Chapter 3
Existence
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The poetry of Agha Shahid Ali has some persistent themes that can be found in all his volumes; home, homeland, nostalgia, loss, longing, involvement with languages and cultures. However, some major themes emerge in the posthumously published volume *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* (2003) converging the earlier themes into a broader existential concern of life and living. Most of the old themes find place in the last volume with an added elaboration or nuance, ideas about home and homeland concretize while histories and historical instances are explored to complete the formation of the poet’s identity as a Kashmiri-American poet. The knowledge of his approaching death due to brain tumor throws him into turmoil of doubt, denial and skepticism. The poet Shahid, a non-practicing Muslim in his personal life, faces an internal battle and his relationship with death, with organized religion, and his own faith in god acquires the central concern of the last volume. The English ghazal comes almost as an epiphany to Shahid, who had been groping for a suitable form. Shahid had been working with strict European metrical forms for many years when he decided to venture into the ghazal. The resultant harvest not only suited Shahid's poetic temperament but also provided a new form of expression to the American poets.

The last volume thus is important at the levels of both form and the content and both have been taken up in the following discussion to reveal how closely associated the form is to the content and how Shahid's poetic genius comes to full flowering in working with the ghazal form in English. The poet while charting a territory for his own self,
brings a gift to the American/English poetry by providing them a new way of expression and by familiarizing them with the rules of the game.

The volume Call Me Ishmael Tonight forms a finale to the poet’s oeuvre in many ways. The content of the final poems also adapt perfectly to the concerns of a poet who was a man of multiple cultures and traditions. The ghazal with its thematic history of love, longing, loss and a tradition of skepticism towards social conventions, organized religion as well as the Divine Will provided the poet a ground on which he could situate his own tussle of faith and doubt. It was however, the genius of Shahid as a poet and his compulsion as an ‘exile of privilege’ to find a suitable tenor for his poetry. The ghazal comes to Shahid as a form of consummation of his life-long struggle to make a niche for the Oriental poetic sensibility and metaphor, and is possibly the best poetic form that could do justice to his personality. The ghazal offered immense possibilities to a poet of Oriental roots but Occidental routes to explore his multiple loyalties, to express his polymorphic, variegated self in its structural arbitrariness of the different sher, but a qafiya that drives home the philosophy, the wisdom or the emotion of the couplet/poet persona. The ghazal also has a long tradition of love, loss, mourning, and extravagant emotionality, and an ambiguously gendered address to the lover/beloved. All this provided a fertile ground to Shahid to situate his own personal dilemmas and identity politics. Shahid in turn gave the Oriental form a new home, a new field in American/English poetry. By bringing the form to America and popularizing it amongst the American poets, Shahid was returning the favors that he felt the two sides of the globe had privileged him with. In his Introduction to the translation of Faiz’s Urdu poems The Rebel’s Silhouette (1991), Ali mentions that though Urdu is his mother tongue, English
was his first language as he used English for “all practical and creative purposes”. Shahid Ali entered the American literary scene as a man of two “nearly equal loyalties” (Rebel’s Silhouette, 1991, 18), he felt he had to repay the loan of one language to the other and took upon himself the daunting task of teaching his American colleagues what a ‘ghazal’ truly is, in spirit and in form. This becomes a life-long project to Shahid who worked slowly to bring the form in the mainstream American poetry. He, today stands as the proponent of the ghazal in the West and has earned credit from noteworthy critics and poets themselves for correcting the American idea about the ghazal as was introduced by Adrienne Rich.

As a form the ghazal has ancient roots. It emerged in seventh century Arabia from the polythematic panegyric qasida to which it was an “amorous prelude”. Suzanne Stetkevych in the Introduction to the Early Islamic Poetry and Poetics calls ghazal “little step-child” of the qasida in the classical Arabic period (Intro, xxi). From there it made its way into Persian and Urdu languages; however, German, Hebrew, Spanish, Azeri, Pashto and Hindi languages can also boast of a tradition in ghazal.

Written in two line stanzas called she’r, (not couplet-- because only the first two lines of the ghazal rhyme) the ghazal follows a strict rhyme and refrain scheme. In fact, it is the repetition of the refrain in every second line that forms a major qualification of the ghazal. Each ghazal has a minimum of four to five she’r which may be and generally are thematically independent. The first she’r, called the matla, sets the rhyme (or qafiya as it is called in Urdu) and the (radif or) refrain used in both lines. In the subsequent she’r, the qafiya and radif is used in only the second line. What stands unique about the ghazal is that each she’r stands as a complete poem (sometimes a story) in its own- there are no run-throughs, no enjambments. The ghazal may have ten stanzas or she’r and each of
them may be talking about a variety of emotions or engagements and yet the involvement is driven home back and again with the reverberation of the rhyme (qafiya) and refrain (radif). All the lines have same metrical length and employ the same beher, which is the “syllabic system for maintaining consistency in line lengths” (Ravishing Disunities, 2000, 183)

Agha Shahid Ali has talked in great length about the “seeming arbitrariness” (Ravishing Disunities, Introduction, 10), the disunities of the ghazal. There is no maximum length of a ghazal. There is usually no narrative unity, no development of thought and one ghazal may have aasha’ar (plural for she’r) that are intense, playful, comical, flirtatious, sorrowful or existential in turn. Except for the first sher (matla) that sets the qafiya and radif scheme and the last she’r-the maqta- which usually carries the name of the poet, the rest of the couplets can be easily shuffled, re-arranged or even snatched away without changing the meaning of the ghazal. To Ali, the ghazal is like a necklace of gems- each stone has its own shine but strung together it makes a separate beautiful piece. (2)

The ghazal with its formal strictness and arbitrary content incubated in Ali’s mind for a long time and suited Ali best. Agha Shahid Ali reached the culmination point of ‘English ghazal’ after years of chiselling, pruning and experimenting with the English language/poetry so as to make it accommodative of the Urdu emotions as well as the Urdu metrical form. There were three stages through which the ghazal passed under the hands of Shahid Ali, to reach the culmination point of Call Me Ishmael Tonight. When Shahid moved to America, he felt a certain sense of loss and “cultural snobbery” (RS, xii) to realise that the American poets were completely unaware of its structural or thematic
concern and would call any poem with dis-jointed stanzas as a ghazal. Shahid had, in ambiguous terms, indicted the American poetess Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) of misrepresenting the ghazal by making it seem arbitrary and random to the American poets. He, therefore, took the task of familiarising about the ghazal upon himself. In the introduction to Rebel’s Silhouette, Shahid admits that he took up the translation of Faiz out of a poetic ego as felt that he owed the American poetic fraternity a debt to let them know about one of the most popular sub-continental Urdu poets. To the post-partition Kashmir, Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1911-1984) was the greatest literary name. He was a political revolutionary and an exiled poet and had transformed the stock figure of the ‘beloved/god’ by extending the metaphor of the archetypal Beloved from woman/lover/God to Revolution. Shahid had internalized Faiz at an early age. His father recited the poems to him from a very young age and Shahid confesses that he could not understand them at all. Years later, Begum Akhtar’s ghazal renditions in intricate Indian ragas made Ali ponder over the genius of Faiz and he found himself in love with both the ghazal and its writer; he had been mesmerised by the singer already! Shahid Ali felt a deep kinship with Faiz and thought it was his duty to make him known to the Western world. He liked to imagine himself in a better position to translate Faiz (as compared to Victor Kiernan and Naomi Lazard, who had already come out with their respective translations of Faiz) because he felt a greater authority in understanding the cultural nuances of the stock phrase/images that frequent the Urdu ghazal.

“What were these cultural differences? I presume Lazard had to learn the nuances of images that would seem too lush to an American poet—images that recur shamelessly in Urdu poetry, among them the moon, the rose, the
moth, the flame. She needed to learn their modern implications as well as their uses over the centuries, a formidable task. For example, the Beloved—an archetype in Urdu poetry—can mean friend, woman, God. Faiz not only tapped into these meanings but also extended them so that the beloved could figure as the revolution. The reader begins to infer, through a highly sensuous language, that waiting for revolution can be as agonising and as intoxicating as waiting for one’s lover. How is the translator to get all of this across? (RS, xiv)

Faiz was one of those rare poets like Pablo Neruda or Garcia Lorca or Robert Frost and Whitman who were popular amongst both the masses as well as the academic circles. His poetry had created a lot of stir for he had completely revolutionised the Urdu ghazal—Ghalib was the last tall figure of ghazal; the theme of his ghazal and of all its practitioners up till Faiz had been love, longing and tragedy—Faiz had all this but with an angle – he had taken the love poetry to a completely different level by making revolution his Beloved.

A glimpse of your face was evidence of springtime.

The sky, wherever I looked, was nothing but your eyes.

If you’d fall into my arms, Fate would be helpless.

All this I’d thought, all this I’d believed.

But there were other sorrows, comforts other than your love.

....
Bitter threads began to unravel before me

As I went into alleys and in open markets

Saw bodies plastered with ash, bathed in blood.

This too deserves attention.

*(Don’t Ask Me, RS, 5)*

The poem is a translation of one of Faiz’s most widely anthologized poem “Mujhse pehli si mohabbat” (Don’t Ask Me For That Love, 22) where the love of nation, the desire for social reformation overtake the personal love. In the hands of Faiz, the ghazal assumed a different shape altogether. The beloved was no longer captivating enough for the social issues of the period were more pressing. Faiz had witnessed the partition of India, the formation of Pakistan and with it brutalities, bloodshed, political manoeuvrings, indifference to human life and emotions. He lived in a time which had no room for the languor of romantic love and without much fuss he accepts its incapability to provide any replenishment in difficult times. This was one of the reasons why Shahid was so fascinated with Faiz; like Faiz, Shahid too was a disconsolate soul—Kashmir was in flames and had lost much of its cultural beauty with the political disturbance in the land.

The translations were begun in 1989 and came in 1991 when the political turmoil was at its peak. The trouble back home in Kashmir pained Ali immensely and he did what all a poet could—compose and create beautiful poetry. (Seven years later, in 1997, Ali comes out with *Country Without Post-Office* which is the poetic record of the trouble of 1990s Kashmir) Faiz was the befitting therapy for the broken hearts and the impassioned spur for the revolutionary minds. In the eight ghazals out of forty-two translations, the beloved
is an evasive, unattainable object of desire and could almost easily be replaced by revolution.

I didn’t listen when my father

recited your poems to us

by heart. What could it mean to a boy

that you had redefined the cruel

beloved, that figure who already

was Friend, Woman, God? In your hands

she was revolution. You gave

her silver hands, her lips were red.

(“Homage to Faiz”, VS, 57)

But the trans-creation of ghazal into English is almost impossible. It is difficult to hold both the form as well as the content together. Ali, therefore, sagaciously makes the use of free verse and adopted a technique of explanation for his translations.

In “Ghazals of Ghalib” (1994), Aijaz Ahmed notes that good translations like good poetry itself are very much a matter of luck. The task of the translator is to convey in a different language “the whole of the original mind” by rendering not only what the
poem is saying but also “how it is saying whatever it says”. Ahmed started his translation of Ghalib with the clear notion that translation is “approximation” (Intro, vii-xxx). Shahid Ali follows the suit and extends a new arm to it “sometimes explanation may be the best way to translate” (RS, xxiii). However, he was aware of the task that he had set for himself—while Ahmed tried to capture the essence of the Ghalib’s ghazal by providing multiple versions by different poets—Shahid took a different route—he mostly tried to explain the possible nuances of the Urdu original. Certain liberties were taken in his translations by not confining himself to the use of meters and the using explanation as a tool of translation. His methodology is different; he works on elaboration. Ali thought he had a certain authority over Urdu and over Faiz. Out of the forty-two translations of Faiz in Rebel’s Silhouette, some are his famous ghazals—‘Shaam-e-firaq ab na pooch’, (“Ghazal”, 38) ‘dono jahan tere sadqe’ (“Ghazal”, 44), ’dil me ab yun tere bhoole huye gham’ (“Ghazal”, 48). Ali’s translations are now regarded as one of the standard ones but according to his own verdict, he had not done complete justice to Faiz.

This translation of Faiz’s poetry was the first phase of making the grooves of Urdu poetry and English language set in. The process of lending and loaning had started with this volume. Contrary to Ali’s own view that in bringing out a work like Rebel’s Silhouette (1991) he had finally ‘forgotten and forgiven the loan of two languages’, (RS, xxv) it was only the beginning of that process. Shahid prided himself on being a postcolonial product as he felt he was an heir to not one but several cultural legacies—Urdu being the most prominent of these. The experimentation with the Urdu language and its particular poetic sensibility was taken to the next level with the introduction of the strict form of the ghazal into the American scene.
In the year 2000, Ali edits a volume called *Ravishing Disunities*; the disunities are that of the ghazal form—each she’r of the ghazal is independent or disunited but is nonetheless delightful, ravishing. The ‘ghazal’ is like a banyan tree where the various branches grow independently and develop their own roots. The emotions, ideas and experiences of one’s lived life are like the various branches of the banyan- each a different chapter, an episode, an identity. They may grow into an independent tree and yet are connected to a host tree. The ghazal is just the same. The various she’r of the ghazal are each a unit, an episode, sometimes a whole story in itself and are strung together into the ghazal by the force of the rhyme and refrain. The volume is a bouquet of ‘*Real Ghazals in English*’ by 107 American poets. Ali lays down the rules of the ghazal clearly and strictly and the poets have adhered to it more or less. John Hollander tries to capture the essence and technicality of the form in the form:

For couplets the ghazal is prime: at the end

Of each one’s a refrain like a chime: “at the end”

But in subsequent couplets throughout the whole poem,

It’s this second line only which will rhyme at the end.

Two frail arms of your delicate form I pursue,

Inaccessible, vibrant, sublime at the end.
Each new couplet’s a different ascent: no great peak,

But a low hill quite easy to climb at the end.

Now Qafia Radif has grown weary, like life,

At the game he’s been wasting his time at. THE END.

(“Ghazal on Ghazals”, RD, 76)

The spirit of the Urdu ghazal, however, is not evident in most of the pieces. Urdu, to quote Aijaz Ahmed, is “very much a language of abstractions.” The movement in Urdu poetry is always away from concreteness. Meaning is not expressed or stated; it is signified”. The language and its poetry are characterised by condensed, reflective lyricism “verbal complexity” and “metaphorical abstraction”. (Ahmed, Introduction, xv) The word ghazal has its etymological origins in the cry of the wounded gazelle; it also means love cooing to the beloved. Thus the dominant mood of the Urdu ghazal is that of desperation, of constant longing of the beloved, the atmosphere is of “sadness and grief” and the occasion for “genuine grief” (RD, 13). The ghazals of Ravishing Disunities are American poems in Urdu-Persian form. The Americans attempting at the form have not adhered to the Urdu original probably because they are not aware of the cultural history and histrionics that the form carries with itself; they have their own stories to tell.

Agha Shahid Ali, by bringing the ghazal to the American poets, not only injects life to an ancient poetic form but also provides an opportunity to the poets to express their
American ideas, emotions into the strict-yet-disunited form of ghazal. The result of this experiment is varied. Many of the ghazals of the volume are brilliant, erotic and beautiful while some are plain poetry which could as well have been written in any other form. One of the most experimental poets who feature in the volume is Paul Muldoon with his “A Double Ghazal for Seamus Heaney” (119-20) and “The Little Black Book” (117-8) both of which are striking in their adaption of the ghazal to the American voice. Muldoon takes the form of the ghazal as an adept potter and turns it into a beautiful pottery to suit his own needs and aesthetics. Incompliancy with the Oriental notion of the ghazal could be noticed again in the “Black Book” which is not a celebration of his relationships but an affected mention of a philanderer about his string of affairs. It is here that the loan of the two languages, Ali talked of was in active exchange with the fusion of two very divergent cultures. Muldoon completely inverts the notion of the ghazal and makes it compatible with his own need.

The emotion, expression and the language attempted in the ghazals are as varied as its progenitors. There are experiments with the language and expression while some poets have preferred to stick with the Urdu original in both form and content. Several ghazals in the volume are a perfect blend of the theatricality of emotions as expressed in the Urdu ghazal and the experimental or spare postmodern American verse. Craig Arnold, Molly Bendall, Robert Boswell, , Michael Collier, Forrest Gander, Sara Suleri, Daniel Hall, Shelli Smith, John R. Reed, Ron Smith, and many poets of Indian origin—G. S. Sharat Chandra, K. N. Daruwalla, have been successful in striking the right cord, creating the best of blends.
Like the Bhakti poetry in India and the Haiku of Japan, the ghazal too was long in need of re-working—in need of a fresh lease of life and Agha Shahid Ali did just that. The task was easier as well as important to him because he was a practising poet himself and because he was well versed in Urdu poetry and its tradition. His teaching MFA in Creative Writing programmes at various universities in US added to the obligation to familiarise the western world with an Oriental beauty.

Multiplicity is the key feature of a ghazal. So is it of American poetry. The history of American literature shows how assimilative, various and divergent its postcolonial tradition has been. Most poets in America readily received the ghazal as it offered an opportunity to celebrate multiplicity. Shahid only needed to make the rules of the game known clearly and allow his compatriots to handle it in their own way. His attempt was to fit in the form—find out if the oriental form could be adapted to meet the needs of American poetry. The grooves set in with some friction, some adjustment, sometimes oddly, sometimes beautifully. Shahid's virtue here lies in honing the pliability of the English language and in making a strict and demanding form accessible to the poets.

However, under all these efforts, Shahid was constantly trying to find a space for himself in a land that was not his homeland but was nonetheless home. ‘Must we always cook with heartless substitutes? / Caraway for cumin and cloves? And lime for thyme?’ (For Time, VS, 366, 11-12) Faiz’s translations in English and the American ghazals in English were the American spices in Indian recipes. It would remain secondary and untrue, just like the experiences of a diaspora in a First World. It is noteworthy that Shahid at all places is aware that he has the privilege of ‘substitutes’ no matter how heartless it is!
Shahid Ali finally finds his correct expression—the form, the house is oriental, furnished with occidental language and the emotion is that of an in-between, of a diaspora. Ali was finally successful in moulding the language of reason and pragmatism to suit his own character and culture, to express the lushness of an oriental mind. The ghazal provides Ali the necessary and the firm ground on which he could lay the foundations of his diasporic identity.

No language is old—or young—beyond English.

So what of a common tongue beyond English?

I know some words for war, all of them sharp,

But the sharpest one is jung—beyond English.

If you wish to know of a king who loved his slave,

you must learn legends, often sung beyond English.

Go all the way through jungle from aleph to zenith

to see English, like monkeys, swung beyond English.

Could a soul crawl at last unshriveled which

to its “own fusing senses” had clung beyond English?

If someone asks where Shahid has disappeared,

he’s waging a war (no, jung) beyond English.

(“Beyond English”, VS, 361-2)
The English language in Shahid's hand was an avenue of possibilities—unlike major diaspora writers/poet, Shahid never expresses a discomfort with the land, language of people of the migrated nation. There is evidence in the initial stage of a certain sense of transitional loss of leaving behind the comfort of home and adjusting into a new place, however, Shahid with much tact and patience brings in a plethora of cultural tradition and history into the new territory—his ghazals are an evidence of his attitude and effort. The process of making the English language ductile began with Rebel’s Silhouette in 1991. Shahid had ripped open the cloistered syntax, lexicons and tropes of English language and like an adept goldsmith hammered the words into new possibilities, nuances and meanings.

In his own words, Shahid never felt rootless—America was as much a home to him as his birthplace Kashmir. However, the love for his homeland, its people and customs, his cultural, linguistic and ancestral roots held a great sway upon him. Shahid kept hankering for his homeland as he knew that return was not possible anymore. A backward movement for the diaspora is a rare phenomenon, if not altogether impossible. India poets who returned from abroad after spending a major time span included prominent names like R.Parasarthy, Sharat Chandra. But one of the important factors that held Shahid back in America was his status as a sexual minority which made return next to impossible. The nostalgia, homesickness and the memory of home assume an epic dimension as the social conventions back home prevent his return. The ghazal, thus worked as a mental mollification—a metaphorical territory where he could situate himself. The Oriental poetic form thus served at several levels: as a pseudo-homeland to the memory, longing and the nostalgia for the home, as a site for pinning his identity as
well as socio-cultural politics, and also as a vantage point of catering to his poetic vanity. The project of the English ghazal was started in 1990s and the first of these—Tonight, and Arabic were published in the volume *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997), a few more were included in the next volume, *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001) while most of the ghazals complied under *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* were published previously in major poetry journals and magazines. What started as an experimentation of a form with the desire of finding a pad for himself and his memories in the ghazal— moved into full bloom with time, maturity and experiences. Shahid comes a long way into acceptance of his situation—the memories need not find a homeland but themselves become a homeland

Memory is no longer confused, it has a homeland—

Says Shammas: Territorialize each confusion in a graceful Arabic.

(“Arabic”, VS, 225)

With time, he realises that memory need not find a homeland—for it *is* a homeland. As a diaspora, Shahid here has charted a new territory that helps the in-between characters. The condition of non-return always mourned in diaspora literature, is uplifted to a happier situation with the memory ‘territorializing’ the diasporic ambiguity and uncertainty. The two worlds of the diaspora whether it is Urdu and English in case of Shahid or Hebrew and Arabic in case of the Israeli-Arab poet Shammas (b. 1950) find clarity and acceptance in the homeland of memory itself.

Writes Shammas: Memory, no longer confused, now is a homeland—

his two languages a Hebrew caress in Arabic.
Malcolm Woodland explains this difference in Ali’s stance with the passage of time;

…the they embody two stances toward that thematics: one dominated by nostalgia and the desire for return, and one dominated by an anti-nostalgic acknowledgement of cultural hybridity.….this first couplet is not a purely “nativist” artifact: it is written in English; it advocates “return” only in language and memory; and it promises not to eliminate “confusion” but to territorialize it in “a graceful Arabic.” Yet it remains strongly marked by a thematics of nostalgia and return and does not explicitly acknowledge the gaps that divide its content, form, and language. The second passage is a revision of the first (RD 8-10), and takes up an unmistakably hybrid position. Now, Shammas’ search for a homeland leads only to the interstitial territory of two of his languages while being written in the third, thereby affirming a fundamental cultural and linguistic hybridity. In the revision, then, there is a more satisfying (if paradoxical) harmony between the content of the couplet and its dual cultural allegiances (Eastern form, Western language)” (2003, 1-2)

The posthumously published, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals* (2003) can then be read as a summation of Ali’s entire life containing all major as well as the minor preoccupations, his past experiences and thematic ventures. The major themes that run in Ali’s poetic oeuvre are loss and longing, nostalgia, roots, languages, culture,
religious history, the turmoil in Kashmir, the life in America—these are the concern in CMIT too. The volume both in content and in form is a homecoming.

What a desert we met in—the foliage was lush!—

a cactus was dipped into every moonshine of snow.

One song is so solitaire in our ring of mountains,

its echo climbs to cut itself at each line of snow.

When he drinks in winter, Shahid kisses his enemies.

For peace, then, let bars open at the first sign of snow.

("Of Snow", 351)

The ‘echo’ in the ‘ring of mountains’ is that of loss and pain which ‘cuts itself’ in all his verses. The apparently contrasting images of the first she’r correspond to the contrasting condition of Ali’s life. The land may be a desert but the foliage is lush—just like Ali’s own life; he may be far away from his homeland but the poetry that he creates is ‘lush’, beautiful and brimming with his love for the lost land. Elsewhere he writes;

Migrating from me to me the soul asks

a bit seriously: what is our covenant, Bones?

("Bones", 357)

The expression comes to him after years of working, re-working, chiselling, shaving and sifting. The volume is replete in abundance with startling surprises of sheer
beauty where Ali finally pays off the loan of the two languages—Urdu and English—that he felt an equal loyalty to. The two worlds where Ali kept moving physically and mentally, the two worlds where he resided simultaneously, the two worlds that were far apart fuse into one new territory in Ali and in Ali’s poetry.

The hunt is over, and I hear the Call to Prayer

Fade into that of the wounded gazelle tonight.

(“Tonight”, VS, 374-5)

The search is for the identity, the quest for the right voice, the true sense of self. The call to prayer is the call for submission to a higher authority in Islamic culture, submission to the Almighty Allah. The wounded gazelle is the ghazal of wounded emotions (the etymology has been traced from the wounded gazelle)—of longing and loss. So Ali’s search for his identity which had long been divided into different loyalties, finds a voice in the ghazal—his long battle for the right voice and expression finds a humble submission in the oriental ghazal; which is like a homecoming, the return to the roots just like the call to prayer demands men to return to the Almighty.

The poems become all the more poignant, the form all the more necessary as Ali was confronting his own mortality during the compilation of this volume. After travelling through continents, living and knowing their histories, imbibing their cultures and venturing into several strict forms like canzone, sestina, and villanelle, Shahid Ali chooses to shape his final words in the ghazal form; a form he had now completely understood and absorbed and a language he had moulded to his own mood. With a long, consistent and
honest attempt, Shahid was not only able to infuse a new idiom to the English poetry, but also gift a new genre to the English poetic culture.

The ghazal worked as a form for Shahid also because it provided him an existing tradition of defiance and effrontery against the societal as well as divine order. Shahid's dilemma at his own mortality, his despair at his mother’s death and his emotional turmoil at the political trouble at his homeland were issues that were handled deftly in the ghazal. One of the striking qualities of the Urdu poetry was its recurrent emotional indulgence inevitably layered with philosophical abstractions. The movement, in most Urdu ghazals, is from a state of rejection and pain to a state of acceptance of the pain as an essential condition of living. This tendency of fatalistic existence is reflected and also concretized by the greatest of the Urdu poets, Mirza Ghalib:

Qaid-e-hayat band-e-gham, asal me dono ek hai

maut se pehley aadmi gham se nijaat paye kyun

This may be roughly translated as: The prison of life and the realm of sorrow are actually but one/ Why then would men find any relief from pain before death. (Translation mine) Ghalib is one of the most resonant voices in Shahid's poetry and had a major influence on Shahid's poetic sensibility. The famous she’r is at the core of the poetics of Agha Shahid Ali. It is like a formula within which Shahid's poetry can be situated. The exile of the poet, as discussed in the last chapter, is not a political banishment, but a temperamental condition. Shahid in his last stage of life, while confronting his mortality in the face of a fatal disease, comes to realize that pain and suffering are elemental to living and cannot be escaped from at all. These existential concerns find a voice in his poetry. The issues that
trouble the poet range from sexuality, to reconciliation of languages and cultures, the play of memory and history, land and loyalties, to god and religion. It is however, a basic struggle to understand the meaning and relevance of all these concerns that become a central issue to the poet. The poet who sees his identity as a Kashmiri-American, as a Shia-Muslim and as an heir of multiple legacies of Urdu-Indian-Western, was compelled by his circumstance to re-access his position. The volume thus reveals his existential struggle as much as his re-formulation of his personal as well as cultural identity.

Now “god to aggrandise, God to glorify” in

the candle that “clear burns”—glare I can’t come by in.

By the enemy, after battle, I place flowers

and the swords he’d heard the angels lullaby in.

When even God is dead, what is left but prayer?

and this wilderness, the mirrors I multiply in?

Doomsday is over, Eden stretched vast over me—

I see the rooms, all the rooms, I am to die.

Ere he never returns, he whose footsteps are dying,

Shahid, run out weeping, bring that passer-by in. (In, 359-60)

Roots and cultural ties remain a thematic concern for the poet Agha Shahid Ali though a defiance and dissent against the conventional religious belief and an inquiring
attitude is evident from his early volumes. In one of the early poems, Shahid lays down the mechanism of his doubtful cynical mind:

I asked grandma: Is God a Muslim?

“Kafir, you’re no good”, she said.

No one taught me Koran.

My father mouthed Freud and Marx,

Something about recognizing necessity

...

Then our servant lost his shoes at the mosque.

I had nothing left to ask. (“Note Autobiographical-1”, Begum Akhtar, 20)

For a poet who gave up faith in religion early in life—at least in the traditional sense of it—this brings in a certain sense of rootlessness as he forgoes the shared cultural support of family and community. Life has a pattern that only he/she understands. The poet’s mind tries to build a norm, a realm of the Sacred by his own understanding of the life around him. This Sacred is different from the sacred of the culture he is born and brought up into. The native culture always insists on the forceful veneration of it rules and norms which to the poet’s mind is stifling and therefore unacceptable. The poet embarks on a journey where he meets and makes the world by himself and for himself and the text becomes his territory where he selects what is to be esteemed and what is unnecessary. For the poet’s sacred, to emerge as the right thing it has to be built up in constant negation
of the socially accepted sacred for it is *that* that the poet is fighting against or trying to come out of. The reading of Shahid’s poems as the *dramatic fictive narrative* of his poetic life reveal the existential struggle of the poet as it passes through various tests of time and how he builds up and deals with his idea of the sacred as different from the given one.

Shahid who displays a disbelieving character from his early poems is rendered a cynic by the brutalities of life and living. In addition, his position as a migrant replenishes him with certain benefit of detached vision. The troubles become trails and a close face-off with life’s vulnerabilities leave Shahid in despair and agony but he never loses faith fully—his poetics show a fortitude that seems to emanate from his strong belief—what is this belief about? What is its nature and how does Shahid constantly renews his faith in the face of fresh trouble is what needs elaboration and analysis here. The *Book Of Ghazals* is Shahid’s journey through Purgatory on the way to the *Paradiso* in the effort to come out of the personal hell. The agony, the despair the doubt and the resolve are all present in the poetry and the perceptive reader has only to look closely at the text to experience the poet’s consciousness.

The Islamic tradition, as against the Judeo-Christian beliefs, put Ishmael at the centre of the sacrificial ritual as ordained to Abraham by the Divine Will. While the test of faith was directed towards Abraham, it was equally demanding on Ishmael as he had the foreknowledge of his death. Abraham has told his son Ishmael of the God’s command to which Ishmael replies “Ye shall not find me wavering”. (Surah 37 in the Quran)

While this impassioned episode of complete faith and submission to the will of god is the root of the analogy drawn in Ali’s poetry—he also seems to be borrowing from
Melville’s *Moby Dick* character Ishmael—the line ‘Call Me Ishmael Tonight’ is a direct loan from the great classic. Melville’s Ishmael gained prominence in modern analysis of the book and has been established as one of the major characters with much psychological and moral insight. While Melville’s Ishmael is no Prophet figure, the parallel is that of a narrow escape from death; Ishmael was the only survivor at the ship. The analogy, however, can be stretched no further as the philosophizing on death of Melville’s Ishmael comes after he has survived the accident, while Ali was aware of his time-limited stay. There can, therefore, be no grounds at which the feelings of Melville and Ali can be correlated.

Ishmael, in Islamic tradition, is a model of willful submission accepting God’s command to give up his life for faith. He faces his upcoming death with not only patience and fortitude but a keenness and willingness that defy logic. It is with such a figure that Shahid equates his own submission with and yet the post-colonial understanding is anything but plain. How does he reach this state of submission or whether there submission is at all, is a question that needs analysis.

Strategically planned with the first she’r giving a foreword to the rest of the volume: ‘I must go back briefly to a place I have loved / to tell those you will efface I have loved’ (*The Veiled Suite*, 326), the volume, has a back and forth movement in time and history. Both personal as well as socio-religious history is revisited and recollected to build up a pattern that defines the poet’s life. From nostalgia to displacement, from roots to rootlessness and from personal to the universal—the ghazals draw a thematic of a migrant soul—an exile of temperament and of nations. Moving from the agony and the
ecstasy of temporal living, the poetic narrative moves to the timeless: “Migrating from me to me, the soul asks, / a bit seriously: What is our covenant bones?” (357)

Shahid who was a T. S. Eliot scholar in his early career, patterns his last book of ghazal, like Eliot’s Waste Land where he weaved various strands of consciousness with his own to present a poetic pattern. The underlying theme of the Waste Land was the degeneration of the moral principles; CMIT is a product of the postcolonial diasporic mind and the various voices weaved in one poetic output is constitutive of the multicultural and the cosmopolitan culture. This post-modern poetic voice is not focal but multiple and fluid. However, this multifocal identity in Ali is never mourned rather it is thoroughly enjoyed! ‘If someone asks where Shahid has disappeared,/ He’s waging a war (no jung) beyond English.’ (VS, 362)

There is a Muslim, a Kashmiri, and a diaspora to the American land in the poet Shahid Ali—inclinations are equally towards the Islamic histories, Hindu gods and goddess as well as the western theologies and culture. Above it all, Ali is the Witness and a Beloved! It is so because for a diaspora, the core unity of home gets shattered as soon as he enters into a new land, a new language or a new culture. No matter how hard the diaspora tries to clutch onto the native roots, to deny the life of Other’s culture; the centre gets disrupted and so, forever. S/He can no longer look back at one’s roots with the same innocence and purity. In the ghazal Exiles, Shahid writes,

In Jerusalem a dead phone’s dialed by exiles.

You learn your strange fate: You were exiled by exiled.

By the Hudson lies Kashmir, brought from Palestine—
it shawls the piano, Bach beguiled by exiles.

One opens the hearts to list unborn galaxies.

Don’t shut the folder when earth is filed by exile. (VS, 297)

And also,

I’m smashed fine enemy in your isolate mirror,

Why the diamond display then—in public—of it all? (VS, 329)

You begin to feel better when the clocks are set back?

Children of Northern Darkness—so defined from the start. (VS, 339)

This diffused mind, full of multiple focal points when faced with life’s vulnerabilities in the form of his own mortality tries to find and make a pattern by looking into the voices that he has known all his life, the cultures he had lived into and the knowledge he has gained. There is evidence of struggle between doubt and faith, between truth and appearance and this journey from doubt to rejection to knowledge to submission that Shahid goes through is his personal purgatory. ‘And I, Shahid, am only escaped to tell thee—/ God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight.’ (VS, 375) In one of the most dramatically intense lines by the poet, Shahid has tried to convey the epiphany or the existential truth that he himself comes to after much battling of the emotions and experiences. It has not been an easy way; the poet has gone through bouts of despair, of serious doubts about the way life has treated him, of deep pain and anguish at the approaching death. Mental affliction and internal struggle are evident many lines:
I’m smashed, fine Enemy, in your isolate mirror.

Why the diamond display then—in public—of it all?

What makes yours the rarest edition is just this:

It’s bound in human skin, the final fabric of it all. (329)

I have come down to my boat to wish myself Bon Voyage.

If that’s the true sound of brevity, what will reappear of fire.

I could not improve my skill to get ahead of storms though

I too enrolled in Doomsday to be a courtier of fire. (332)

The Beloved will leave you behind from the start

Light is difficult: one must be blind from the start.

Ontological episode? God doesn’t care.

“That’s why he exists,” you divined from the start.

I am mere dust. The desert hides itself in me.

Against me the ocean has reclined from the start.

Who but Satan can know God’s sorrow in Heaven?
God longed for the lover He undermined from the start. (339-40)

For God’s sake don’t unveil the black stone of K’aaba.

What if Faith too’s let love bead a dew of water?

Are your streets, Abraham, washed of “the Sons of Stones”?

Sand was all Ishmael once drew of water. (350)

The God referred to in these poems and even earlier is not the powerful god of Hopkins. It is not the grandeur of god that is implored or celebrated but the vulnerability and whimsicality that has been dwelt upon by the poet. The use of words like ‘spiv’, ‘lonely’ ‘terrorizing’ are instances of the wavering faith or the unconvinced belief. The volume thus, presents a ground where the conflicting emotions and ideas of the poet are fore-played in the form of allusions to the figures of Abraham, Ishmael as well as Satan. The poet figure has a shifting stance from submission and faith in the form of Ishmael, Karbala and the Sufi mystic Mansoor Al-Hajj to a defiance represented in the constant questioning, negation or uprooting of these ideals of piety and holiness. The defiance is however projected through a romanticizing the Satan figure. The rebelliousness of Satan in the classical Urdu literature has been a common motif and has provided a ground to many poets to express their doubts in the Divine Will. Agha Shahid Ali is also following the same paved way of these Urdu-Persian poets like Ghalib, Faiz, Iqbal (his famous piece Shikwa or Complaint against the Divine Will) in voicing his rebellion and his existential concerns in his poetry. The ghazal tradition offers a common motif of the lover and the
beloved, modeled on God and Satan, deeply in love yet highly antagonist against each other. In the ghazal, the poets play upon this metaphor and the virtuosity of the poet lies in maintaining the ambiguity between the earthly lover and the divine love. The poet can easily switch from one to the other. Interestingly, the lover-beloved figure is also kept ambiguous gender-wise; the Muslim God, Allah being asexual! The idea of Satan as the first and the truest lover of God is borrowed from the Sufi theology and weaved intricately with the ghazal tradition. Eric Ormsby in *The Three Faces of Satan in Islam* (2008) describes the nature of love and longing and politics in the some of the Sufi traditions.

Sufi writing on the love of God draws for its vocabulary and tropes on the conventional erotic poetry of Arabic and, later, Persian literature. The lover—the *muhibb*—sighs, yearns, tosses and turns, utters rending sobs and heartbroken groans. He is tormented by longing (*shawq* in Arabic), burns for intimacy (*uns*) with the beloved, whose coquettish mockery and prevarications he must endure. Sometimes he even dies for love, especially when he overhears a line of poetry or a melody that reminds him of his beloved. The protocols of amorous intrigue have been transposed to the transcendental realm...The most authentic of such love is that which is chaste, unrequited and rejected. The purest lover is he who can hope for nothing and yet, continue to burn in the fiery passion that consumes him. In this respect, Satan, who has loved God without hope for countless millennia, appears as the truest lover as well as the truest monotheist.” (pg. 40)
The lover continues to woo the beloved despite her indifference or callousness or sometimes, even infidelity. The Urdu ghazal lover surpasses the Shakesperean ones (Orlando, Bassanio) by completely effacing his personality, by being in love to the point of madness and by having faith in his love and the beloved so much so that he overlooks her mean, cruel ways. The submission to love and the beloved is complete and without any doubt. This theme of love among the mortals is known as *Ishq-e-Majazi* (Earthly Love) in Urdu poetic tradition. The purer and exalted form of love, as in the Bhakti traditions, is the divine love or *Ishq-e-Haqiqi*—the love of Truth. All Earthly Love is inferior to and modeled on the *Divine Love* and the quality of poetry is determined by its subtle inclination to the divine love when it is apparently talking about the earthly love. In an essay *The Arabic/Persian Tradition*, Dutta-Roy also touches on this theme of God longing for his lovers:

Ali’s sense of his own mortality in the face of brain cancer in America blends with Ishmael’s knowledge of his oncoming death…connecting the two is the figure of God as beloved, who tests the love through the intensity of separation and suffering. But the pangs of separation and suffering are two way. Even god waits for the reunion with the lover he cruelly separated from himself: “God longs for the lover He undermined from the start”. As the poet and Ishmael wait for death, the terror, love and faith come to terms with each other…the narrative moves vacillating between the extremities of faith and doubt as the hour of extreme pain, exit and freedom approaches…this personal narrative rightly ends in the perfect blending of the two central personas, united in suffering, pain and final peace in the loving and tearful embrace of God: “And I Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee—I God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight”. (pg 152-3)
This *Prophet versus Satan*, and the *Beloved versus Rebel* dichotomy is interesting as it can be seen as an act of the assertion of the identity against the demand of submission to the Supreme Will. There is a continuous dissent in the poet’s manner and voice for the exacting attitude of the Beloved is incomprehensible to the aching mind. The foreknowledge of his mortality makes a case to admit to the supremacy of the god and his own vulnerability. Ali’s lord, as the prototypal Beloved from the Urdu poetry, is not compassionate or relenting rather stubborn, proud. It is only Satan who had preserved his identity by rebelling against god because he was the truest lover—he alone can understand god’s “vintage loneliness that has turned to vinegar”. And only Shahid because he is the ‘Witness’ can know “God’s sorrow in heaven” and see Him sobbing, longing for His lover. This knowledge of God’s vulnerability towards Satan stands analogous to Bhabha’s concept of the ‘Other’. The Beloved-Satan is the ‘Other’ and no matter how cruel, crude or undeserving of attention, it is a necessary figure to keep the ‘Self’ alive. But the ‘in-between’ figure of the poet, a post-modern mind of multiple centers and a postcolonial diaspora who has knowledge of both the worlds—here metaphorically can thus have no fixed truths. He stands at a vantage point where he ‘witnesses’ the play of both the Self and the Other. To such a Witness, submission is not just difficult but impossible. Shahid Ali therefore remains a “refugee from Belief” and knows that “In this universe one dies a plaintiff forever”

    Even death won’t hide the poor fugitive forever

    on Doomsday he will learn he must live forever. (369)
Ali’s ghazals show a struggle of faith in the divine pattern and thus mostly deals with *Ishq-e-haqiqi*. The love, devotion and complete submission of the body and the self that the prophets (Abraham, Ishmael, Muhammad or his grandson Hussein) had, is what is demanded in love. Only after a period of long and intense pain, does Shahid Ali seems to realize his fate is destined with these men—these truly devoted men of god—and he seems to be giving himself up to the divine will.

The hunt is over and I hear the Call to Prayer

Fade into that of the wounded gazelle tonight.

And, I, Shahid am only escaped to tell thee

God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight. (375)

But it is Satan who is the foremost lover of god and not any prophet. God has “undermined from the start” his “one true lover”! Therefore, it is Satan, the arch rebel that becomes the prototypal lover in Ali’s poetry. It is Satan for whom Majnoon, the famous oriental lover mourns, (“From Another Desert”, *Nostalgist’s*) and it is Satan whom Shahid seems to be siding with at most occasions. Interestingly, the poet-persona is a constantly shifting figure that pals and pairs with the prophets (as men of faith and submission) as well as with Satan—the arch rebel and the arch lover. This shifting stance reflects the poet’s inner dilemmas, the spiritual tussle and the desire to understand the pattern of his life, the recent turn of his fortune. There is an acute realization of pain in the prophets that emanates from forbearance and submission to God’s will and there is also the pain of separation that the arch lovers God and Satan undergo. And finally, there is the knowledge of the God’s loneliness in Heaven. Dying thus, becomes a metaphor in Shahid,
for succumbing to the whim of God, to humor him. Death has been a very strong and recurring trope in Shahid right from the early volumes. Even when the poet had not gone through any personal destruction (for lack of a better word), death as well as exile were constantly mentioned—this may be because Shahid understands death and exile as an existential condition. The trajectory of the poet shows how his awareness is tested, provided for, relocated, and then get entwined in his discourse to come out as the ultimate summation in the Book of Ghazals. Dwelling upon the variety, variability and the multiplicity of life, of pain, of awareness, of love and of longings, there remains one idea that is predominant—that of death and exile where the two are seen as one—exile is death and death is but only an exile.

There are a few codifications that need some analysis. In the famous and important line—‘And, I, Shahid am only escaped to tell thee/ God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight. (375)’ the various clause need to be taken up individually to get a sense of the poet’s intentions. ‘I, Shahid’ is a witness but to what? ‘God sobs in my arms’—why does God sob? ‘Call me Ishmael’—Ishmael is a figure of submission acquiescence and modesty. However, as the Witness he has knowledge of the will of God as well as his loneliness. ‘Escaped’—what has he “escaped” from? Has he escaped the wrath/punishment or has he escaped the whimsicality of God? Shahid was actually dying—he had not really escaped any pain or even the submission. The Book of Ghazals then may be considered an act of pro-creation at one level; the poet’s desire to live on, even in the act of submitting to his fatal illness, the assertion of his identity and claims indelibility by his knowledge.
Apart from making use of Islamic history and metaphors, Shahid's poetry is significantly laced with the myths of Hindu Gods and Goddess. Shiva and Parvati signify opposite forces of Purush and Prakriti, and together they signify the regenerative and creative forces—a sort of communion that Shahid longs for—the coming together of the opposite Apollo and Dionysian, Hindu and Muslim identities to fuse into one creative force—and perhaps for himself too. The use of “dark blue God” Krishna, can also be seen in similar light. Krishna as a symbol may mean many things—unlimited beauty, knowledge, strength, fame, riches and rasa-leela as well as political strategist, a savior and a fighter against evil. There is a continual reinforcement of the idea of multiplicity reinforced through the use of icons from multiple religious and cultural ideals. The diaspora lives in dichotomies—he survives at multiple levels. Shahid accepts this duality and even finds his comfort in it. In later poems, he even celebrates his hybrid position by bringing in a cosmopolitan angle to his poetics. Shahid's poetry, especially in the later half is replete with allusions and symbols from various geographical, cultural and political spaces.

In the arch that encompasses Shahid's spiritual journey and the existential battle, his involvement with languages and cultures form an important tangent—the identity of the poet is reflected and completed only when he retracts his journey to his roots—the Arabic and Persian. These are in fact, the starting point of the journey only taken up in retrospect. The indirect and gradual acculturation that comes from the Arabic language springs into full effect—Arabic is the language of the holy book, Quran and Arabic is the source in which are born and revealed the stories of rebellion and passion—Satan and
Iblis. Thus, the poet’s identity when traced back goes back from these routes of passion and rebellion to the roots of submission.

Shahid's involvement and his skill at the use of English language, the language he called his first language, provided him immense capabilities to share and express himself. However, the poet's desire is to go ‘Beyond English’. English as a language may work as a ‘common tongue’ (2) but it fails to satisfy the sharp taste of the oriental mind: “I know some words for war, all of them sharp, but the sharpest one is jung— beyond english.” (3-4,) To the poet, it is Arabic, the root language of Urdu family, that seems to be the ‘language of loss’. This is an important stance and speaks about the trace of history— Shahid as a postcolonial diaspora—living and thriving in english language finds english a ‘young’ language and thus all business must take place in Arabic—the progenitor of the ghazal as well as the language that binds Muslims across the world. It is the stories of Arabic language and culture, history (Majnoon, Shammas, wide-eyed houris, Amichai) that the poet wants to represent as that is where lies the root of the poet and the ghazal form—and that is a history that remains unknown to english speakers. The reclamation of the Arabic language is a step in the poet’s journey towards self-identify. As a migrant, Shahid retraces all possible routes as well as roots. Like the ghazal in English, Shahid too is a hybrid. Both had gained something and lost something with their advent onto the English Language. Since both the poet and the ghazal have their origin in Arabic language—a movement backwards, a re-vision of the origins help in identifying the form. English is the language which ultimately ‘homes’ Shahid Ali but this ‘home’ has bricks and walls from the Arabic-Persian-Urdu language. It is on the foundational bricks of these languages that the new home is built.
A philosophical position develops in Shahid's later poetry—especially the last volume of ghazals. Faced with real pain and loss, Shahid faces an existential crisis losing first his homeland, and then his mother. With the supporting pillars effaced, the poet is left to fend for himself. This crisis forms the journey that encapsulates Shahid's personal, as well as social life. Issues central to Shahid's existential concerns moved in an upward spiral originating in his homosexuality. While Shahid never takes up his sexuality in his poems, it nonetheless pervades the poetic consciousness. Much of the sense of loss, longing and fatalistic brooding in Shahid's poetry emanates not only from his sense of exile, of being the Other in a majority population, but from a temperamental and existential condition. As a homosexual, Shahid remained exiled from the large heterosexual population, as a Kashmiri from the Indians, as a Muslim from the Hindu majority and as a Shia he is different to the Sunni majority (two percent of the population). However, even within this social group, Shahid stands out as an English-speaking literature-loving person. He becomes an Outsider by the virtue of his sexual orientation. This awareness of his difference with the outside world is what contributes to his sense of identity.

The language of the roots is reclaimed by resorting to the poetic structure, the content matter, the style and the mannerisms of the popular poetic form, ghazal, in the way it was used and a revisit to the folklore, popular myths, mythology, or popular legends. This leads to a transfer of the real essence of the language for a language is, but a vehicle of its tradition and culture. Reproducing the folktlores of Laila Majnoon, the anecdotes of Mansur Al-Hallaj, drawing metaphors and parallels from Islamic history bring in a consciousness of the Arabic language—the essence is also captured by a
constant allusion to the great Urdu poets and singers—Ghalib, Meer, Faiz, Faraz, Begum Akhtar, Mallika Pukhraj. The Indianness/Hindustani culture is also reproduced by the mention of Malhar lyrics, Bollywood songs, bhajans, Shiv-Parvati tussle, the Radha Krishna affair, the priest in saffron, the smashed statues of the temple. The syntax or the structure of a language has several common phrases, expressions common to its speakers—this has been used at several places by the poet to bring home to the readers of his poetry the real feel of that language. Shahid was inspired by the Spanish poet Lorca as well as the Urdu poet Faiz to handle his verse in such a manner. Both Lorca and Faiz, in their respective arts, tried to usher in a language that was close to common people. They both by ushering the language of the common people brought in an unconventionality in the conventional literary traditions of their age.Translations of the Arabic poet, Mahmoud Darwish, form the major chunk of Rooms Are Never Finished volume. This inclusion of the translation can be seen as part of Shahid's poetic theory; the indulgence in the thematic of nostalgia and memory and the process of overcoming it through the involved use of native language and its recurrent tropes. This way nostalgia translates from pain and longing to a site of reconciliation and habitation itself. The new (here English) language is moulded by diaspora poet through a gradual process of hammering and chiseling the syntax of the language to bring in a new idiom from their native languages. It is in this light that the frequent silent allusion or translation of Ghalib and Faiz can be seen in Shahid's poetry. These allusions/translations enrich the poet’s ‘English’ poems with a native consciousness. They constitute a part of his early life—his native home and language and an early existence when the diaspora was a pure native.
There are also frequent allusions to images, icons, songs, movements from the Indian cinema. This again explains the composition of the diaspora as a product of 70s and 80s and the Bollywood pervading upon the psyche of the Indian youth so much that it becomes an essential component of their lives. Shahid's use of it only reflects that a modern man exposed to multiple sources and mediums of learning is not the regular Wordsworthian, Arnold, Eliot drawing inspiration from only classical literary texts or their social surroundings but the contemporary poet—a post-modern, post colonial poet—who lives in the era of advanced scientific inventions of television, video cameras, telephones, trains, flights, computers and floppies have many more moments of inspirations and many more medium to influence him. The existence of the poet is therefore not restricted within a literary tradition but is much more open and diffused drawing from multifarious sources.

Shahid's poetry has a two-way movement. There is a journey forward in time where he is battling his death and a retrospective journey backward in time rejoining the dots of existence. The present crisis of the poet of the approaching death is deftly handled by delving into his past. The ghazals, with its wide thematic range, encapsulates this intense and passionate personal battle of the poet. It also reveals the lighter side of the poet with incorporation of the comic, the mundane and the dull range of emotions and concerns. Not only does this reflect the range of the poet’s involvement, it also brings about an ironic contrast much like the comic interludes in Shakespearean tragedies.
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