Chapter 1

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Agha Shahid Ali’s movement from India to the United States of America in 1975 was a characteristic émigré move. Greener pastures awaited Shahid who wanted to be a poet of English writing but knew he will have a tougher time establishing himself in India. Not that his career was any easier in US, but there was a greater chance of finding publishers for English poetry in America than in India. Shahid's move to the US qualifies as a twentieth century migration where jobs, immigration rules, friends, lovers and settling in were the general issues as opposed to the political exiles or indentured labors that were a feature of earlier times. However, the settling in part for any migrant, willing or forced, is a long and continuous project; one that ends only with life. And perhaps, it is for this reason that the term diaspora has been widely accepted for all kinds of migrants for the migrant never feels settled and is always appropriating, approximating or adjusting to the values, culture and life of the new land. The land he migrates to always feels alien and always demands more efforts in adjustment from the diaspora. The poetry of Agha Shahid Ali is a part of this new migrant expression and though Shahid himself ended up being an important part of American multiculturalism, it is only possible because he too faced issues regarding cultural assimilation and question about identity and belonging.

Shahid, like several other diaspora writers and poets, migrates to a land that offers better opportunities than his homeland but finds himself pining for the land of birth and his family nonetheless. And while the poet is still grappling with the issues of loss of hearth, trying to find comfort in memory, history, parallels in traditions and traditions of
loss, a political crisis back home comes as an emotional strike. It nearly robs him of his home forever. He now becomes an exile; not because the land has forced him out but because the land has forced itself out—the exodus of the Kashmiri pandits has destroyed the syncretic culture of the land, the culture which Shahid boastfully proclaimed to be a product of. Home and homeland both are destroyed when the poet loses his mother. He then enters a phase of an existential predicament when the poet contracts the same tumor his mother did, and faces his end. The tussle between faith in the divine plan and doubt over the divine interventions forms the subject matter of much of the last poems; these themes shall be elaborated upon in the later chapters. The poetic journey of Agha Shahid Ali can be cleanly divided into these three phases that corresponds the chapter division of the dissertation; from a willing migrant Shahid moves into a condition of exile which forces him to delve into the larger issues of existence and living.

The early move to America classifies Agha Shahid Ali into a category that Aijaz Ahmad calls the ‘exile of privilege’; those elite group of migrants that move to a wealthy First World “metropolitan, liberal, predominantly white university” (84) in an anticipation of finding a room for himself in these universities that boast of a multicultural environment and which most of the time does accommodate the budding intellectual from the outside world. This lot of migrants, Ahmed says with definition, “knows it will not return, joins the faculty of this or that metropolitan university, frequents the circuits of conferences and the university presses, and develops, often with the greatest degree of innocence and missionary zeal, quite considerable stakes in overvalorizing what has already been designated as ‘Third World Literature’—and, when fashions change, reconciles this category even with poststructuralism.” (85) Ahmed however lists another
category of academic migrants: “people who are prevented, against their own commitment and desire, from living in the country of birth by authority of state—any state—or by fear of personal annihilation…not privilege but impossibility, not profession but pain.” (85) The poet Agha Shahid Ali’s position is between these two categories: he is the young intellectual who does rounds of American universities, studying and teaching courses because home does not provide him the scope for growth as a person or a poet.

The later part of seventies when Shahid had moved out from India was the time when Kashmir was not in extreme distress though there had been political agony in the state ever since the separation of India and Pakistan in 1947 that rendered normal living difficult. Even in Delhi where Shahid was living by teaching at the Hindu College, he had to “face certain rebuffs” (Ghosh, 2002, 12) which were perhaps directed at him due to his position as an advocate of the cause of Kashmir’s independence or could also be because of his position as a sexual minority. In total, however Shahid faced the same “fear of personal annihilation” that Ahmed has hinted at in his essay.

The early volumes hence reveal an acute sense of nostalgia and longing for home which is the ideal, idyllic place to be in. It should, however not taken as trauma or exile in its real painful sense with all the historical baggage. Poems from 1970s till 1990, collected in five volumes, Bone Sculptor (1972), In Memory of Begum Akhtar and Other Poems (1979), The Half-Inch Himalayas (1987), A Walk Through the Yellow Pages (1987), A Nostalgist’s Map of America (1991), enlist an array of emotions that are easily found in any émigré from one land and culture to another. Thematic obsessions in these volumes range from family, homeland, the Kashmiri/Indian culture, parents and ancestors, to stories and metaphors of loss and longing in American tribal living and other landscapes.
to histories of loss in myths and everyday life. The condition of separation from one’s family and homeland is painful and disturbing—Nostalgia hits him in the recollection of episodes of the folding prayer rugs, drying of gingers and peppers, Malhar songs by the mother, the mirror-studded quilts, the Begum Akhtar ghazals, poems of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, songs on the gramophone—such memories of everyday living that now find expression into poetry.

What is striking about Shahid’s approach to his homeland is that it is rather romantic—it is remembered with all fondness and fascination with an undercurrent of a sense of tragic brooding. Unlike the contemporary diaspora writers and poets, Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie, A. K. Ramanujan, Sharat Chandra, and H. O. Nazareth, Shahid’s memories of the homeland are not dark, chaotic or ruptured; rather it is a pool of secured deposit he draws from to help himself function smoothly in the present. His present is built upon the foundation of his past memories; memories that rarely gloss the ugly or the macabre from the homeland; rather his poetry emerges from a life which is true to all its hues and is therefore, a source that supplements to his sense of identity. Shahid’s poetry, like his personality is rooted and cosmopolitan, is current and yet traditional, having its major source in history of the land and people and the way memories bring it to the forefront or alter their sense. Memories do haunt and pain him but it does not make the poet ‘powerless/disabled’; an idea that Paranjape finds evident in most diaspora writers. (MP, 2001, 5) It is rather enabling—the memories form a center and help Shahid locate himself in an alien land. His memories seem to provide him a cushion against the life in US that is new and demands a great deal of adjustment. With his migration, Shahid gained not only a better position economically and socially but also a better perspective—that of
the in-between. He becomes a colonial hybrid gaining a ‘new consciousness’ (Bhabha as quoted in MP, pg 5) What is found in the early volumes is an involvement with roots, ancestors, and landscape whose history and memory creates a reservoir of tenderness one associates with family and home, and the poetry is a resultant of the longing for that domestic tenderness, the assurance of belonging.

In the first five volumes, Shahid slowly unfolds himself as a romantic in a modern sense. A sense of tragic loss and mourning is the characteristic feature of Shahid's poetry that focuses on past memories and ideas that attach themselves to his identity. Unlike his contemporary diaspora poets Ramanujan, Nazareth and Sharat Chandra, Shahid's method is just the reproduction of a memory or an episode as it fell on his mind. He is rarely critical or cynical of his roots or homeland, except in the Notes Autobiographical poems where he establishes himself as a Muslim who grows out of ritualistic practices because he has been exposed to the charms/ vices of the Western world:

I asked Grandma: “Is God a Muslim?”

“Kafir, you’re no good,” she said.

No one taught me the Koran.

My father mouthed Freud and Marx,

something about recognizing necessity

and India bleeding for our smooth skins.

Mother had long since discarded the veil.

We ate pork secretly.

(“Notes Autobiographical—2”, 20, 3-10)
The modernist flavor present in the first two volumes that were published in India; *Bone Sculptor* in 1975 and *In Memory of Begum Akhtar and Other Poems* in 1978, both from Writer’s Workshop, Calcutta, are a reflection of early readings of T S Eliot, P B Shelly, Mirza Ghalib and Faiz Ahmad Faiz. The poems abound with past cultures and people, with images of death and denial. The poet was still in India and therefore the exile/emigrant trope found in the poems is rather debatable. All reviewers and critics who have read Shahid closely have hardly questioned the poet’s sense of exile that is found in his early poems. He was rather branded as a poet of exile, loss and mourning by critics like Needham Lawrence, Bruce King and AK Mehrotra from early on. In the 1992 *Oxford Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets*, Mehrotra writing a short note on Shahid has this to say: “Though Ali has made exile his permanent condition, it is not what he writes about. Exile offers him unconfined and un-peopled space into which one at a time, he introduces human figures.” (pg. 139) Bruce King in his chapter on Shahid titled “The Diaspora” (2001), also recognizes this feeling of exile and finds him conscious of the condition of exile as elemental to human condition. This feeling of exile that is apparent to most critics and readers may be attributed to the poet’s consciousness of lost cultures, past singers and poets and the life that was in past. He is, however, still a simple migrant who has not been forced out of his land or has not lost his home in the sense the words ‘diaspora’ and ‘exile’ mean. Therefore, in Shahid's early volumes the exile and loss are used only as a trope to build up an idea, an identity and a book of poems that is bound together as much with the tradition of post-colonial migration as with the decadence of Urdu-Persian language and is equally a part of the loss that the Kashmiri native feels due to the undefined nature of his political affiliations. From the chinars of Kashmir to the
Vietnam wars, the poet is responsive to a variety of issues that crowd his life; the mind was now the Jamesian web of consciousness where everything gets caught up, reflected upon and reproduced in photographic images. The first two volumes—*Bone Sculptor* and *In Memory of Begum Akhtar*, are slim ones and few poems of prominence are—“Dear Editor”, “Editor Revisted”, “In Memory of Begum Akhtar”, “Notes Autobiographical”, “Thumri for Rasoolan Bai”, “Introduction”, “The Jama Masjid Butcher”. Many of these poems are re-worked into other or/and better poems in the later volumes, but they helped establish Shahid as a poet of some merit. Needham Lawrence makes a good assessment of the two volumes in his review named “Agha Shahid Ali, Writers of Indian Diaspora”:

> “the perfunctory nature of some poems in *Bone Sculpture* is at times, the result of literary posturing and self-protective masking, which will allow the poet to speak of loss and separation without revealing the particulars of his history, the wellsprings of his feelings. With *In Memory of Begum Akhtar*, Ali reveals to his audience glimpses of a past that explain, in part, his preoccupation with death, separation, and loss. Modernist brooding takes a local flavor and actuality when, in “Notes Autobiographical—1” and “Notes Autobiographical—2”, he creates his own version of Death of God and Tradition in reflecting on the story of shoes stolen at a mosque. The theft of shoes at the mosque is only a convenient occasion for the poet’s apostasy; it crystallizes for him a growing sense of the irrelevance of God, who fails to answer his concerns and questions.” (10)

Most of the poems are autobiographical or confessional and establish the poet’s identity as a culturally steeped yet a non-practicing Muslim: one that is rooted both in the chinar trees and Amarnath caves in Kashmir as much as his readings of Shakespeare and Milton. The
charm of these volumes lies in the unity of its thematic thread. From his earliest volumes, Shahid emerges as an honest poet, keen on establishing himself as poet of cultures and defends his use of the English language cleverly: “call me a poet/ dear editor/ they call this my alien language// i am a dealer in words/ that mix cultures/ and leave me rootles” and goes on to say “I swear/ dear editor/ I have my hopes/ hopes which assume shape in/ alien territories” (dear editor, 1-7, 11). Shahid’s attempt at poetry is what he accredits to the art of the classical singer Rasoolan Bai: “I could only preserve/ her breaking voice/ while the house burnt its bhairavi”; all art and beauty must be preserved though as a post-colonial, post-modern subject he is aware of the futility of this effort. Metaphors and images of partition, death, bones, blood, ruins, are both from English modernists (Auden, Eliot, Hardy) as well as the Urdu poets (Ghalib, Mir, Faiz).

At eighteen I was surprised
by verse-libre. A PhD from Leeds
mentioned discipline, casually
brought the waste-land.
Unawares I was caught in wars
and wars, Vietnam pulling me
towards suppleness of language.
Death punctuated all my poems.
(“Introducing”, 13)

Home, family, people, travel, flights, shifting and moving are the themes that the next volume, The Half-Inch Himalayas, has to offer. Like the Urdu poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz whom Shahid admired for adding to the richness of Urdu poetry with new metaphorical
nuances to the beloved figure, Shahid himself composed poems that had an absentee beloved. This figure is not a fixed one but like the Derridean ‘presence/absence’ changes with time and can be interpreted into home, homeland, mother, lover, poetry or God. Shahid’s poetic style routinely borrows from the Urdu poetry in its own tradition of celebrating loss and longing. In The Half-Inch Himalayas, the lost home in Kashmir is also wrapped around this absentee beloved figure that teases the poet through its perpetual presence in the mind hinting towards its physical absence. Postcard from Kashmir, the prologue poem, reveals how intensely moved the poet is when he held a simple postcard from his homeland. The image of the half-inch Himalayan Mountain of the postal stamp triggers his nostalgia and makes him aware of his condition of exile:

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox

My home a neat four by six inches

I always loved neatness. Now I hold

The half-inch Himalayas in my hand

This is home. And this is the closest

I’ll ever be to home. When I return,

the colors won’t be so brilliant

the Jhelum waters so clean,

so ultramarine. My love

so overexposed (1-10)
The poem exposes his deep love and nostalgia for his land and sets into motion a lyric of longing, memory, homeland, and nostalgia. Home is so distant a place that sets in an entire chain of reverie. Agha Shahid Ali’s situation is like that lover from Faiz’s sher that Shahid translated: “Uthkar to aagaye hain teri bazm se magar/ Kuch dil hi jaanta hai kis dil se aayen hain”

As such I came away from the evening

Everyone still there with you among the lights

Only the heart felt

its terrible defeat

only it knew its desolation

and it could speak

only to itself

(“Ghazal”, The Rebel’s Silhouette, Pg. 48)

The forsaken lover has now no other option but to give in to the reveries of the beloved land and make a map of the homeland retracing episodes that define home and homeland for him. Poets like A.K. Ramanujan (1929-1993), Shiv Kumar (1921-) and Sharat Chandra (1938-2000) who had faced this kind of disruption, felt uprooted or faced unaccommodating behavior in the U.S. (all were immigrants to US!) wrote poems where their text becomes ‘an act of imaginary reunification” for them the text was “a way of imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation”. (Hall, 2004, 110-121) Shahid, much like, Vikram Seth (1952-) enjoyed his movement to
US. He was not oblivious to the privileges that his move to a nation like America places him in. Besides an opportunity for a better life and a space to grow as a poet, he also gains the perspective of an ‘in-between’. He becomes a Kashmiri-American, Indian- American, Muslim-American; a product of several cultures even as an Indian—Kashmiri, Shia-Muslim; America adds to this multiculturalism manifold. Most modern critics and writers have seen migration as a rather painful process. Saterdra Narayana quotes the condition of the migrant who leaves his homeland from Salman Rushdie:

A full migrant suffers, traditionally, a triple disruption: he loses his place, he enters into an alien language, and he finds himself surrounded by beings whose social behavior and code is very unlike, and sometimes even offensive, to his own. And this is what makes migrant such important figures: because roots, language and social norms have been three of the most important parts of the definition of what it is to be a human being. The migrant, denied all three, is obliged to find new ways of describing himself, new ways of being human. (2001)

America was not an altogether alien land to Shahid—he had lived the first five years of his life in Indiana when his father was a PhD candidate at the Ball State University, the language too as per Shahid's own account was familiar—English was Shahid's first language if not the mother tongue. Shahid's poetics thus has no anxiety about the alienation of land or language, however, a certain sense of loss that is associated with movement and displacement is present in the early volumes. Most of his poems are autobiographical, revolving around his life as a migrant clutching on to his roots, and who sees the new world through the lenses of a migrant, ever nostalgic for his homeland. His
first American publication shows him to be completely engaged and overpowered by the thoughts of his home in Kashmir. The roots, the language, the people and the land are all evoked graphically in an attempt to relive the past. The poems in this volume plot the cartography of Shahid's later thematic concerns and his attitude as a poet. While deeply nostalgic not only for his home and homeland, but also for an era of rich and sophisticated cultural environment of the Urdu-Muslim-Kashmiri-Indian kind, the poetics of Agha Shahid Ali affirmative and all-inclusive—romantic in the Urdu traditional sense—keeping alive the tradition of Ghalib, Mir and Faiz, and also that of the English modernists like Yeats, Eliot and Auden, and the more contemporary poets likes James Merrill and W S Merwin.

The book of poems is bound by a narrative of recollections, triggered by the postcard from Kashmir that sets him thinking about how he travelled from a secure, rooted home (Kashmir) through a city of coalescence (Delhi) to a metropolitan world (U.S.). The four sections of the volume roughly correspond to the subsequent stages of Ali’s life-roots/family/ancestors in Kashmir, life of a student and later as teacher in Delhi, arrival and settlement in U.S. and from there a retrospection and reminiscence of the life left behind in India.

Race, language, religion, community of interest and geography—are the five things that, as Ernest Renan lists, constitute a nation. (1996, 42-43) Shahid Ali’s poetry is an attempt of recreating that race and religion, language and the community of interest but his physical movement from India to U.S. deprives him of the fifth essential ingredient—the geography, and thus in his poems he creates ‘imaginary homelands’ with all the assortment of memories he had.
Section 1 shows Ali engaged with his personal history, his family, and his ancestors. Ancestral histories are an important part of the Oriental cultural mindset defining a man’s identity and claiming a share on his present. Renan believes that “It is the ancestors who have made us what we are.” These ‘heroic past, great men, glory’ are the ‘social capital’ that helps a man to formulate his idea of nation and history. (4, 1996) Shahid traces the root of his migration from his ancestors who were originally from Samarkand (Uzbekistan)

My ancestor, a man

of Himalayan snow,

came to Kashmir from Samarkand,

They tap every year on his window,

Their voices hushed to ice.

(“Snowman,” 1-3, 18-19)

Eccentricities and inflections of the family’s “Cracked Portraits” are delineated as an alibi of his own renunciation of the traditional religious faith and a bent towards the modern philosophies and arts; Socrates, Plato, Marx, Lenin, Freud, Napoleon, Beethoven as well as Sufi mystics, Gandhi, Malika Pukhraj, Siddhewari, and Rasoolan Bai are the influences that the poet acknowledges as a part of his inheritance. His insistence that his ancestors too, like him, belonged to a different land originally makes his displacement also a part of the family lineage.
The women of the family come across as the more vital relations—grandmother/s, mother, and also the female singers whose presence are recorded continually through the gramophone. With them, he associates fragility, domesticity and tenderness and also a certain strength and vitality that govern his attitude towards life. To Ali, they were the carriers, the upholders and the epitomes of learning, life and culture:

Those intervals

between the day’s

time calls to prayer

the women of the house

pulling thick threads

through vegetables

rosaries of ginger

of rustling peppers

in autumn drying for winter

(“Prayer Rug”, 1-9)

The lost pieces of the Dacca gauge saari weave the poet’s personal sense of displacement and exile to that of its weavers and artisans; and while the rich cultural heritage of Bengal heirloom suffers due to the British colonial expansion, the poet rather gains due to it. This is one of the poems where Shahid revert the colonial hegemonic rhetoric in the very
language (English) the colony taught him. The loss suffered by the colony (Bengal/India) finds an expression in the colonizer’s own language. Another poem that talks about the longing for his homeland in the U.S. is “Monsoon Note” where he remembers how his mother too would yearn for the monsoons of the plain in her homeland, Lucknow. He understands his mother’s nostalgia for old records of Banaras thumri-singers, of the flute of Krishna on the shores of the Jamuna and of the monsoon love-lyrics only when he was himself away from his secular-multicultural ambience of his home. The use of these variegated images and memories located in his homeland helps Shahid re-builds his home in America; the home in Kashmir is transported to the New World in the images that overpower the poet’s present:

And my memory will be a little
out of focus, in it
a giant negative, black
and white, still undeveloped.

(“Postcard”, 11-14, 29)

The poems of the second section give a trail of his Delhi life. The memories are of people and places-Jama Masjid, Chandini Chowk, the pavement astrologers outside railway stations, the beggars living in ruined tombs, the hawkers selling combs and mirrors, the butchers to whom Ali would ‘...smile and quote/a Ghalib line; he completes/the couplet, smiles/quotes a Mir line’. (A Butcher, 17-20), a bus ride or a movie reminds the poet of his own banishment and the distance between the two lives are
aggravated. Strong metaphors of exile are used to convey a sense of utter loss juxtaposing the tragedy of West with that of the East—banishment of King Lear brings the poet to another time, space and geographical plane—the metaphor works not only because the two kings were banished from their states but also cross roads at the spatial and the temporal plane Zafar’s banishment, ironically, was the result of the British colonization of India while Lear was the King of Britain in his hey days.

I think of Zafar, poet and Emperor

being led through this street

by British soldiers, his feet in chains,

to watch his sons hanged.

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.”

He was exiled to Burma, buried in Rangoon. (14-23)

His Delhi phase of life was both happy and bitter. Amitav Ghosh reports of his time-

Shahid’s memories of Delhi University were deeply conflicted: he became something of a campus celebrity but also endured rebuffs and disappointments that may well have come his way only because he was a
Muslim and a Kashmiri. Although he developed many close and lasting friendships he also suffered many betrayals and much unhappiness. In any event, he was, I think, deeply relieved when Penn State University in College Park, Pennsylvania, offered him a scholarship for a Ph.D. (2001, 12)

Strangely, Ghosh makes no mention of Shahid's homosexuality which could also be a cause of the “rebuff”. It is perhaps for this reason Ali says: ‘Can you rinse away this city that lasts/ like blood on the bitten tongue? (“Chandini Chowk, Delhi”, 10-11)

Ali’s secular upbringing, the upper-class Muslim culture of his family and the involvement of his family in poetry and politics molded him into a man of liberal politics, and a generous and genial attitude. Deep admiration for music and poetry was both inbred and influenced by the association with the two great figures of his time— Begum Akhtar (1914-74) and Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911-84). The early collection dedicated to Begum Akhtar – In Memory Of Begum Akhtar and Other Poems (1979) shows the extent of sway she had on Shahid and his poetry and it is from her that Shahid Ali learned both to harness his pain and to give voice to his grief. To quote Ghosh, “It may well have been this relationship with Begum Akhtar that engendered his passion for the ghazal as a verse form” and which ‘prove(d) to be Shahid’s most important scholarly contribution to the canon of English poetry.” (Ghosh, 2002)

Faiz was a cherished poet of an even more cherished language, Urdu, a family friend and a father figure to Ali but his merit appended more so, after Ali settled in U.S.
because he could identify with Faiz’s feelings of displacement and exile. Faiz, among other things also became a metaphor, a condition to Ali

Wherever you were, Faiz, that

Language spoke to you; and when you heard it,

You were alone- in Tunis, Beirut,

London, Moscow.

(“Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz”, 20-23)

Ali, in 1991, came out with *The Rebel’s Silhouette*, a translation of Faiz’s Urdu ghazals in English. “In the free verse of another language I imprisoned/ each line-but touched my own exile.” (Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz 61-3) Faiz was a political rebel, born and brought up Muslim who in his later life turned into an avowed agnostic and a Marxist. Unhappy with the political state of his country (Pakistan) he continuously spoke against the government and therefore had to be exiled twice. Faiz however, advocated humanism and internationalism, and was four time nominee of the Nobel Prize.

It was the influence of these two personalities that Ali’s love for the ghazals made a culmination into *Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book Of Ghazals* (2001). The ghazal was a space, a territory Ali had made secure for himself in a foreign land. (He had once invited others too, to his territory- edition of *Ravishing Dis-Unities: Real Ghazal in English* (2000).

The next section begins with a poem called “A Wrong Turn” and Ali writes
In my dreams I’m always

in a massacred town, its name

erased from maps,

no road signs to it.

Only a wrong turn brings me here.(1-5)

While these lines had a prophetic quality, hinting at the future destruction of Kashmir that Shahid shall witness in the early 1990s, the section refers to life in America where life is no longer the same, and one wonders if Ali considered his movement to U.S. as a wrong turn. The poems following are named “Vacating an Apartment”, “The Previous Occupant”, and “Leaving Your City”- where Shahid Ali is both sentimental and melodramatic-

They ignore my love-affair with the furniture

the coffee-table that memorized

my crossed-out lines

……..

The landlord gives them my autopsy;

They sign the lease.

The room is beating with bottled infants,

And I’ve stopped beating.
I’m moving out holding tombstones in my hands.

(“Vacating an Apartment”, 20-3, 26-30)

In another place, Shahid Ali imagines that the previous occupant too, has had a love affair with his apartment and like Shahid, he too has left his essence in the places he stayed:

But no detergent will rub his voice from the air

though he has disappeared in some country

as far as Chile.

The stains of his thoughts still cling

In phrases to the frost on the windows.

(“The Previous Occupant” 16-20)

Subsequent to these are “Philadelphia, 2:00 A.M.”, “The Jogger on Riverside Drive, 5:00 A.M.”, “The Flight from Houston In January”-where the note is of utter loss and regret-‘Suddenly the white hills of Pittsburgh/….I see only the dark side/of the sky.(“Flight from Houston in January”, 18-20) The critic Bruce King makes an interesting observation:

His life is uprooted; there are many references to airplanes, nights in bars and changing apartments …the idiom becomes increasingly American, the setting contemporary but there is thinning of poetic texture corresponding to the thinning of experience in a land of exile. (266, 2001)
The fourth and the last section announce him a “Survivor”. The image and memories of his early life in Kashmir overpowers him once more and though he knew he could not return no matter how much he wanted to and therefore he imagines—Somewhere/without me/my life begins. (“In The Mountains”, 1-3) Ali’s parents were the gravitational pull he experienced from time to time. “My parents sleep like children in the dark./ I am too far to hear them breathe/ …../ I am thirteen thousand miles from home.” (“Houses”, 5-6, 13) The collection has repeated images of his parents who lived in Kashmir while Ali was in the U.S. The separation of homeland married with the separation from a loving family caused him great anguish and intense pain.

In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie writes” the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss (of migration) in an intensified form”. To him the memories are partial and fragmented like ‘broken mirrors’. (1982, 11) However, to Ali memory was like a continuous, waking dream. It is there and it is not there. This may be a reason why Ali would not use period signs at the end of his poems—because they do not end! There is a back and forth movement in time, a pattern, a repetition of images, a preoccupation with places and people, a weaving of the various experiences of loss, displacement, exile and nostalgia.

I close my eyes. It doesn’t leave me,

The cold moon of Kashmir which breaks

into my house

and steals my parents love.
Memories tease him and split his life in a foreign land and his heart in his homeland. Later when violence erupted in Kashmir in the 1990s, his heart burned with the burning of Kashmir. To nostalgia, gets added the anguish and despair of the loss of home in real terms, as he would never be able to return to his homeland, even if he does so physically. This sets in the actual exile—the sense of loneliness, of being away from home increased with time—and Shahid's epigraph to *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, “...for wherever/ I seat myself I die in exile” proved faithful to Shahid Ali’s fate; for time could not heal his wounded heart and this is evident from *The Final Collection* where his exile finds the ultimate metaphors in the Islamic tradition and history - that of Ishmael and Karbala.

Shahid's technical virtuosity is highly commendable in the volume. The poems from *The Half-Inch Himalayas* are highly imagistic and yet they have a distinct voice of the poet. They succeed in conveying what they want to. The images create scenes from an episode and then liquefy and re-emerge into another picture. The poems sometime resemble the Bergsonian snowball of consciousness where one episode on the mind gets wound around another episode. Shahid's voice as a poet is clear and strong from this volume onwards; his reputation as a poet was firmly established as he got good reviews from all quarters. Shahid's style of writing in this early phase is characteristically controlled. The next volume was *A Nostalgist’s Map of America* (1991) and we find Shahid's style of writing increasingly post-modernist; spare, controlled, working with sudden puns and twist and relying on imagery for expression of an emotion. The single and even smaller words are infused with potent meanings and are placed in poems strategically. The “Evanescence” series poems exemplify this technique.
Up till 1980s, Shahid's involvement with American resembles more like the American migrants to Europe in the early 20th century like Henry James, Ezra Pound or T S Eliot. A comparison is drawn between the American expatriates to Europe and Shahid's migration to American because like most these writers/poets, Shahid was aware and proud of his own cultural heritage. The move to a foreign land does not create a schism in his personality but rather enriches it. The early poems are reminiscences and recreations of his life in India with family and friends; however a new texture and idiom, and new subjects—American life, history, friends, bars, poets, flights and landscape slowly seep into the thematic concerns with the poet gaining interest in his new surroundings.

The chapbook A Walk Through the Yellow Pages published in 1987 and the next volume A Nostalgist’s Map of America that appeared in 1991 established Shahid as a poet of language. A Walk Through the Yellow Pages is a collection of mere eleven poems. It was published by Sun/Gemini Publishers in 1987. The idea behind the book seems to be the way words and language affect human lives. Written against the backdrop of advertisements in the Yellow Pages and those that flood the modern American streets, newspapers, and lives; the volume conveys the idea that human emotions can be easily manipulated and the sole motive of every activity is profit-making. Advertisements and fairy-tales constructed with words contrive an image in the human minds and construct a new reality, and ideas like “Today talk is cheap. Call somebody” are words molded to make one feel special, wanted, wanting or suchlike. The “Bell Telephone Hour” is a string of five poems woven from the taglines of calling cards or phone companies and loops back to the early poems “Leaving Your City” “My finger, your phone number/at its tip, dials the night.” (HIH, 66) “A Call” “The ocean moves into the wires.” (76) The poems
treat nostalgia ironically—an emotion characteristic of the diaspora who moves through a phase of plain homesickness to an acceptance of the new land and is undergoing a state of realization that though a home is lost, all is not lost. There emerges a shift in poet’s attitude from nostalgic indulgence to ironic dismissal of his own homesickness.

An interesting series of poems are those that constitute the re-reading of the Grimm’s Tale—“An Interview with Red Riding Hood Now No Longer Young” (98-99), “A Wolf’s Post-Script to the Little Red Riding Hood” (100-01) and “Hansel’s Game” (102-03).

The ‘bad’ characters are given a voice or prominence in these poems. The poet is making the subaltern speak to bring out the voices from the fringes to the forefront, to subvert the mainstream dialectic and to show cracks and fissures in the classic reading. “A Wolf’s Postscript” is an evidence of anthropocentrism that lies rooted in a culture and has been accepted very easily. The poem written from the wolf’s perspective is full of fractures. The poet deconstructs a narrative where the wolf was made to look like a blood-thirsty villain and the erratic nature of stories men cook up to amuse themselves and their children. “The Wolf’s Postscript” makes the reader realize that anthropocentric discourse can be served right at a young age when the children are not even aware of the bias that is served against the animals. “Was I sleeping when he snipped my thick black fur” (101) the wolf comes to question the absurdity of the story’s base. While the wolf allows the grandmother to dwell happily in the midst of the forest, the humans cannot let the world stay calm—they had to kill the wolf not just to protect themselves but also to snip and fill the wolf’s stomach with stones and make him a butt of jokes among the children. The master-slave, man/nature, man/animal dialectic is subverted using dark humor and
counter-narrative techniques to explore and expose the archetypal notions of innocence and guile.

In “An Interview” (98-9) rests on the last line “How warm it was inside the wolf!” (99) The Little Red Riding Hood is placed in a modern capitalist world which does not provide her any sense of security but only makes her retreat to the dark pit of the wolf. The reworking of the classic children’s tales at this stage of life can be termed as the diaspora’s attempt to look back at his life critically. Oddly, both the poems—“Hansel’s Game” and “Red Riding Hood” hint towards a desire of a backward journey to the mother’s womb!

Exploring into the common themes of crisis faced in the process of living, the poet taps on several such stories which appeals to him in distinctive ways—Eurydice, Graeae, Medusa, Phil (the friend) and Majnoon, the Oriental lover, are all stories of loss, uprootedness and pain.

Shahid's thematic concern now is an exploration into the kinds of pain. The root of the existential crisis, the trauma of living is slowly setting in at this phase and would emerge as an underlying feature of his later poetry.

The volume A Nostalgist’s Map of America was published in the year 1991 by the W.W. Norton, New York. The first edition boasts of two reviews by the prominent poets Carolyn Forche and James Merrill. While Carolyn Forche places Shahid in the legacy of Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and Paul Muldoon and says that “his poems notable for their wisdom and grace, are elegant but never affected. Ali so artfully sustains his contemplation that upon entering his work we experience the play of light
through the many prisms of his intelligence”, Merrill uses Shahid's own metaphor of
‘countless mirrored convexities of the Mughal ceilings’ to describe his poems, also calling
the poet’s ‘gaze’ ‘mercurial and many-faceted’.

The book is headed by “Eurydice” and divided into parts just like *The Half-Inch Himalayas*. The first section consists of five poems, the second section is “In Search of Evanescence”, consisting of eleven parts and the title poem and another poem, the third part is “From Another Desert”, and the fourth part has again a variety of eight other poems.

“Beyond Ash Rains” is a love poem—of lovers who find a legacy in history and a
solace in future. The lovers take a walk in an emptied world (devoid of presence, perhaps)
but come across “bare history” where the poet suffered loss, was exiled, but the lover
promises the poet that no loss or exile shall take place again. The poem is a recount and a
song of loss; a song because there is a ray of hope in the end. The vanished tribes are not
really vanished because the poet has reclaimed it. The poem interestingly has an epigraph
from Gilgamesh “What have you known of loss/ That makes you different from other
men?” While loss certainly is a theme of the poem, homoeroticism is also a visible strand
here and continues in the next poem, “Rehearsal of Loss”:

I drove away from your door. And the night,

it left the earth the way a broken man,

his lover’s door closing behind him, leaves

that street in silence for the rest of his life.
The Urdu sher ‘Dono jahan tere sadke me waar ke/ lo ja rahe hain teri bazm se haar ke’ by Faiz Ahmad Faiz is quite audible in these lines—also cinematic images from old Hindi movies where the separation of lovers is symbolized through shut/closing doors.

“Crucifixion” is again a tale of loss, of sacrifice, of history’s claim on the present and also of a son lost to his family. An anecdote that the poet gathers, while driving past the city of Les Cruces (The City of Crosses) in New Mexico about the Penitentes people—“nomads of the Sangre de Cristos who crucify, each Easter, one of their own”, becomes for Shahid another story of loss that he feels compelled to chronicle. Another story of the South-western American desert is “Leaving Sonora”, a poem where against the harshness of a desert and against the history of fifteen hundred years of the Hohokam, the poet celebrates a moment of light, of life, of transformation of a coal into diamond possible only after ‘terrible pressure’. This landscape too ‘insists on fidelity’ just like the poet’s own homeland where one has to ‘Be faithful, / even to those who no longer exist.

The next series of poems—“In Search of Evanescence”, “A Nostagist’s Map of America”, and also “I Dream I Return to Tucson in the Monsoon”, are exercises in the surrealist mode of writing. However, being Shahid poems they could not escape the emotions of loss, longing, and perspicacity. Though the poet confesses of his own obtuseness in sympathizing with the suffering of his friend, Phil, a dying AIDS patient; the “Search of Evanescence” poems are a harnessing of emotions. The poems sway between emotion and emotionality, between dark and somber and also between structure and fluidity. The poems in the volume are eclectic both in their themes and their inspirations, intertextually woven with the voices of many American poets. Shahid's
involvement with Emily Dickinson can be seen in his continual referencing to her poems and a styling of the poems in the Dickinson-ian manner.

I want—Evanescence—slowly. After great pain.

So I refuse to be the only passenger:

I’ve bought tickets for us to Evanescence, Phil,

And you will be with me as we pass the ghost towns—

What views! Rock ruins of post offices. Brilliant,

Telegraph—we’ll pass them… (In Search 9, 131)

Shahid is a student of Dickinson both in her content and in her manner; while the poems reflect on light, abstractions, desires, destinies and on living and dying and on the substance that make moments eternity. The dying friend Phil is more of an abstraction of death and loss—a theme Shahid is not yet ready to take up but would plunge in deeply in the later volumes. Shahid’s treatment of death of his friend is rather impersonal and dissolves into the Dickinson-ian thematic; the loss of the friend—of a life is positioned along with the loss of a language and also equated with the movement of a person from one city to another. The chronicler of the history of loss stops again to record another incident of labor strife in Bisbee, 1917. Once again episodes of history reclaim the present with silences, whispers and haunting figures that roam about in the hotel. “Something has happened. What is it? / But who will tell her…// Every silence in the world has conspired with every other.”(The Keeper of the Dead Hotel, 136-138, 32-38)

While the act of recording history is an act of formation, of structuring, of giving prominence to the neglected, the forgotten, but it is also an act of limiting, of confining
the episodes in words; for writing and re-writing always entails an erasure, an absence, and it is here that the task of the poet achieves a great role as his images and words open to its readers layers of consciousness and meaning. The poems of the American desert land (also, leaping up to the New England region through Emily Dickinson) by employing the techniques of surrealism, of imagism—use broken images, syntactical deviations, infusing words with potent meanings reach an effect of multiplicity and eclecticism.

The Urdu poets Faiz, Mir and Ghalib resurface in the “From Another Desert” series which has longing, search and loss of the Beloved as its central theme. The string of thirteen poems is an interesting compilation where the American desert is juxtaposed against the desert of Pre-Islamic Arab. The history of American southwest is contrasted with the folklore of Arabo-Persian culture (first written account is Nizami Ganjavi’s 12th century Layla and Majnun). Majnoon is the epitome of passionate love and thus the most celebrated lover of Urdu-Persian poetry. He is thus positioned along with Satan, the arch-rebel and the arch-lover of God. And God by dispelling Iblis from his abode in Heaven is the first cruel Beloved, who cares not for the agony of the lover’s loss. The poem, written in long sentences and short lines and single-line stanzas, stress both on the passion of the lover-poet figure and sparseness and emotional hollow felt by the fallen lover.

The idea of Satan and God being the first lovers has been borrowed from Sufi theology—though this trope is a regular feature of Arabic, Persian, and Urdu poetry. It is noteworthy here that Persian-Urdu poetic forms, have love as a central trope, though this love theme sways between love of/for God called ‘Ishq-e haqiqi’ or love with/for humans, termed as ‘Ishq-e-majazi’. Shahid's inclusion of this trope in his gamut serves the twin function of familiarizing the American readers with an essential trait of Urdu poetry as
well as unearthing the trend of homo-erotic poetry in same tradition. As a diaspora, he is learning to reclaim his roots not through simple nostalgic recollections but through celebrating a much nuanced pattern of history, culture and human passions. The most exalted of love in Urdu poetic tradition is the Ishq-e-haqiqi, the love of truth or God, a love which is commonly stated in either un-gendered terms or in homo-erotic vocabulary. The latter emotion being a constant recurring feature in Shahid's poetry as shall be taken up in the later chapter. This poem also reveals the poet’s bent towards the ghazal, the poetic form that Shahid shall take up with greater vigor in later life. The Another Desert series is a rather ghazal-esque poem having all the required elements of the ghazal; the dejected lover, the cruel Beloved, the undying love, the apathy of the on-lookers, the performance of miraculous feats for the Beloved’s sake (digging earth by bare hands), separation of the lovers as a condition of doom—all this bound by the voice of the master ghazal poet, Ghalib, (1797-1869) (in the epitaph) but the form itself.

In prison Majnoon weeps for Satan:

And Iblis angel of smokeless fire bereft of dreams would still not / bow to man Qais weep for Iblis a lover like you a lover of God that / cruel Beloved Qais welcomes the knives the stones but never bow to / man learn from Iblis survive somehow survive in Hell each day this / memory the echo of the Beloved’s voice telling one to go to Hell (147)

Shahid's relation with both the host country and that of his birth is not singular or one way- but a two way— a give and take one. The loan of the English language is repaid
by bringing in the knowledge of his country and its traditions in that language. What US
gives to Shahid in terms of an intellectual workspace, is repaid through his poetry that
contributes to the multiculturalism of America. US, though a land not originally of his
birth, has slowly provided him a second home contributing the larger framework that
Shahid dwells in. By the time of the publication of *Nostalgist’s Map*, America is no longer
seen not as an alien land, but life in US is an extension of his exilic temperament;
relocation to America only sharpens his sense of up-rootedness not instills it. From here
on, it is an onward journey to exile. The poet increasingly feels affiliated to the figures of
loss and longing, the exiled from home and human contacts—Medusa, Graeae: “I too was
human. I who now live here/at the end of the world...//we recall men we have loved, /
their gestures now forever refusing us.” (“Medusa”, 156, 6-14) And also,

Listen to my account as the world vanishes:

We were young, my sisters and I,

Though withered from birth, our hair grey,

In this land of wavering light,

Everything shrouded, the sun banished, the moon in exile.

(“The Youngest of the Graeae”, 158, 1-5)

Shifts in focal points, time and space ellipsis, wordplay, disjointed themes,
unfinished sentences, narrative digressions and sudden diversions are the techniques
employed to bring in disparate images under a canopy, tying them in a poem for they all
seem to point eastward to home.
Works Cited


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