Chapter 2

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The previous chapter established Agha Shahid Ali as a modern migrant enjoying a position of privilege (Ahmad, 1992) It is also recorded how Shahid slowly gathers in his encompassing narrative, the various kinds of loss and longing as he changes his landscape. And yet, till the late 1980s, Shahid Ali was one to those ‘happy’ and ‘privileged’ people who moved to the US as a student who earned himself a position as an academician and poet and living a comfortable life negotiating between the old and the new home and culture. Had it not been for the political crisis in Kashmir in the 1988-89, Shahid might have remained only an émigré poet—plush job, family roots in India and an aesthetic sensibility honed by both Western and Eastern traditions. However, the 1990s violence and political uprising in the Valley of Kashmir which was home to Agha Shahid Ali, led to a dramatic turn in his poetics. The language acquires a new intensity and the poetic subject takes an altogether different direction. Shahid, always a personal poet, becomes an involved one. The present chapter traces the sense of exile in Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry that emerges post-A Nostalgist’s Map of America (1991) volume. A sense of disastrous calamity, fatality, anguish and desolation is evident in the volume The Country Without a Post Office (1997) which talks about the loss of his homeland in Kashmir. The 1990s Kashmir saw the emergence of several militant organizations claiming Kashmir’s independence as a Muslim state or as a part of Pakistan. The demand for the separate state turned violent with the entry of political factions, especially the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front. The state and the central government took a firm stance against the separatist movement. The situation became aggressive in the 1989 when the native people
sided with these organizations and conducted mass protests in Lal Chowk (downtown public square) and elsewhere. The protest ended up in violence and destruction which ripped apart the secular social fabric of the land with its infamous forced expulsion of the native Hindus, popularly known as Kashmiri Pandits. This naturally led to the destruction of the rich cultural heritage of the syncreticism of the Hindu and Muslim tradition of the valley, popularly known as Kashmiriyat. With the Islamic purist infiltrating the land and the culture of the Valley and the mindless suppression of that by the Indian military, the paradise on earth, as Kashmir was famously called as, turned into hell. The lives of both who were robbed of their lands and with it, a dignified living and also of those who stayed behind turned into nightmares. Refugee camps, trauma of the loss of home and family, apathy of the government, no rehabilitation of the displaced people, unavailability of food and shelter, no source of living, incessant military operations, unwarranted combing of the houses and random killings became the order of the day in the Valley. This had deep repercussions on the social and emotional make up of the people of the Valley.

For Shahid, this political trouble in the land robbed him the haven that the home was even after his migration to the US. Shahid being the ‘privileged’ diaspora would frequently travel back to his homeland. He was therefore, still involved in the lives, people and politics of the land. The 1990’s breakout marred the social and cultural generosity and reception that the land offered. Shahid was already on the fringes of the social structure because of his precarious position as a homosexual and as a Shia-Muslim based in the Western world. The political situation in his homeland consolidates the exilic temperament. The death of the mother that took place immediately after the turmoil in Kashmir created the condition of ‘no-return’. Shahid’s ‘home’ gets destroyed altogether.
The mother, in Shahid's poetry remains the primary ‘beloved’ figure amongst his other loves—homeland, God, poetry. The poet in a different land, even when it is plush and comfortable, hankers for the home. He relies upon his memory, the bits and scrapes of news available to him, repeatedly travels back to the history of the land, imagining himself to be a part of all was important. Shahid wants to live his ‘witness’ position by projecting himself as an omnipresent figure across time and space. Shahid never makes his homosexuality a part of his poetics. It remains underplayed in his poetry but it certainly contributes to his sense of alienation. The building blocks of the poet’s identity made him an ‘Outsider’; Shahid was a gay—Muslim—Shia—Kashmiri—English speaking—poetry loving—migrant. He was not just ‘doubly exiled’ but an exemplary product of the post-modern, post colonial. It is perhaps, for this reason that Shahid's poetry displays the unique pain that appeals to both American and the Indian readers. His poetry happens from pain, from that distinct quality of submerging in the pain and not yielding to it.

The chapter shall take up the theme of exile that emerges in Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry mainly due to loss of the homeland and then the home/mother. Exile, in Shahid, also emanates from the postmodern identity that is full of ironies and contradictions, and from the ‘Outsider’ position that his homosexuality places him in. But Shahid's poetry ultimately establishes exile to be a temperamental condition. The Shia-Muslim poet traces his sense of exile from the original exile of Satan, the arch Beloved/Lover of God and the exile of the first man, Adam and Eve from Heaven. To Shahid, man is essentially bound to suffer exile due to his position as man, and as a lover. The ‘no-return’ is a territory that is home, womb, and heaven. Thus, exile in Shahid's poetry is not just an exile from
homeland but also from home, from the womb of the mother, and from the showground of the Beloved. Modeled on the Urdu-Persian poetic tradition of the archetypal oppositional figures of Lover/Beloved, God/Prophet, God/ Satan, Home/Exile and unnamed/un-gendered love, Shahid Ali’s poetry, re-establishes them in a continuum of the Derridean binary opposites in his English language poetry—the ever evasive, the ever–effacing Other.

Compared to other contemporary diaspora poets like A K Ramanujan, Nazareth, Sharat Chandra or Shiv Kumar, Shahid’s poetry is noticeably different in its relationship to home, and homeland. While the other poets look at the land with anger, disgust or derision, Shahid's backward glance is not only fondly romantic but the poems are constantly recreating the lived experiences. Shahid’s poems are never judgmental towards India, Kashmir, Kashmiri culture or people; rather they emphasize the tenderness and beauty of the pluralistic society that Kashmir was known for. In *The Country Without a Post-Office*, the poet draws readers’ attention towards the ethos of a Kashmiri culture and at the same time decries the violence that broke out in the 1989-90 which destroyed the local culture. And while the poet romanticizes the genesis of the Valley, lauding the socio-cultural icons and spaces and mourns the atrocious assault on these, he simultaneously consolidates the rhetoric of a different ethnicity of the Kashmiri race.

The prevalence of political trouble in the Valley is brought to the knowledge of the outside world, especially the Western World by situating his homeland Kashmir in line with other places of international trouble—Palestine, Sarajevo, Chechnya and Armenia, Shahid gave the situation the seriousness and attention it deserved. Kashmir was into flames; people killed, homes abandoned, looted and burned shattering the core syncretic
character of ‘Kashmiriyat’. The volume thus is significant at multiple levels as it not only is an anguished cry of loss, but also a reclamation and a fossilization of the distinctiveness of the homeland in Kashmir.

These images of loss, suffering, and pain are juxtaposed against or weaved along the images of beauty, tenderness and benevolence of the history and genesis of the Kashmiri land. Kashmir is a land of mythical origins. From the piercing of the mountain by the trident to reveal the Valley (“Son et Lumiere”, 5-7) to the rushing up of the land, “from the ocean, toward Kashmir” to the craving of the Jhelum in the shape of paisley by Lord Shiva (“A History of Paisley”, 218), the genesis is rendered in romantic and fragile imagery. Popular Kashmiri icons and figures are used by the poet to construct an ethnicity specific to the land. The icons and components of the Kashmiri culture, Nund Rishi, Lal Ded, Shah Hamdan were local saint that stood for social unity, cultural richness and steadfastness in troubled times. They are used effectively to furnish a link between the popular religious traditions and the socio-cultural practices of the people of the land. By playing them out in his poetics and weaving the personal, the political and the historical together, the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali concretizes a ‘thirdspace’ (Bhabha) that the diaspora longs for as ‘home’. The act of poetic creation, while spelling out that from which he is exiled, is also an act of recreating that land. Memory, lived experiences, imagination, history and the geographical spaces all blend to create an ‘imaginary homeland’ that is not close to the ‘real’ home but much better. One of the features of the diaspora is the formation of the notion of ‘State’ and of being guilty of overlooking the existent cracks in the native land, prior to their departures Shahid’s romanticization of the land may be seen in this light. To bring up one’s homeland in to international concern,
one has to tell the world that the home was an immaculately beautiful place with a space for everyone but the ongoing trouble has marred the land physically as well as emotionally.

The volume stands out in Shahid's oeuvre as an anguished cry of loss and mourning with poems pouring out emotions like the molten lava, sometimes too forceful to be harnessed into a form and at other times, too raw to be left without a formalistic boundary. Many strict poetic forms in this volume like the canzone, the villanelle, and the ghazal are used with an intention to convey the layers of emotional density. The poems are a requiem that connects the atrocious historical lineage of the land, a lament of loss suffered by the people of the land, and mourning for the destruction the land has undergone. It is also a song of celebration of the mythological roots of Kashmir, of the bucolic beauty of the land, and of the cultural amalgamation that has been referred to as Kashmiriyat. The poems draw a parallel with the atrocities suffered by the people in other lands as well and in Kashmir’s own history. The poems move both temporally and spatially to bind universal sentiments of loss and love.

Kashmir is a land of fascinating stories and Shahid’s involvement in its history and mythical legends has been a part of his poetics from early years. In the Begum Akhtar volume, Shahid traces the common Kashmiri myth that the Valley holds the grave of Jesus Christ who travelled from Jerusalem to Kashmir after his resurrection and also that the Kashmiris are lost tribe of the Israel. (“Legends of Kashmir: A Lost Tribe”, 43.)

He never died on the cross, but

(a lost tribe to himself)
wore a wilderness embroidered
with the dust of deserts, stopping
now and then (for a year
or so) to memorize the marks on his wrists.
his memory failed when he reached Kashmir:
even the silver in his brain
couldn’t echo Gethsemane. (“2. Christ in Exile”, BA, 44)

In CWPO, the land’s featured motifs; the paisley designs are said to have their origin in the footprints of Goddess Parvati when “she ran away from Shiva” who “eventually caught up with her” and “commemorates their reunion, he carved the Jhelum River, as it moves through the Vale of Kashmir, in the shape of paisley.” (Epigraph to “A History of Paisley”, 28, 218) against this tenderness, love and union is drawn the contrast of the present day Kashmir where “bullets drown(ing) out the bells of her anklets; where ‘drippings from a suspended burning tire/ are falling on the back of the prisoner, / the naked boy.” (“I See Kashmir”, 13-15, 178) The poet follows the old friend Rizwan who died amongst “blood on the road/ and hundreds of pairs of shoes the mourners / left behind, as they ran from the funeral, victims of the firing.” (32-33, 179) and where “homes (are) set ablaze by midnight soldiers.” (38-39, 179)

Brahma’s torn voice in “A Footnote to History” (221) hints at the eternal sadness and separation. The cracks in the beautiful, pristine genesis of the land is hinted at in “Son et Lumiere at Shalimar Garden” (223) where Shahid again draws up mythical legends
about gypsies travelling to Europe in ancient times only to be “ambushed by / forests on fire.” (28/9) The Valley’s legendary origin where Brahma pierces the Valley with a trident to defeat the water demon “One Born Of Water” Jalodbhava (223, 8) is contrasted against the Mughal’s violation of the natural and auspicious mountainous regions for their “thirst for/ terracing the seasons/ into symmetry” (26-8).

The troubled nights in Kashmir are the same as that of the Russian poet Osip Mandelstern’s “velvet dark”, “velvet Void” (The Blessed Word, 171, ln 9) where “A patrol is stationed on the bridge and a car hoots like a cuckoo.” (20) among the echoes of loss of past—Habba Khatun losing her husband to the Mughal king Akbar, “Srinagar hunches like a wild cat” with its “lonely sentries, wretched in bunkers” having the “license to kill” (51-3) and dismembered bodies flowing in the Jhelum. In the prose poem, Shahid does some remarkable feats here, criss-crossing different time zones and spaces; he ties into one strand the stories of loss. While God relented on seeing Abraham’s son Ishmael sacrificing his life for Him, *He* does not spare the young Kashmiri boys, like Irfan or Rizwan: “Son after son—never to return from the/ night of torture—was taken away.” (28-9) and while the “blessed women” of the Valley collected chinar leaves, made fire and sang songs, there occurred “mass rapes in the villages, towns left in cinders, neighborhoods torched” (42-3). Amongst such pain the poet finds a need to re-invent “an imaginary homeland” and to reassert the multiplicity of the land, Shahid writes:

Let me cry out in that void, say it as I can. I write on that void:

Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmire, Cashmir, Cashmere,

Cashmere, Cachemire, Cushmeer, Cachmiere, Casmir, Or Cauchemar
in a sea of stories? Or: Kacman, Kaschemir, Kasmere, Kachmire,

Kasmir. Kerseymere? (10-4)

The semantic difference and the phonetic similarity hints towards the difference of religious and cultural practices in the land which in turn is a characteristic feature of the Valley. People despite their differences are essentially Kashmiri.

The emotions that are evoked in the Kashmir volume are very much raw and real—Shahid's poetics here reaches a pitch that matches the indulgence and emotionality found in the Urdu poems—many poems freely borrow images, metaphors and the sense of that slippery ground between fatality and hope from the Urdu poetic tradition. “Phantom heart/pray he’s alive. I have returned in rain to find him, to learn why he never wrote.” (The Country Without a Post Office, 32-3, 203). CWPO is one such poem where the very landscape is charged with emotions— the minaret, the wicks of clay lamp, the call of the muezzin, the rain, the paisley clouds, and the call to prayer, the autumn blossom, the papier-mâché—all gather to create an image of the Kashmir the poet has lived into; a Kashmir where now the “letters with doomed/ address” have been returned because “each house (is) buried or empty” (7-8, 202). Contrast is drawn between images of fragility linked to the Kashmiri culture and land and the imagery of terror and despair reflecting the bloodshed and the killings in the state. The lament of the poet is conveyed not in wails or cries but by plain cataloging: “When the muezzin/ died, the city was robbed of every call/ The houses were swept about like leaves for burning.” Shahid's grief here achieves a Keatisan quality where the fatality and meaninglessness of the life dawns upon the poet at the same time he realizes he has immense desire to live life fully. He however,
cannot escape the anguish and tries his best to pacify himself, allay his own fears “Mad heart! Be brave”. This is an unprecedented line in English poetry and only Agha Shahid Ali could have used it to convey serious business in a poem like *The Country Without a Post Office*. It is noteworthy here that the elements of God, Godliness or religion/worship are a regular feature in the poet’s scheme of things. The death of the muezzin, the call for prayers, the minaret, the clay lamps (CWPO), the statutes of the temple, the refugee from Belief, the priest in saffron (Ghazal, 193) “Insh’Allah, if God wills”—all ideas or phrases in the volume show the poet’s acute awareness of the element of religion that has played a part in the local politics. At the same time, it also point towards the poet’s own tussle with religion and religiosity. The division of the homeland on religious grounds is of utmost disgust to the poet: “They make a desolation and call it peace” (9, 175) and he is seen continuously asserting the long tradition of the syncreticism of the Hindu-Muslim cultures that was a unique feature to Kashmir. “In the lake the arms of temples and mosques are locked/ in each other’s reflections” (16-7, 176). Most critics of Shahid's poetry find this image the epitome of Shahid's dream Kashmiri syncreticism. However, the English critic Rachael Farebrother has a different insight about it. She finds that the religious institutions of mosque and temple are “linked to human physicality in such a way as to underline the powerful and the destructive, hold of religion in the Kashmir Valley.” (94) She therefore opines “Ali’s symbolism is suggestive of human intimacy; the arms of these people public institutions are coiled in destructive symbiosis, ‘locked’ in a deathly embrace.” (95)

Shahid seems to have a foreknowledge of such a brutal banishment of his Hindu counter-parts: “In your absence you polished me into the Enemy” (Farewell, 27, 176) the
Hindus were needed to “perfect” him. The Hindus and the Muslims in the Valley have been coexisting for a long time and each complimented and completed the other; the native Kashmiri culture would not hold in the absence of any one of the religious groups. The absence of the patronizing attitude that most Muslim leaders/thinkers are guilty of when talking about the Kashmiri Pandits, is again one of different points of Shahid's poetic. The Kashmiri Pandits are the ‘Other’ and yet that dichotomy is quashed as soon as it is built. Shahid writes:

You needed me. You needed me to perfect me.

In your absence you polished me into the Enemy.

......

I am everything you lost. You can’t forgive me.

I am everything you lost. Your perfect enemy.

......

I am being row through Paradise on a river of Hell:

Exquisite ghost, it is night. (26-33)

The sense of loss of the cultural counter-part in the Hindu population of the Valley evokes sadness “If only somehow you could have been mine, what wouldn’t have happened in this world?” (38-9) The poem “Farewell” was meant to be a love letter from Kashmiri Muslim to a Kashmiri Pandit. The expression may sound grandiose to the English readers but is a commonly accepted hyperbole in Urdu poetry as well as Hindi cinema (places
from where Shahid heavily borrows his tropes from) and both the addressee and the addresser here are familiar with the two traditions. (Notes, VS, 377)

Elsewhere again, the poet writes: “We beg them, ‘Who will protect us if you leave?’/ They don’t answer, they just disappear/ on the road to the plains, clutching the gods.” (43-4,180) Shahid in *The Country Without a Post Office* is not a Muslim poet rather a Kashmiri one, advocating the native cultural hybridity that existed amongst its people much before Bhabha brought in the term into fashion. The Kashmiri identity for Shahid meant a coexistence of the Muslim and Hindu traditions where the two have so influenced each other that there emerge from them the traditions of Sufism and Rishi-ism. Shah Hamdan, Lal Ded or Lalleshwari, and Nund Rishi are not just historical figures but they are also ideas, ideals and ideologies that stood for the syncreticism of the Hindu and Muslim cultures pervading the Valley and governing people’s life until the political strife of 1989 and the exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits. In the poetic narrative, these poets and saints figure recurrently to build up an identity that is historically and culturally Kashmiri. Unlike the modern Western notions of cultural tolerance, most Indian cultures can boast of not only being tolerant but also being influenced by different religions and ethnicities. Shahid’s poetics thus overrides the modern notions of secularism and tolerance to show that people are capable of more; of adapting and of relenting to the beauties of nature and geography. “This dividing of the country, the divisions between people—Hindu, Muslim, Muslim, Hindu—you can’t imagine how much I hate it. It makes me sick. What I say is: why can’t you be happy with the cuisines and the clothes and the music and all these wonderful things?” Shahid once rhetorically asked Amitav Ghosh. He goes on to add: “At least here we have been able to make a space where we can all come together because of
the good things.” (6) This is a defining statement of Shahid’s political stance about Kashmir and also his own place in it. Since Shahid and Kashmir has seen better days, he is unable to accept the intrusion of the divisive politics in his land.

Sayyid Ali Hamdani, known as Shah Hamdan, was a Sufi saint who had travelled to Kashmir from the city of Hamdan, Persia in around 14th century. He was a great influence in converting the people of the Valley to Islam. He was among the first league of Muslim saints that travelled to Kashmir and converted huge population of the native people by making the Islamic principles familiar and accessible to the Kashmiri people. In the same thread of history is Lalleshwari, Lalla or Lal Ded (c1320), a mystic poetess who advocated a philosophy combining her own Trika (shavaite tradition) and yoga as well as the core principles of Islamic Sufism. Her compositions were cherished by the common Kashmiri folks as they were opposed to the Brahaminical order and hypocritical orthodoxy. (Kak, 177-178 IN A.RAO) She was a major influence on the Sufi Saint Sheikh Nuruddin Nurani or Nund Rishi (1379-1442), who popularized the Islamic principles among the common people through his Koshur poetic compositions and use of peasant and regional imagery. Nund Rishi established a unique order of Islamic Rishism, amalgamating the Islamic and Hindu traditions of asceticism where the Rishis led a “pre-Islamic” lifestyle, maintaining strict vegetarian diets, and spending years in forests, and remaining unmarried. The Muslim Rishism was the only indigenous Sufi order and remained popular till 17th century after which it was assimilated into other schools who were strict regarding adherence to Islamic rituals and came down from Central Asia. (Sikand, 495-96) The burning of the Chrar Sharif, Nund Rishi’s shrine that was visited alike by the Hindus and the Muslims is not just a physical violence but also an assault to
the nativism of the land. The entry of fundamentalists in the Valley is a disheartening episode to the poet. “Alas! Death has bent my back. / It is too late for threads at Charar Sharif.” (I Dream I Am the Only Passenger, 61-2, 187)

The formalistic style and the content of the poems are intricately linked to suggest an involved politics. The prose poems, which are several, in the volume, are those of utter dejection—“The Blessed Word: A Prologue”, “Lo, A Tint Cashmere”, “Dear Shahid” are works where allusions are stitched, episodes juxtaposed to bring out the contrast in the situation or heighten the irony. The sentiment in Dear Shahid, for instance, is more effective when directly reproduced. A letter that remained undelivered to the poet because the post-offices were shut down form the core theme of the volume. It suggests not only the complexities of a troubled state to share its but also the political apathy of the rest of the world to the poet’s homeland. The surrealistic mode of writing suits his memory trail and the spasm of painful assault he feels on himself. Many poems start with small letters, ‘and’, ‘but’ and ‘again’— “I Dream I Am the Only Passenger”, “Some Visions”, “Return to Harmony 3”, “The Country Without a Post Office” suggesting the ongoing dialogue the poet is indulged in with his memory and recall and reproducing. The unconventional use of punctuations, missing full stops, long dashes, long sentences, quick phrases, and repetition of words—all suggest an emotional breakdown. The volume reads like a mourner’s recollection of a dead loved one who wants to harness the pain, hiccups, wails, and again breaks down to sobbing and weeping. The use of strict metrical forms—sestina, villanelle, and the ghazal—all ancient and demanding forms may be seen as only an effort by the poet to find sense and restraint in the face of utter loss. Shahid, a student of modern English poetry, makes heavy use of imagistic and surrealistic style of narration to convey
the continuation of atrocities at both the physical and the emotional planes. Not only the home, the homeland is robbed of its people and beauty but memory of those things and events gets overpowered with violence. Grief becomes too intense to be told in a plain story—thus the poet resorts to stylistic methods to convey his pain. The style remains rather, imagistic and surreal with images constantly melting into each other. Repetition of certain images from previous volumes, use of dramatic verbs, violence invoking adjectives, unfinished sentences, broken syntax, hyphens, enjambments between paragraphs, technical innovation that uses lines borrowed from other poets and people, the choice to use certain words from the Urdu-Kashmiri parlance—Muezzin (202), ghats, inshaallah, etc, and the choice to make a literal translation of certain phrase from the local language—The Slave of Prophet, () Eyes of Maple Green, (181) My silk is stained...(185) Phantom heart (203) Mad heart (206) are methods that produce the semblance of the diaspora feelings of both involvement and distance. Language is used effectively to portray a land in ruins but it also gives away the idea that the poet is far removed from the land and it has the aim of exceeding the local to be sensible to the foreign audience. Dramatic verbs are predominant in the volume—piercing, terracing, splintering, razed, stuffed, bombed, fled, exiled, etc creating the impression of destruction in the land. These verbs are responsible in the major way to build up the dramatic quality of the book. The use of personal pronouns—I, We, you, he—and proper nouns—Rizwan, Irfan, Vir, Gupar Road, Mir Pan House, Shalimar Ghats, Pampore, Lal Chowk, Harmonies, Nanga Parbat reflects the poet’s embroilment into the gory affairs. The inclusion of locales where the poet lived and people whom he personally knew from the Valley contribute to the creation of poet’s identity as a Kashmiri while also pointing to that “Third Space” (Bhabha, 1994)
where the modern hybrid plays out his negotiations with the native culture and the imposed order.

While the focal interest of the poet in the volume is to give expression to his own grief at the loss of his homeland, it is the formation of a native identity of Kashmir that emerges as another major product of Shahid’s poetry. Shahid uses history and memory, both personal and collective to his use. Tying personal narratives with the historical, the factual details with the folklore and poetic, the text creates a Kashmir that was home to the poet. The modern historian Dominick LaCapra finds the role of memory very important in the construction of history. He propounds that history remains both informed as well as questioned by memory. (2001) Shahid’s poems stitch the two together. They reveal a text that relies on memory to construct the history while history becomes a supporting pillar to the trail of memory. Time past and time present collectively lead to a time future. Here, the formation of the Kashmiri state and identity.

You history gets in the way of my memory…

Your memory gets in the way of my memory….

Your memory gets in the way of my memory. (28-41, *Farewell*)

The poem *Farewell*, writes Shahid Ali, in the post-script is at one level a love song between Hindu and Muslim lovers. The theme of prohibited love may also envelopes the theme of gay love that runs under surface of the apparent Hindu-Muslim dichotomy. While addressing the Pandit beloved, the Muslim lover in between the cries of desolation “At a certain point I lost track of you” (1) and “They make a desolation and call it peace” (2) falls back into the reminisces of the beloved geography where the “ibex rubs itself
against the rock” (5) and since the lovers are not present there (because they are Hindu and Muslim or gay) to witness its fallen fleece from the slope. The angle of Hindu-Muslim and also gay love is made pervasive by placing the duo to various situation and by assigning their loss to the loss of geo-political spaces—slopes of the hills, the lakes with the locked reflections, temples and mosques, and in the memory of the desert caravan (12-17, 175-7) The possibility of the gay reunion now seems to be as vague as the reflection of the mosque and the temple holding their arms in water; while it is a beautiful dream, it holds an infirm position of ‘reflection in water’. “A Pastoral” (196) may be read in continuation of the “Farewell”, where the poet hopes to “meet again in Srinagar”. Resonating T S Eliot’s “Burnt Norton”, set against Zbignew Herbert’s wall of “dense ivy of executions” and a continuation to Osip Mandelstam’s “We shall meet again”, the poem is a subversion of the romantic genre, “re-imagined as a highly political genre, with brutality, violence and subjugation at its heart”. (Chambers, 91) It “recontextualizes familiar pastoral imagery, orchestrating violent disjunctions in order to unsettle the readers’ assumptions.” (90) Unlike Shelley’s “Skylark” and Keats’ “Nightingale” that attract men through their songs, the horned lark in the poem stays “silent” and will sing only when spring arrives. “…the mountain falcon/ rip(s) open, in mid-air, the blue magpie, / then carry it limp from the talons.” (28-30) It is a land full of soldiers, dead post offices, and a history that remains deaf and a bird that speaks but only in future. The present has nothing but a hope to “meet again” and a vision to “return—forever—and inherit” (50) the land to which they belong.

Song and singing is another metaphor that produces the ambivalent effect of both living and loss—from the songs of Habba Khatoon who sings at the loss of her lover
husband decrying the Mughal ruler Akbar to Begum Akhtar’s heart-wrenching ghazal—
“Every will be here But I” (28, 185) earning her right to die to the chanteuse’s love song in _After the August Wedding_ (239-40) for the married couple. Spilled against this is the brigadier’s brutality when he makes the young boys of Kashmir break “on the racks” so that “their bodies sing…till no song is left to sing.” (55-56, 241) The images of conventional beauty are all nuanced with novel meanings from the modern and a violence ridden land—Roses, Chinar leaves and Saffron— the basic symbols of beauty and delicacy are revoked as images of death, killing, burning and bloodshed due to the virtue of their fiery redness and also because of their abundant presence at the time of killing and destruction. The songs range thematically and in formalistic styles but they connect basic human emotions of love, marriage, loss and freedom and also death across time and space through a transnational poetics. (Ramzani, 2006)

The Indian film industry famous for its singing and dancing and its melodramatic musicals was a thriving industry during the nineteen seventies, eighties and nineties. Shahid, extremely fond of Bollywood, have made a lavish use of the images collected from Bollywood movies, songs, metaphoric gestures. He sometimes rely on these songs and ghazals to convey his emotions— “Ghalib’s ghazal” (270) Makhdoom’s translation—‘Ghazal’ (228) Faiz’s “Memory” (263) Ahmad Faraz’s ‘As Ever’ (345) and the “Film Bhajan Found on 78 RPM” (226) are clear examples of heavy loans from film and music industry to convey his emotions that were fed upon a tradition of melodrama and histrionic display. The ghazals were available to Shahid mostly through sung version of Begum Akhtar, Rasoolan Bai or other popular singers. This triggers the close associations established between the song, singing, night, stages, radio, ghazal, and the Urdu poets—
Ghalib, Begum Akhtar, Faiz, and Faraz, gramophones and Kashmir. They come tied in a string of memory and create a reservoir for the poet to plunge in and recreate himself anew. Memories in Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry work in an interdependent way. They represent a lost time and beauty of living but they while being reproduced in the text remake the man and reproduce the beauty of that living.

The few human figures mentioned in the volume function both personal as well as universal symbols—Rizwan, Hans Christian Ostro, Grandmother, Vir, the unnamed muezzin, and the nameless correspondent. These figures from home bring the text closer to life. The real and the imaginary comingle to create that space where the poet dwelled. The poet-figure in the volume deserves some attention as the victim of the aftermath as well as an onlooker. Shahid position as a “beloved”—the insider, the lover, the One is contrasted with his stance of the “Witness”—the detached onlooker, the outsider who knows better and sees all but is never hit by the violence. The equivocality of the name’s meaning ‘Shahid’ suggests the dual position the poet held. The correspondent, like the poet figure, is a link to the outside world to share the pain of the Kashmiri people who remains uninvolved. The distanced poet figure is a recurrent image that is reinforced by the use of radios, stages, flights, taxis and travel— mediums that help him in staying connected to the land. But the modern world with its science and development has an abundance of mediums. The poet thus travels between the old home and the new home both physically and emotionally. This modern diaspora who remains in touch with the domestic political situation is the one who is responsible for creating the symbol out of his land—the chinars, the saffron, the paisleys, the muezzin, the wick clays, the mausoleum of Sufi saints all become Kashmir because the poet’s memory is constituted by it.
One of the pertinent issues that many critics point in diaspora literature is the reimagining of the nation/homeland with the help of the text by a diaspora poet. The diaspora poet/writer through a recollection of his memory reproduces the events, people customs, rituals, language conventions in his text thus leading to a consolidation of that idea. By reimagining their nation, the poet strengthens the notions of home and homeland, thus contributing to the discourse of a nationalistic identity. Shahid's *The Country Without a Post Office* volume does this. The poems reveal his fascination with the land pre-1990s when the situation in the Valley was not into active militancy. His involvement in the affairs of the homeland gets intensified when his friends are killed, his neighbors have to leave the Valley, his family cannot reach out to him, and even his own house seems to have become an army bunker. However, there remains an inherent contrast in the situation. The poet is able to write because of the virtue of his ‘Outsider’ status. This is a moment of ambivalence—he is involved as it is his land, his family, his people but the fact that he is unable to experience the pain himself, that he is not a party to the real suffering himself, and that the news of the home reaches to him via reports and letters sidelines him as an outsider. The fact, though saving the poet from real danger, is also painful due to the emotional vulnerability and a hollowness of not belonging. It is in this stage that the re-imagining of the nation happens. The use of contrasting imagery, of bifocal intensity, and the images of exquisite beauty pitted against terrible violence bring the formulation of the nation that was burning. The distance is repeatedly projected through the images of flights taken, the trip from airport to home in closed cars, the notion of the son returning to find the lost home, the letters written to him in “far off lands”.

Nowhere but here does the poet features fully as the “exile of privilege” (Aijaz Ahmed, 85) The position of privilege saves him from pain but it makes him an exile nonetheless.

The culture of Kashmir has always had a mixed religious component and the people have mostly been open to the new ideas and permeations from other sources of knowledge. This idea of the homeland increasingly fosters the poet’s identity as a Kashmiri-Muslim poet which takes a definitive shape from this point onwards. The disrupted land is an antecedent to the poet’s identity. It provides a form and a force to the poet. The trouble in the land implores his solidarity and affinity. The people who suffered are his people, the land in his jeopardy is his land, and the culture destroyed is his culture, the loss is his loss. The poet takes upon himself the onus of preserving it, singing of the beauty.

Identity is not just a matter of given in life. Family, geography, history, and social position are the fixed determinants of constructing any identity. It is also decided by what one does and by the interaction a person has with other people. For the postcolonial subject the givens—history, geography are problematic as they have been subjected to violence by the colonizers. For the diaspora even the family is at distance. Hence, the diasporas always clutch on to people, events, places that provide the semblance of home or family. When Kashmir is lost to violence and state repression, Shahid's source of comfort confines to his family. In the apparent event of the absence of any partner of his own, the Mother becomes the closest to him. However, even while the valley was adjusting to the new routine post the unrest, Shahid's mother is diagnosed with brain tumor. She moves to New York to get treated for it but passes away after a year’s battle in April 1997 (Epitaph to Rooms Are Never Finished)
The mother’s death ruptured the domestic peace and harmony and the pain demanded an expression that was both majestic and rooted. As a diaspora, Shahid had lost his home much earlier when he made the physical movement to USA, then the sense of the rootedness and harmony that home offers was destroyed by political aggression in the land, however it was ultimately the death of the mother robbed him of the real sense of home. Vijay Mishra finds the true cause of the diaspora’s mourning: “the (ideal) loss persists because there is no substitution for it in the ‘new object of love’ (in the nation-state in the case of diaspora)” (8). It may be pertinent here to mention that in Indian culture, the mother is considered the most important unit of the family. A constant source of warmth, love, welcome, the mother has relentless dedication towards the family and is an epitome of sacrifice of personal happiness for the welfare of the family. Shahid apparently held a close relationship with his mother. The mother features in his poetry as a symbol of warmth, culture, domesticity, love and ethnicity, from the earliest volumes. She, along with God, home and homeland fill in for the ‘Beloved’ in his poetry. In a complex tie-up of these beloved figures, the loss of one is recounted as the loss of all—

…Mother,

They asked me, So how’s the writing? I answered My mother

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

sufficed except the promise, fading, of Kashmir

and the cries that reached you from the cliffs of Kashmir
(across fifteen centuries) in the hospital. Kashmir,

She’s dying! How her breathing drowns out the universe

As she sleeps in Amherst. (Lennox Hill, 32-39, 248)

Her suffering due to her illness made him suffer equally. This love and suffering becomes a part of his poetic consciousness and the result is the elegy Lennox Hill followed by the series of poems that qualify as the Oriental elegiac rendition, Marsiya. The employs metaphors from the Judeo-Islamic history, intercalating it with the history of Kashmir. The loss of the mother and the motherland is the loss of the pillar identifying features. Shahid, therefore loops in other foundational components that would sustain him in the event of such tragic breakdown. The metaphor, developed at several levels in the two volumes, CWPO and RNF, pairs the atrocities suffered by the people of Kashmir with the atrocities suffered by the family of Hussain. Karbala was a battle fought in the 7th century AD between the despot of Kufa (present day Iraq) Yazid and the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, Hussain ibn Ali. The battle fought for ten days on the barren heath of Karbala is recounted as an episode of cruelest destruction of men who fought for righteousness and truth. The soldiers from Hussain’s army who were very few as against Yazid’s army, were not allowed any respite of water and even women and children were tortured and disgraced. The battle was eventually lost with Hussain fighting till his last breath and killed after several treacherous blows. This battle has a central position in the Shia collective memory who follow a ritual of mourning for the martyrs of Karbala expressing their solidarity. The bloodshed in Kashmir was as ruthless and gory as it was in Karbala (available to the poet through the collected memory in annual Muharram
mourning meets and rituals) and those who could not be a part of the battle or were of later generations mourn the brutal killings in epic tropes, just as the poet does for Kashmir. To this unique yoking of two killings and mourning gets added the mourning of the mother’s death. This was a personal blow to Shahid; the home was lost doubly now. The warmth and comfort that the mother provides to a family is unparalleled; with the loss of the essence of homeland in the destruction of cultural plurality and the loss of the essence of home in the death of the mother, the poet’s pain reaches a new pitch. This brings in an utter sense of isolation and an onset of the ‘no-return’ condition. Hoshang Merchant in his essay titled ‘Agha Shahid Ali’s gay nation’ (2009) remarking on the strong bond that the gay poets have with their mothers “Gay poets are mother fixated...” (175), theorizes that “for the queer poet home means mother, the return could only mean a return to the womb” (178). Thus, establishing the ‘alienation’ of the queer and the perpetual state of exile he resides in.

Rooms Are Never Finished published in the year 2000 was a finalist to the prestigious National Book Award in America. Shahid’s poetry achieved a flavour unprecedented both in his own oeuvre as well as in the Indian English poetry. The death of the mother brings him face to face with certain rituals that he or the family would not practice generally. The offering of prayers for the death body—‘namaz-e-janaza’ and then the days of ritualistic mourning, the third day ‘teeja’ or the tenth day ‘dusvi,’ the singing of traditional elegies and Marsiya ‘nauha and marsiya’ in the Shia household become sources of poetic inspiration while also being an expression of grief. There is a sense of awakening, a different knowledge that instills in the poet the sense of exile that becomes apparent in this volume. The history of Karbala is a core to the Shia identity,
Shahid’s inclusion of that history in his poetry while providing a new idiom to English poetry also towards his recourse to the Islamic culture and theology. The religion was abandoned long ago when the servant lost his footwear outside the mosque. (“Notes Autobiographical-1”, BA, 20) In The Half-Inch Himalayas Shahid traces a history of his ancestors who fed on Western philosophers— Plato, Marx and Freud and drank wine. His involvement with religion, religious rituals and faith began only when he experiences death and destruction in his homeland Kashmir. The importance of the religious rituals foreground when they are set against the backdrop of the death of his mother. Shahid's mother who was as religious and she was modern, is thus given a farewell in a form that is suitable to her.

Shahid Ali was brought up into a Shia Muslim family and grew up celebrating Muharram every year since childhood, listening to the Marsiyas, the ritualistic mourning for the martyrs of Karbala. The Shias take pride and dutifully adhere to the annual religious indulgence like weeping, breast-beating, and sometime self-flagellation or simply reciting elegies. They do so to express their sorrow at the brutal butchering of Imam Hussain (Prophet Muhammad’s grandson) and his entire family and also to express solidarity with the leader of the community that had they been present at Karbala they would have certainly joined him in the fight against evil. Since Imam Hussain suffered the brutish treatment meted out to him and his family so that the coming generation is free of the misrule of Yazid, mourning is the least they can do. To many Shias, the precedent of mourning the martyrs of Karbala predates the event of Karbala and was set by Adam himself. Adam, as a prophet, had foreknowledge of Karbala, and he mourned for his descendants (through the bloodline of Prophet Muhammad) as much as he mourned for
himself, after being expelled from Paradise. The shedding of tears and acts of mourning are hence integrated into the very essence of human self. From this perspective, Adam’s progeny is fated to carry not his “sin” but rather his tears. Hussain is not only Adam’s progeny but a divine light that emanates from God. God foretold the cosmic proportions of the Karbala tragedy to all the pious prophets and saints who worship Him. Karbala was to be the ultimate battle between the believers and the infidels—a battle that Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ismail, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad fought on various levels. Hussain was the designated final warrior for this battle, and through his sacrifice the legacy of all the prophets would receive the perpetual assurance of safety. In the act of mourning for his mother Shahid has used the formal Marsiya, the Urdu equivalent of the elegy that has its thematic origin in the rendering of the episodes of Karbala and the mourning for Imam Hussain and the other martyrs. Shahid also remembers how the lamentations of Hussain’s sister Zainab was continually and rigorously remembered by his mother and is therefore becomes a part of his own memory of his now dead mother.

The play between history and personal memory is a part of the poetics of Agha Shahid Ali who patterns his personal tragedy with the larger historical and religious frameworks. The subjective and the objective, the recorded and the experiential, memory and history, the distant and the loved ones all feature and interact freely and constantly in the poetry of Shahid to show how common lives can alter the sense of history and how loss and lamentations are a universal rejoinder. The new form and possibility Shahid added to the English poetry by reworking the ancient poetic tradition of Marsiya—a form still used in most Muslim communities, by juxtaposing the bloodshed and killings in Kashmir with the historical episode of Karbala and the loss, lament and pain of his dying
mother with that of Hussain’s sister Zainab, make his personal tragedy with that of Karbala and of the entire Shia community. The religious and historical loss syntaxed with a personal one provides the diaspora poet a consolatory perspective in the process of constructing a new transnational poetics. While the ghazal was the ‘loan’ he was repaying to his twin loyalties of Urdu and English languages, (Ravishig Disunities, 9) the use of the Marsiya form seems a necessary step in the trajectory of the poet’s journey towards self identification and the ultimate communion with the divine will. The Marsiya, like the Ghazal constituted a part of the poet’s social makeup.

In South Asian Muslim communities, this historical battle is kept alive in the memory of Shia followers through an annual socio-religious custom called Majlis during the month of Moharram. The Marsiya is the elegy for the martyr which is sung out in these gatherings and followed by active mourning, raucous weeping, chest-beating and the singing of dirges. Each man, woman and child is implored to weep and cry loudly and expressively. There is expectation and organization that the loss, pain and meaning of the battle are driven home to each person present in these Majlis. The pain expressed in the Marsiya is the utmost a human can experience and emotional release is achieved only through grieving more and more. Not much consolation is offered to the mourners as the loud lamentations are said to bring about a cathartic effect and religiously it is considered a sign of devotion.

The traditional mourning rituals in the Shia community are organized in five to six sections which are different only in terms of the narrative they are taking up. The Majlis, (mourning ritual) usually begins with a 1) Soz; a lament, followed by a 2) Salaam, a salutation to the war heroes, 3) Marsiya, the elegy usually about the death of Imam
Hussain, 4) Zikr; narrative recollection of the events at the war followed by 5) Nauha, a lament song accompanied by rhythmic chest-beating. The ritual usually closes off at this point or may have an extra section called the 6) Ziyarat, where the martyrs of the battle are again remembered and praised for their valor and steadfastness. (Hyder, 2006) The Marsiya is part of the larger narrative framework in a Majlis (gathering of mourners) and the movement of the series is rhythmic for it intends to well up emotions to a crescendo. Over the years, the writers of Marsiya have increasingly been professionals, and the form has gained more poetic elements than being a simple account of the war. Like the Ghazal, Marsiya is also of Arabic-Persian origin and became popular in India during the eighteenth century with poets like Fazl Ali Fazli, Miskin, and Miyan Sikandar (Madhu, 9). The ceremonial singing was called Marsiya-khwani, Marsiya-go’ii and later as Soz-khawni or Nauha-khwani and was usually written in five line stanza, called Mussadas. By nineteenth century, Marsiya having borrowed elements from other Urdu-Persian forms as Masnavi (narrative poetry) and Qasida (panegyric) went through the hands of master poets as Mir, Sauda and Dard, ironically more famous for their ghazals; it slowly evolved in a literary form from a musical one. The Marsiya as a literary form, reached its pinnacle in the 19th century and two poets are considered most important in its development by most scholars of Urdu literary history; Mir Anis (1801-74) and Mirza Salamat Ali Dabir (1803-75) who are credited with perfecting the lamentation into verse poetry, bringing ‘elegiac restraints and dramatic brightness’ (Ali Zaidi, 167), and adapting the Persian model to Indian poetic tradition. The common stanza divisions now established were those of four lines called murabba, five line stanza; mukhammas, or six line stanza--mussaddas. Also popular were Rubai; the four half line stanza and the masnavi, the
rhyming couplet stanzas. The standard Marsiya was more about the components than about formal division. The sub-section had some standard components as noted by Ali Jawad Zaidi in his *History of Urdu Literature*: (i) Chehra (Introduction) (ii) Ruksat (taking leave of Iman Hussain, or of the ladies of the house in relations, to proceed to the battlefield. (iii) Aamad (entry to the battlefield) (iv) Rajaz (chivalrous account of family and self, addressed to the adversary) (v) Jang (combat) also includes the description of the sword and the steed. (vi) Shahadat (martyrdom) (vii) Bain (lamentation) (viii) Dua (invocational epilogue) (160)

Many literary Marsiyas have been non-religious too, yet they employ the same tragic grandeur, epic similes, and elegiac metaphors as does the Karbala ones. Shahid, we thus understand, is merging the meta-narratives into a new transnational/diasporic space. The volume *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001) is punctuated with two long series of poems of which the opening one is *From Amherst to Karbala*. This series has twelve poems patterned on the Marsiya/Majlis format in a formal act of mourning on the death of his mother.

The volume begins with the elegy Lennox Hill, which lends itself to the modern literary Marsiya form content-wise. Structurally it is a canzone of Italian origin, used for ballads and songs, developed by Petrarch. Shahid by adapting this ballad form to sing of sorrow has subjected himself to an ambitious task as a poet. The form and the content are fundamentally contradictory and demand much dexterity from the poet. Setting diverse history and mythology against personal grief in a metonymic weave, Shahid is not only ploughing back to his roots in Kashmir but is also exploring new methods of mourning.
The ‘blizzard-fall of elephants’ and the ‘sirens of Manhattan’ are contrasted against the flute of Krishna (Shahid's favorite God!) and the unmentioned voice of his parent poets Faiz and Ghalib, and are trying to voice the poet’s grief. In the sixty-five lines, the poet capsules the cultural history of his homeland Kashmir. The mother is also the motherland and the poet laments the loss of both. Clubbing disparate allusions from history, mythology and folklore, Shahid invokes the historic Vaishnav (followers of Lord Vishnu/Krishna) and the Shaivic (Lord Shiva) and the Buddhist traditions of the land,

‘The greatest of all footprints is the elephant’s.’ (7, 247)

‘…I, one festival, crowned Krishna by you Kashmir/ listening to my flute.’(21)

‘And where was the god of elephants/ plump with Fate, when tusk to tusk, the universe/ dyed green, became ivory?’ (29-32) and also ‘O Destroyer’ (41)

These traditions have been subjected to destructions by heavy-handedness of the rulers of the land— the autocratic Hun ruler Mihirgula, is one example. Contrasting the Hun ruler against ‘the Merciful of the Universe’ (one of the ninety-nine names given to Allah in Islamic theology) who is implored upon continuously to save the mother as she was, does not bring any solace to the poet. The laments are then directed towards the Sufi saints, known as preservers of culture, of people, who in a unique way had helped mould the rich syncretic culture of Kashmir and were inspiration of hope and divinity of both the Hindus and the Muslims alike. They too are ‘so far away’ that prayers sent to them do not ask them of preservation but of death. ‘Saints, let her die’ is all that the poet could ask of Gods. Utter conscious of the impending sense of doom and closure brings the poetic rendition to a high. The desire was to preserve the beloved mother in the best form.
But there were times, Mother,
while you slept, that I prayed, “Saints let her die.”

Not, I swear, that I wished you to die
but to save you as you were, young, in song in Kashmir
and I, one festival crowned Krishna by you, Kashmir

listening to my flute. You never let gods die (247)

The lament is not just about the loss of the mother but also of the loss of essence, of the beauty and of the past memories, of warmth and cultural plurality. The semantic similarity of mother/motherland is reinforced by the employment of Urdu poetic idioms (‘Then let the universe, / like paradise, be considered a tomb’, ‘My mother/ is my poetry’, For compared to my grief for you, what are those of Kashmir…) (248-9) Shahid's elegy is thus directed to the land and to his mother where both are symbols and correspond to the schema of the Beloved figure that features in his poetry. The Urdu poetry, specially the ghazal (the form Shahid was working on simultaneously) has an absentee figure, the Beloved, to which all the expression is directed. This figure is the cause of all of poet’s love, yearning, pain, happiness and suffering for ‘she’ (as it generally is understood to be) is an unattainable ideal and the lover is constantly mourning for union with her. This Beloved is like the post-structural absence, an ever-evasive ideal. In Shahid’s poetry, this ideal shift between both the mother and the motherland, the two entities that were a major component of Shahid's identity and now the former is dead and the latter destroyed. In his introductory note to his translation of Urdu poems of Faiz, The Rebel’s Silhouette (1991)
Shahid describes how the beloved could mean, ‘friend, woman, God, or as in the case of Faiz, ‘revolution’. He has added to the shifting nuance of the beloved, the mother figure too. The ‘beloved’ figure evolves from the motherland (CWPO, 1998) to the Mother (RANF, 2001) and in the later volumes this figure assumes a divine nature, hinting at the God vs Satan, God vs Human dichotomy. In Lennox Hill, it is only the mother who the poet is concerned about, “Mother, / they asked me, So how’s the writing? I answered My mother/ is my poem” (248). The rival figure is the Dark God/gods/Saints/God— semantic range hinting at cultural plurality Shahid was a product of. Imploring upon these high gods, the poet tries to protect his mother from dying painful death. The mother is dying like the motherland Kashmir. For a man exploring his identity through poetry, the physical separation from mother and motherland draws him away from his roots and in an antithesis to the Keatsian dictum, Shahid establishes a new poetics ‘Pain is truth’. In situating his identity in his poetry and his poetry in the metaphorical frames of Ishmael and Karbala, the rebellion of Satan, the anguish of Majnoon, and the exile of Lorca, Faiz and Mahmoud Darwish, Shahid has found the seams of universal anguish and exile in his poetry. Shahid's own exile is matched against that of his dying mother and that of his mother is the same as the exile of Hussain’s sister Zainab. By replicating the formal structure and the emotional grandeur of the Marsiya, Shahid is eulogizing his mother in a most reverent manner.

Capped by the “Lennox Hill”, the ‘From Karbala to Amherst’ series lends itself more to the structure of memory than that of the Majlis. It however, corresponds to the thematic structure of the Marsiya as the formal structure of Marsiya is not a necessarily strident condition. It may be written in couplets or quatrains or a repetitive rhyme. It is the
use of hyperbole and epic similes that lend flavor to the Marsiya. The history of the
Karbala is detailed by the poet in the first poem of the series “Karbala: A History of ‘the
House of Sorrow’” for his American readers. By placing the narrative focal on Jesus
Christ, the poet is trying to make accessible to the Western reader the esoteric Islamic
history:

Jesus and his disciples, passing through the plain of Karbala, saw "a herd of
gazelles, crowding together and weeping." Astonished, the disciples looked at their Lord.
He spoke, "At this site the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) will one
day be killed." And Jesus wept. "Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain
of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain." …. For just "as Jesus went to
Jerusalem to die on the Cross," Hussain "went to Karbala to accept the passion that had
been meant for him from the beginning of time” (RANF, 2-17, 250)

The prose poem in a series that connect different times, goes on to describe how
Ishmael’s martyrdom was deferred by supplication of a ram for “a great redeeming
sacrifice”, for both Ishmael and Abraham and Ishmael had submitted to the Divine will;
and how Abraham too had wept for he knew that the redeeming sacrifice would be the
martyrdom of Hussain at the battle of Karbala. The trajectory of mourning established, the
poet only has the singular project of mourning and lamenting. Loss, then becomes a part
of history, of identity.

Mourners beg for water—the martyr's thirst. They wound their
heads and "the green grassy field where their processions end "becomes
bloodied and looks like a field of poppies”. And my brother knows he will
die. He has himself put on his shroud. A deluge of weeping follows. I remember since childhood. One majlis stays— Summer 1992 — when for two years Death had turned everyday Kashmir into some family’s Karbala. We celebrated Ashura with relatives, in the afternoon—because of the night curfew. That evening at home, my mother was suddenly in tears. I was puzzled, then very moved: Since she was a girl, she had felt Zainab's grief as her own. (Karbala, 253)

The tragedy enters his own home through the connection of Hussain’s sister Zainab, whose exile and elegies were felt deeply by the poet’s mother. This poem “Zainab’s Lament in Damascus” written on the patterns of a Nauha is stitched in the poet’s personal Marsiya as it threads the mother’s memory. The difficulty/advantage of using the Karbala metaphor by Shahid has been pointed out by one of the early critics of Shahid, Nishat Zaidi:

Since a metaphor is an interactional device based on the connection established between the two apparently dissimilar terms, much in the working of a metaphor depends on the reader's knowledge of the discontinuous term. The reader, thus, becomes an active participant in the decoding of a metaphor. The target audience of Agha Shahid Ali (mainly English and American) being unfamiliar with the Karbala and its significance for Muslim psyche, it was imperative for him to connect it to them and he does so not just by supplying information but by creating empathy. He begins the story of Karbala with Jesus’ lament over the future death of Hussain and draws parallel of the ritualistic memorializing of
Hussain in Muharram by Shi'as with the "Calvary" in Christianity.

(Karbala, 159)

The next poem “Summers of Translation” is written in what Daniel Hall calls the “magpie” (VS, 19) mode. Reminiscent of the time Shahid translated the Urdu poet Faiz with his mother, the poem is a play of several time and space interjections. The poet’s conscious flows like a stream from one episode to the other— the translation of the Faiz poem to the film bhajan (Hindu devotional song) the mother-son duo was fond of, to the mother’s longing for her home in the northern plains to the political upheaval of Kashmir to the singer Begum Akhtar to the lamentations of a previous Majlis. These are ‘moments of being’ and thus disparate episodes are connected through one consciousness; “I who of passion always made a holocaust” “Mother/ you are “the breath drawn after every line”

In “Above the Cities”, the crescendo of pain has reached its peak and the moment of the mother’s death is described in short painful gasps of utterance . . . . For

over Hussain’s mansion the night that’s dropped is

leading the heart in //

one jade line unbroken to Doomsday: She is
gone!—the nurse’s words. And again the flat line

(She is gone!), for in the ICU green, the

monitor’s pulse was //
but the heart unable to empty itself. (261)

Shahid's use of metaphor and language is either colloquial or hyperbolic. At places he is highly evocative and his craft of charging ordinary words with potency remains understated. The journey from the hospital bed to airport transits to their home in Srinagar, Kashmir is the same as that which Hussein’s family went through after the battle; Zainab, Hussein’s sister among other women was made to walk behind the army carrying the severed heads spiked on lance of her brother Hussein and other martyrs also close family member. Shahid too has to carry the sad burden of the mother’s coffin from city to city as he goes back home to bury her.

…I’m piling

Doomsday on Doomsday

over oceans, continents, deserts, cities.

Airport after airport, the plane is darkness

plunged into the sunrise...

(“Above the cities”, 260)

The mother’s memories are revoked along with the lost cultural history of the homeland. The engaged passion has no linear progression. The syntax correspond to the paradigmatic occurrence of reminisces and to the small chest-beating gaps of the Marsiya. A common Marsiya trope is when the mourners recall how the women and men who supported Hussain cry out in prayers to the Almighty to have mercy on His own followers and spare them the thirst, bloodshed and torture of looking at their own family members
being slaughtered; Shahid too evokes, the generous, just, protector qualities of the God by quoting Quranic verses “The lamp kindled from a blessed tree” is a reference to verses from Quran, Surah An-Nur (24:35). It is one of the most famous verses where the nature of God’s being is described; Allah is a light in the niche lit by the olive tree that belongs to no terrain—implying that Allah is the constant source of faith, life, resource, hope and he is never partial nor unjust—the hurt son is thus recalling his lord and reminding Him of His own virtues of protection, restoration. But the inevitable does happen. The foreknowledge of Karbala is paralleled with the foreknowledge of the mother’s death (old age, brain tumor) and grief of loss of the mother melts into the archetypal separation of all lovers “Doomsday had but...” (a translational of Ghalib’s couplet, and then into the plain of Karbala “So nothing but Karbala’s Slaughter/ through my mother’s eyes at the majlis..” and then the burning of Kashmir. The tragedy of the son is as painful as that which fell on the house of Prophet’s grandson—conveyed by the constant reiteration of “over Hussain’s mansion” “O bleeding mansion, what night has fallen?” (260-2). There are some densely tragic metaphors that the poet uses to convey his colossal loss; ‘coffin holding coffin’ ‘doomsday on doomsday’, ‘the plane is darkness plunged into the sunrise/ the sun died’. Towards the end of the poem the sentences become short (‘She is gone’) and broken. The narrative of the mother’s dying in the hospital-- these final moments are so traumatic that the poet keeps leaning on the historical and cultural losses suffered all over the world to frame his pain.

The Airport poems, New Delhi Airport and Srinagar Airport are slow narrations unfolding the story further like the Zikr. Heavily interspersed with Urdu idiomatic tropes and rhetoric, these poems further the lover-beloved, and the martyrdom narration. Unlike
the devoted mourners, the poet is accusing God of indifference, sadism and violence. “…Scriptures breaks, breaks down to confess His violence…” (“New Delhi Airport”, 264). It breaks into a momentary lapse of memory—a film song favorite to the mother is recalled in full. (“Film Bhajan Found on a 78 RPM”). A lyric of pure devotion from Radha to Lord Krishna, is a lost memory and now stands in antithesis to the poet’s desperation. God, the ninth poem in the series can fairly be treated as the Salavat in the Majlis where the mourners, send praise and benediction to the martyrs of Karbala, to Prophet Muhammad and to Allah. The poem also resonates the final moment of departure of a deceased from their house in the open coffins when the people gathered around break into a chant of Tauhid, (There is no god but God and Muhammad is His Prophet). But the calls to the Almighty have gone unheard and the god who was implored as the Savior is realized to be ‘the final assassin’.

God then is only the final assassin.

........no stars shine

To reaveal Him as only the final assassin.

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

In the dark the marble of each tomb grows skin.

I tear it off. I make a holocaust. I underline

God is the only, the only assassin

......................................(3-15, 269)
The use of “dark blue God” that is, Krishna, can also be seen in similar light. Krishna as a symbol stands for many things-- unlimited beauty, knowledge, strength, fame, riches and *rasa-leela* (play of love) as well as political strategist, a savior and a fighter against evil. The bhajan (Hindu devotional hymn) that Shahid stitches in his elegy speaks of the desperation of Krishna’s consort Radha who is longing for a union, for a consolation from her “dark blue God”. The mother’s death seems to be a part of his *Leela* (play) “…do not hide yourself merely to break my heart…” (266). Shahid wants the Gods to end their play in his land and in his life. But there is an ongoing tussle evident in Ali’s stance on the perceived capabilities of those Gods he keep invoking in his poems. The injustice of the God/gods in destroying his beautiful homeland and more so, in making his mother suffer is a cause of desperation:

Thus I swear, here and now, not to forgive the universe

that would let me get used to a universe

without you. She, she alone, was the universe

as she earned, like a galaxy, her right not to die,

Defying the Merciful of the Universe,

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

of drug-bound time. And where was the god of elephants,

plump with Fate, when tusk to tusk, the universe,
dyed green, became ivory? Then let the universe,

like Paradise, become a tomb.

*(Lennox Hill, 247-8)*

“The Fourth Day” marks the end of active mourning for the deceased. The one line stanza with an emphasis on the tradition of weeping and an iteration of the doomsday is similar to chest-beating *Matam* (dirge). History, tragedy and poetry are seamed into one weave. The translations of the two most cherished Urdu poets, *Memory* by Faiz Ahmed Faiz and “Ghalib’s Ghazal”, included in the narrative reflect their importance as a part of the emotional structure of the poet and his mother. Use of Meer, Ghalib brings in the sense of eighteenth century Mughal decadence. The lavish loans from Ghalib, Meer, Faiz, Faraz with their sense of loss, and longing, of desire encases the poet’s own loss. *By the Waters of the Sind* though has no mention of Karbala, yet it is patterned on the Rajaz (account of family and self). Contrary to the high emotional charge exuded at the end of the *Marsiya-khwani*, the poem is a sober philosophical contemplation on ‘separation’s geography’ (276). This brings an inversion to the popular practice. The diaspora poet may never be expected to follow traditional word—the post modern subjectivity enters the form. Like the river Indus, his mother lost her identity in a foreign land, but the poet knows that it “will become in Pakistan, the Indus again”. Political undertones hint towards the age-old animosity of between the states of Kashmir and Punjab and of new-found kinship between Kashmir and Pakistan. The moon, a common motif in Urdu poetry as the *other* epitome of beauty; the beloved being the first, and a rival of the Beloved, is thus
'sentenced to Black Water' and not allowed to “shine so hauntingly out" “on an earth from which (the mother has) vanished” (278).

Shahid is thus constantly trying to make up for the losses of ‘missed relationships’ and ‘unshared histories’ in his poetry. There is a continuous effort by the poet to keep connected to the past and that is how he moves forward in tradition. Shahid inherited his theory of poetry from T S Eliot who demands the poet to be aware of the past tradition to be able to make a new contribution to it. One of Shahid's techniques was a telescoping of two different time zones in order to show how life is a continuum lived in small moments. History, for Shahid Ali, is as much a part of the present as he understands the present will be to future. The poet is conscious of his art and the artifact he builds up by assembling pieces of diverse experiences in human consciousness. The history of Kashmir, and of Karbala provide him the suitable metaphor to translate his loss, nostalgia and his exile and find his position in the larger tradition of aesthetic. A K Ramanujan (1929-1993), a contemporary Indian English poet, who is generally pitted against Agha Shahid Ali as Indian-American diaspora, is credited by Bruce King for his “realistic debunking of the romanticization of traditional Tamil culture” (King, 210). Agha Shahid Ali perceives it from the other angle— his is a debunked romanticization of the post modern Islamic culture. He, as a voluntary diaspora, sees exile not as a physical condition but as an existential condition—a condition of life. He traces his sense of exile to Iblees (Satan)—the first lover of God—to Adam, the first man and to Ishmael, the first Muslim prophet. (Ishmael is called the first Muslim prophet because in the genealogical split between the Jews/Christians and the Muslims emerges post Ishmael. The Jews hail Isaac, brother of Ishmael, as the heir to Abraham unlike the Muslims who trace their lineage to Ishmael.)
Shahid like them continually seeks a reunion with the Beloved/God. In constant narration and quoting of Islamic history—even verses from the Quran, Shahid tries to fit his grief in the larger framework. He also establishes how pain and suffering is a part of the divine plan and how like all true lovers of God (Christ, Abraham, Ishmael and Hussein) he too is suffering for His whims. The defiance becomes more vocal and structured in the last volume, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* (2003) but in the present volume, the poet is going through the *purgatory* and the suffering demands tropes as intense as Karbala. Shahid’s poems apprehend that the faith, especially for an Oriental mind, remains at the core of human existence. This, however, is an impossible condition for the exile. There remains ambiguity on the relevance of God and his power to hold the centre in the event of loss. The diaspora, the postcolonial, the post modern has the curse/blessing of ambivalence, of alienation and of an existential quest. There is a celebration of the break from old convention and multiplicty of traditions. God, faith, religion, family, history, nation and cultural unity only provide a semblance of comfort and form to the poet. And yet the ambiguity prevails when there is a constant movement towards these well-established notions. The diaspora, then has to make his negotiations. The loss of physical geography entails the loss of a shared language, culture and history throwing the migrant poet on an unfamiliar terrain. The destruction of that home and land shatters him to the core instill the exile notions. All important constituents of identity are lost or destroyed. The only respite available to him is in memory and poetry.
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