divided people, families and land. Ali says he couldn’t sympathize but “only wanted the bitter couplets explained” (Ali In Memory 27). Thus he is trying to express the pain of the destruction of the Urdu poetic culture, as he says in the latter poem.

History broke the back

of poetry: he will soon

remember nothing, not

even Ghalib (Ali In Memory 28).
Ali has written elegies in the lament of great connoisseurs of art like Begum Akhtar, Rasoolan Bai, Faiz Ahmad Faiz; to the extent that he has named his second book of verse after Begum Akhtar— *In Memory of Begum Akhtar*. Besides that there are lots of allusions to the artists like Bismillah Khan, music type like Qawwali etc. He laments the loss of Rasoolan Bai whose house was burned in the Ahmedabad riots in 1969 and poet “could only preserve/her breaking voice/while the house was burned its bhairavi” (Ali In Memory 27). He wrote the elegy on Begum Akhtar in his book *In Memory of begum Akhtar* and later on republished it in *The Half Inch Himalaya*. The lament in both cases becomes the lament for the art they were related with, as he writes on Begum Akhtar, “Ghazal, that death-sustaining widow, / sobs in dingy archives, hooked to you” (Ali, The Veiled 53)

Similarly in the elegy on Faiz, he refers to his liking of Faiz via listening to Begam Akhtar. For Ali she is music, poetry and voice in one. “…Begum Akhtar, who wore your couplets/ into ragas: both language and music/were sharpened.”(Ali, The Veiled 58) Begum Akhtar for him, therefore, represents and personifies the Indo-Islamic art and literature, and while lamenting her death he actually laments the death of the Indo-Islamic art and culture.

We get to know from Amitav Ghosh that Ali’s was emotionally involved with his mother and Begum Akhtar and Ali loved both (Ghosh 315). It is his mother who helped him to translate Faiz into English. Ali’s mother was well versed in both Persian and Urdu literature and she was from Lucknow— the “city of culture”; and it is from her he inherited the legacy of Urdu (Indo-Islamic) culture. Begum Akhtar’s love added to his affection with the culture; in that way it had a lasting influence on him and his poetry.
You’ve finally polished catastrophe,

the note you seasoned with decades

of Ghalib, Mir, Faiz:

I innovate on a noteless raga. (Ali, The Veiled 54)

Although Agha Shahid Ali in his poetry about India has mainly focused on Indo-Islamic culture, but, since he had a secular upbringing, he has also written much about the Hindu tradition and culture. Amitav Ghosh tells us how Agha Shahid Ali once as a child wanted to build a temple and later on adored it with a goddess, and how her mother encouraged him in doing so. (Ghosh 318) Moreover he extremely liked “Kashmiri food in Pandit style” food and himself cooked some dishes in America. (Ghosh 314) He has titled many of his poems in his career with Hindu headings like Pilgrimage to Amarnath, Deepavali, Deevali in his early books while he was in India. In his later poetry written in America, he translated a Bhajan, a hindu devotional song (from a Bollywood movie) into English. Besides that, we find allusions to the Hindu myths and culture throughout his poetry.

The poetry Ali wrote while in America also shows pain, loss and nostalgia for his old culture. Now, he is more mature, and the loss is not merely felt but also accepted; and memories stay with him. In a poem like The Decca Gauzes Ali mixes the stark historical reality with his sweet memories. Agha Shahid Ali banks a lot on his memory, and we find him going back to the past in lot of his poems. Here, in this poem, while mixing memory
with history; he becomes political; postcolonial to be more appropriate where he ponders over a colonial brutality like amputating of weavers’ hands. Even though, Ali is not a committed postcolonial writer like Chinua Achebe, Derrick Walcott, etc but since he lives in the postcolonial period and comes from the erstwhile colony, he can’t escape the reality. Before lamenting the “dead art now” (Ali, The Veiled 42), he tells us about the beauty of art, making the loss more painful. The gauzes “known as woven air, running/water, evening dew :”( Ali, The Veiled 42) which his grandmother once wore was original as “it was pulled, all/ six yards, through a ring” (Ali, The Veiled 43). While commemorating the great art he shifts to the painful and bleak story:

In history we learn: the hands

of weavers were amputated,

the looms of Bengal silenced,

and the cotton shipped raw

by British to England.( Ali, The Veiled 42-43)

Thus, he strikes the postcolonial chord sketching the terror and exploitation of imperialism and its effect on the subcontinent, all done to benefit the Industrialists in the Britain. At the same time he talks about her grandmother’s Decca-gauze sari which she received in dowry, when it tore, she cut it to make handkerchiefs for her younger ones. Cutting of sari and tearing it apart can be compared with amputating of weavers’ hands. They could not inherit the sari as they were no more made, and they had to satisfy themselves with handkerchiefs cut from the sari. Similarly, artists with amputated hands
could not teach the art of making Decca gauzes to the new generation. Ali ends the poem on nostalgic-romantic note, noting how her grand-mother compared morning air with the Decca Gauzes; thus mixing memory, pain and history.

"Poetry and history share one burden: memory." (Patke 36). This is true about all Indian poets particularly Agha Shahid Ali and A K Ramanujan: both were obsessed with the memories, particularly remembering their families. A Lost Memory of Delhi, he remembers year of his birth where he sees his father who is younger than him in Delhi, near Okhla riding a bicycle. (Ali, The Veiled 30). He goes into the lane of his memory to remember his mother "a recent bride" (Ali, The Veiled 30) and listens to "The bells of her anklets [which] are distant/like the sound of china" (Ali, The Veiled). Then memory goes back to the photograph whose image in the mind must be the thing that incites the memory and, thereby the imagination which makes his parents younger than him. He "want[s] to tell them" that he is their son, but "the night of his being" is quite and "they don't they won't hear" him (Ali, The Veiled 30-31). Ali like A K Ramanujan seems to recompense the loss by memories.

Memory,

In a crowd of memories, seems

To have no place

At all for unforgettable things. (The Oxford 21).

When an interviewer asked Ramanujan about his use of memory in his poetry, he answered:
I don’t really know. I simply write poems as they occur to me... I have number of poems which are obsessed with memories itself; memory as history and myth, memory as one’s own past—the presence of the past—the way the present gathers to itself different pasts. (Ramanujan)

Agha Shahid Ali was born in a Shia Muslim family. The most important feature of Shia Islam that differentiates it from Sunni Islam is the mourning of Shias in the month of Muharram; which marks the month of martyrdom of Imam Husain, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, in the battle of Karbala. We find many references to Karbala and Muharram in his poetry. Husain was killed in the battle of Karbala along with other seventy-one companions while fighting the troops of Yazid in 61AH (680AD). Two days after the catastrophe seventy-two heads were showcased in the markets and women were taken as captives. Shia Muslims mourn the death every year on Ashura (10th Muharram) singing elegies in the remembrance of the slain, and bleed their bodies by beating themselves with chains. The mourning is so intense that it appears, like Ali says, “as if the news has just reached them—fourteen hundred years after the Battle of Karbala (Ali, The Veiled 250)”.

We find the reference to Karbala and Muharram in many of his anthologies, but his poem From Amherst to Kashmir is full-fledged poem referring to Muharram and Karbala. Here he juxtaposes the tragic death of his mother with death of Hussain. There is a very old tradition of the poetry of mourning in the memory of the martyrs of Karbala called marsiyai in Urdu, Persian and other Muslim languages. Ali seems to be the first writer in English who has made an attempt to write marsiya in English. “From Amherst to Kashmir” is divided into twelve parts. The first part is a prose description of the
historical background of the tragedy of Karbala. The description is not merely a historical account but has references to the Prophet Jesus and his disciples asking him about weeping of gazelles, when they pass through the plain of Karbala. Jesus says they do it for the grief of Hussain, and he himself weeps for the same reason. Similarly Ali alludes to the story of Abraham and the sacrifice of his son Ishmael who was ransomed by a sheep brought from heaven. The sheep couldn’t suffice and it is Hussain who has to pay the price, and, “Abraham foreknew all and wept bitterly” (Ali, The Veiled 251). The aura of description is somber and weepy, very similar to the shia Muharram majlis—the gathering listening to the morose sermon describing the tragedy of Karbala. Therefore, one can say that the part one of the poem is a kind of poetic majlis.

If part 1 is a majlis, Part 2 of the poem is a marsiya which Agha Shahid Ali titles as “Zainab’s Lament in Damascus”. Here he tries to reproduce the elegy which Zainab might have sung in the memory of her brother Hussain. First line of the marsiya “Over Hussains mansion what night has fallen” becomes the leitmotif of the poem. The marsiya ends on a sad and weeping note like the traditional nawah “Weep for my brother/World, weep for Hussain” (Ali, The Veiled 255).

In rest of the poem we find him juxtaposing the tragic death of Husain with death of his mother and he remembers his mother weeping, and when he enquires, she answers, “... it is Zainab’s / grief, that’s all” (Ali, The Veiled 261). Ali, in this 12 part poem translates Faiz’s poem Memory (yaad), a bhajan from hindi movie titled, “Film Bhajan Found on a 78 RPM”, and Ghazal of Ghalib. All these translated pieces are about memory, loss, longing and death which suits the mood of the poem. He remembers the mother’s cry, which is the Zainab’s cry, in turn the cry of gazelle; the cry, he says, is so
heightened "that even in memory it lets the memory cease", therefore he becomes obsessed with memory and mourning. The mood is similar to the first lines of his first poem, "Bones" in his first book, Bone Schupture (1972), written twenty six years before this poem:

The years are dead. I'm
twenty, a mounrer in Mohorrum

Procession, mixing blood with

mud, memory with memory... (Ali, Bone 11).

Karbala has different meaning for different people; Iranian revolutionary writer, Ali Sharyati, influence by Heidegger gave an "existentialist reading of the tragedy of Karbala" (Afary, and Anderson 60) and deduced a message of sacrifice and martyrdom from it. For him Imam Hussain’s martyrdom gives a "message to the whole world, to be the eloquent tongue of this flowing blood and these resting bodies among the walking dead.",(qtd in Mehdi). Similarly Michel Foucault was impressed by ta’ziyeh play which he saw during ashura in Iran, and his admiration for the celebrations was his obsession with pre-modernity. (Voss). However, for Ali it is a metaphor of loss and pastness of time. Ali mourns it along with death of his mother. Thus this is not only a marziya for Husain, but for his mother also. While mourning death of his mother, Ali in the poem “Lenox Hill” becomes mother of his mother. (Ali, The Veiled 248) This mothering is also indirectly seen in “From Amherst to Kashmir” where, like Zainab who laments the death of Husain, Ali laments the death of his mother. His grief which starts from the grief of his mother goes to his mother’s grief of Zainab and to Zainab’s grief of Hussain, thus a universal
grief which transcends time, like the tragedy of Karbala. Mahmoud Ayoub writes about the Karbala rituals that “in the ritualistic moment, serial time becomes the bridge connecting primordial time and its special history with the timeless eternity of the future. The eternal fulfillment of time becomes the goal of human time and history.” (Mehdi). Karbala or Muharram for Ali, therefore, is not simply the remembrance of the martyrdom of Husain, but a metaphor of loss, exile, memory, grief and pain.

While Agha Shahid Ali has adopted diverse themes and styles in his poetry and has been termed by Bruce King as “increasingly major poet” (King 274); he has, however, not been well received by Indian Critics. It is mostly after he got international acclimation that he began to make name in India. He is found in very few Indian anthologies, whereas, he makes his name in various American and International anthologies including the Harold Bloom’s and The Norton Anthology of Poetry where only three other Indian poets have been able to find their place. A recent anthology, 60 Indian Poets edited by Jeet Thayil, published by Penguin, India in 2008 which covers almost all the Indian English Poets does not find a mention of Agha Shahid Ali. Writing about the missing of Agha Shahid Ali, Ruth Vanita, Sujatha Bhatt, and Meena Alexander, Gopi K. Kottoor, says that the “logic of the deletions is ... baffling.” (The Hindu). Keki N Daruwalla praises the anthology, but says that Ali’s absence is “Non-sense”, and adds that “he should have been there. ... I regard him as a good poet, very good poet; sensitive” (Daruwalla); Tabish Khair says that the two finest Indian English poets are A K Ramanujan and Agha Shahid Ali; others come later. (Khair)

Ali’s poetry is largely multicultural where at the same time he is Muslim, Indian and American, therefore, a transnational poet. His emotional involvement with Indian
Muslim culture and his obsession with the same is one important reason for Ali being marginalized by the Indian critics, and the anthologies of Indian English Poetry; as their main focus is on “nationalistic”, and “native” poetry, rather than foreign or non-native poetry. His obsession with Urdu led him to write Ghazals in English which is his great gift to the world literature. (c.f. 5th Chap) But Urdu, the language which influenced his writing, is considered by the traditionalists in India, as a language of foreign descent which has nothing to do with Sanskrit or Hindu culture.

Persian (in its Indian form) and Urdu have maintained the Perso-Arabic stylistic devices, metaphors and symbolism. It is this aspect of Urdu that alienated it from the traditionalist Hindus, who believe that in its formal experimentation, thematic range, and metaphor, it maintained an ‘un-Indian’ (Islamic) tradition, and continues to seek inspiration from such non-native traditions. (Kachru 293)

Another important reason due to which Agha Shahid Ali got marginalized in India is that Indian critics have failed to accept or understand the Indo-Islamic tradition as something Indian. Indo-Islamic culture is a hybrid of Indian culture and Islamic culture, particularly Sufi culture which is found in the Indian architecture, poetry, literature, food and so on. Movies produced by Bollywood, the most popular entertainment industry in India, are equally in Urdu as they are in Hindi; as the language used in simple, therefore, comes very near to Urdu rather than Sanskritized Hindi. Almost all the Bollywood songs, except few bhajans and other devotional songs, are written in Urdu even by the Hindi writers. They only use Hindi script but metaphors and mazmoon of the songs is from Urdu culture. In addition, Bollywood singers use glottal and nasal sounds which are the peculiarities of the Urdu language. Therefore, Bollywood, a major Indian cultural
industry, since its existence, has not been able to do away with Urdu cultural tradition. But many nationalists fail to accept the so called foreign culture in land full of diverse geographies, languages and cultures. Ali says about the Urdu culture and his affiliation with it,

Of course all this has to do with an emotional identification on my part with north Indian Muslim culture, which is steeped in Urdu. I, as I have grown older, have felt the need to identify myself as a north Indian Muslim (not in any sectarian sense but in cultural sense). And I do not feel that this culture is necessarily the province of the Muslims (after all, Firaq Gorakhpuri was a Hindu) and many non-Muslim Indians can also consider themselves culturally Muslim. I think I am among the very few of the Indians writing in English who is identifying himself in these terms. However, I do not want in all cases to be straitjacketed by these remarks; I want this to be a prominent but not exclusive element in my work. [qtd. in Mehrotra]

But, ironically, Agha Shahid Ali is straitjacketed by the same thing he cautions. The main reason is that the post Independence poetry in India has mostly been seen from the nationalistic point of veiw. R Parthasarathy remarks that “Any evaluation of Indian verse is usually bedeviled by the question of national identity (Partha 5).” And Bruce King points out that “Seth and Ali published and gained recognition abroad where no one asked them whether they were Indian but judged their book in comparison with other poets and found them outstanding” (King 296). He further adds that “Recognition of Indian English poetry had long been delayed by an older cultural nationalism … (King 296). Thus Ali’s poetry is seen more from the nationalistic point of view where he does not qualify to be in the canon; therefore, marginalized. Moreover, in The Country Without
a Post Office, Ali has remorsefully sketched the gross human rights violations by the Indian state in Kashmir. (c.f. Chap 3). This book has been received quite well in Kashmir and at the international level too; however, in India the book has not received much critical attention with exceptions like Amitav Ghosh. (Ghosh) Hence, this critically acclaimed book has also been overlooked in India for the same nationalistic reasons, as Ali is found portraying the state apparatus in bad light.

Thus Agha Shahid Ali’s marginalization is somewhat a peculiar case. Marginality is defined in terms of two major types spatial and societal; societal includes demography, religion, culture and social structure, and spatial is based on physical location and distance from the centre. Expatriate writers like Meena Alexander, Shujatta Butt, Vikram Seth can be taken as marginalized (if at all they are marginalized) on the spatial level as they have been living outside India. Ali belongs to the same group, but he is doubly marginalized as he is marginalized on the societal level also (which includes culture and religion), unlike others writing in diaspora.

Irrespective of all this, given the themes, patterns and forms Agha Shahid Ali has used, he will continue to find readers both at the national and international level. His themes and concerns may be regional and culture specific, but his poetry is not. Given the excellence of his poetry, as discussed in this chapter and will be discussed in the next chapters, he, as Bruce King remarks, will continue to be “increasingly a major poet” (274).
Notes

1. Writers Workshop, a non-profit publishing house, was founded in 1958, by P. Lal to enhance the original writing and translation in the English language. Many of the prominent Indian English writers have published with the Writers Workshop. They include Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, Ruskin Bond, A K Ramanujan, Shiv Kumar, Adil Jussawalla, Keki Daruwalla, Jayanta Mahapatra, Shashi Deshpande, Meena Alexander, Vikram Seth, Agha Shahid Ali and others. It can be accessed on writersworkshopindia.com

2. From Bill Ashcroft et al’s The Empire Writes Back.

3. Urdu and Hindi share common roots in Khari Boli and Brij Bhasha spoken in Western U P. Urdu is written in Persian-Arabic script, and literature in the Devanagri script appeared much later. It was backed by Fort William College, Calcutta where Urdu books were rewritten in the Devanagri script, and Arabic and Persian origin words were purged from it. Urdu went on to become national language of Pakistan; and in India Urdu got a step motherly treatment which relegated its position to a madrassa language.

4. The Norton Anthology of Poetry, Fifth Edition has included only three Indian poets, A K Ramanujan, Dom Moraes and Vikram Seth besides Agha Shahid Ali; and, at the same time, only two Indian poets, Vikram Seth and Agha Shahid Ali ,figure in The Norton Anthology of Poetry, Shorter Fifth Edition. “Ali’s work has been included in both mainstream and alternative American anthologies, such as Drive, They Said: Poems About Americans and Their Cars (1994), The Arnold Anthology of Post-Colonial Literatures in English (1996), Contours of the Heart: Asian American Poetry (1996),
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