Introduction

Migration became a norm in the postcolonial era as people began to travel to the different parts of the world in search of a job, or for better education, or due to political compulsions and geo-political conflicts. The return to home was quite difficult as the objective of migration was usually permanent. Global capitalism has made the dispersal rate extremely high but at the same time quite easy. This has led people from different backgrounds to settle in places that are geographically, politically and culturally different. The people living in these conditions are generally termed as “diaspora”. Diaspora refers to the people scattered from their original habitat by compulsion or by choice. The term was originally used for displacement of Jews, when they were forced to leave the land after the destruction of the first temple of Solomon; but the term these days has come to refer to the displacement in modern times. Diaspora have a very strong link with the homeland, and they find themselves as an ethno-cultural group linked to a certain part of a “imagined community” which is always in their mind, always beautiful and the best (Rushdie 10). But, more than anything else, it is home, a place where one has lived a part of one’s life, which becomes a cause of desire and longing. As Butler says that more than ethnicity (religion and phenotype) it is home land an entity that anchors diasporic identity. (204)

Agha Shahid Ali is one such writer who did border crossing, therefore, carrying with him in his writing a pluralistic legacy which makes him a typical hybrid writer. He grew up in Kashmir, went on to live in America in 1974, and used to visit Kashmir to spend summer with his parents. He wrote on various themes and issues. The thesis is an attempt to study the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali in detail, trying to cover almost whole of
his poetry. Title of the thesis is *Cultural Plurality and Revival: A Study of the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali*. The thesis will try to examine how Ali’s multicultural upbringing had a strong effect on his poetry. The life of Ali where he finds himself to be a part of many cultures shaped his themes and techniques. He writes about his home, both old and new; and is mostly concerned with loss and the passing away of things. As the nostalgia of the old language and culture preoccupy him, he tries to revive it by adopting a different type of writing styles and forms. In addition, his language is syncretistic where he juxtaposes themes and patterns of two different languages. The thesis will try to look at this new form, termed as ghazelesque (Singh), and about how he exploits diverse themes and subjects with loss and nostalgia at its roots.

Home land, for Agha Shahid Ali, like any other émigré, is a point of focus in diaspora. When people in diaspora encounter a new environment, they react to it depending upon the temperament and on the political and socio-cultural gap between their home country and the host country. The encounter leads either to assimilation or integration or separation or marginalization. Assimilation refers to a reaction to the new environment in which the individual sheds his original identity and adopts a new identity. If an individual seeks to remain away from the dominant culture it is called separation. On other hand when a person has a good relation with his old culture and new culture simultaneously it is called integration. In marginalization a person loses his old cultural values as well as the large society (Bhatia and Ram 141). Thus there are various processes by which a person goes through the process of acculturation. Its effect on host countries, particularly America and Europe, has been vivid with people from different religious, geographic and ethnic identities settling in one nation. This has given rise to a
multicultural society. A multicultural society is one which consists of varied cultural
groups and it is sometimes synonymously referred to as multiethnic and multiracial,
meaning the “presence of ‘non-white’ migrant communities in ‘white’ Western societies;
therefore giving it racial connotations” (Multiculturalism). Multiculturalism, therefore, is
a very political and relative term, e.g. The Commission's Report: The Future of Multi-
Ethnic Britain, states “Britain is both a community of citizens and a community of
communities, both a liberal and a multicultural society, and needs to reconcile their
sometimes conflicting requirements” (Commission). The statement is ambiguous as it
claims to assimilate various communities together with “conflicting requirements”
(Commission). It is usually referred to as liberal multiculturalism. Multiculturalism,
nowadays, is more of a political than a cultural term, like Samuel P. Huntington calls the
present age as the age of “the clash of civilizations”; considering that, he claimed that the
conflict in the post cold war era will not be ideological or economic but the conflict of
culture; “The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics.” (Huntington). This is
usually now referred to as post-multiculturalism which has given rise to xenophobia in
the West.

A "plural society", on other hand, is said to be one characterized by cultural
sections where “each displays its own relatively distinct pattern of socio-cultural
integration” (Cross 5). There is, however, a difference between multiculturalism and
pluralism. As discussed above multiculturalism is a political policy of a state to let the
people of different cultural backgrounds settle peacefully in a state. Pluralism on other
hand is a social attitude of people to resist assimilation into a dominant culture and save
their distinct identity.
According to Young (1976, 12, 16) “cultural pluralism” should be defined in terms of three basic components: “(1) Plurality is with relationship to an authoritative arena, the sovereign territorial state . . . which provides sharply demarcated boundaries within which groups define themselves and each other, and their interaction occurs; (2) Two or more socially and politically significant aggregates, differentiated by cultural criteria . . . whose competition, interaction, and conflict constitute one important ingredient in the overall pattern of political transactions in the polity; (3) The bases for these solidarity groupings are commonalities or affinities of ethnicity, language, race, caste, assumed blood tie, custom, and/or territory.” (qtd. in Toffolo 18)

A person in diaspora while trying to strike a balance between the home culture and host culture somehow attains a hybrid identity which is very much reflected in diasporic writing. Diaspora writers give voice to their loss and their struggle of the confrontation with a new culture. They, through their writing, try to cope with the shock of up rootedness. There writings, using Homi K Bhaba’s term, are hybrid. Hybridity, originally a term from horticulture refers to the mixture of two different cultures, or in betweenness where one belongs to neither of the two or belongs to both. Jehan Ramazani while commenting upon a line from Derek Walcott’s “The Schooner Flight”, “...either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation”; says, “This nobody contains multitudes (Ramazani 1). This multitudinous or plural nature which is found in a migrant is quite vivid in the case of any writer, even if his subject is his home. “But under modernity”, says Ramazani, “even a “national poet” turns out, on closer inspection, to also be a transnational” (14). The space
in which a writer exercises himself is termed as third space: it is a space which contains a mixture of different cultures where cultural meanings not only differ but, to use a poststructuralist term, also defer. Thus “the space of hybridity itself, the space in which cultural meanings and identities always contain the traces of other meanings and identities” (Cultural Diversity 60-62). Given the background of Agha Shahid Ali one finds similar concerns and themes in his poetry; it is at same time culturally plural and geopolitically transnational.

Agha Shahid Ali has written many poetry collections, a translation, a critical work, and has edited a book too. Bone-Sculpture (1972) is his first book written in India where he experimented with style and has been strongly influenced by his reading of Eliot. It deals with loneliness and skepticism. In In Memory of Begum Akhtar (1979), Ali seems to have matured as a poet and his Urdu influences are quite noticeable from the title of the book. He deals with the concepts he had left in his early book but presents them in a style which seems to be his own. The Half-Inch Himalayas (1987) is the first book he wrote while living in America; it deals with his strong longing for home, Kashmir, besides his family is also the focus of the book. A Walk Through the Yellow Pages (1987) presents the surreal and gothic vision of Ali, and the poems deal with violence and power. A Nostalgist’s Map of America (1991) deals with exile, longing and desire. Ali, like a travel poet, sets out to map America and envisions the brutality of history, particularly with reference to the Native Americans. The Country Without a Post Office (1997) is one of his celebrated books which deals with violence and human rights violations in Kashmir. The book is a kind of the “poetry of witness”, or resistance literature regarding the Kashmir conflict; it is considered to one of the best literary pieces

Not much critical work has been done on Agha Shahid Ali except some articles, scholarly papers, obituaries, and interviews. No full-fledged book has been written on him until now. Some critics, however, have written very good scholarly papers. Nishat Zaidi has written at least three papers on Agha Shahid Ali. Important among them is "Center/ Margin Dialectics and the Poetic Form: The Ghazals of Agha Shahid Ali". Zaidi in this paper talks about Ghazal in general and how Ali's Ghazal writing in English "is a sincere attempt to make his culture available to the world" (55). She goes on to explain how this Ghazal writing is an attempt to bridge the two civilizations: East and the West. Zaidi explains the pros and cons of Ghazal, discussing the metaphors and figures it uses and how the Urdu Ghazal came to be written in *Sabki-hindi*. In her paper "Translation as a 'Third Space': Reading Agha Shahid Ali's translation of Faiz Ahmad Faiz", Zaidi has read Ali's translation of Faiz according to Homi K Bhaba's concept of Third Space, a
dialogic or hyphenated space of in-betweeness. Zaidi sees Ali as a poet-translator whose finished poems look anew, a kind of a transcreation only possible because Ali lived in and experienced both the cultures and languages.

Amitav Ghosh’s article “The Ghat of the Only World: Agha Shahid Ali in Brooklyn” is a combination of Ali’s biography, Ghosh’s personal interactions with Ali, a critical analysis of some of Ali’s poems, and about his death and obituary. This is one of the finest articles on Ali equally useful for critic, student or a lay reader. In terms of critical analysis the article talks about Ali’s anthology *The Country Without a Post Office* and his relationship with Kashmir, his secular outlook, and Agha Shahid Ali as probably being the future National poet of the Independent Kashmir. Ghosh further talks about the death of Ali’s mother and the grief it thrust upon Ali, which he vented in the canzone “Lenox Hill”. Ghosh comments critically on the canzone.

Shaden M. Tageldin has written a detailed scholarly paper comparing Algerian-French novelist Sakinna Boukchedenna and Agha Shahid Ali in her paper entitled “Reversing the Sentence of Impossible Nostalgia: The Poetics of Postcolonial Migration in Sakkina Boukhedenna and Agha Shahid Ali”. The paper deals with nostalgia not only about the past but about the future also, what she calls “a universal exilic condition” which is different from postcolonial migration as it is both retrospective and prospective (233). She compares Boukchedenna’s novel *Journal:<<National-Immgre(e)>>* with Ali’s one and a half page poem “A Butcher”. She looks “trans-intra-naturally at the post- and neo-colonial history” of these hybrid writers (237). She looks at the conversation between Ali and Butcher as one between Ali and his alter ego. In his critical analysis of the poem she studies Muslims of India from minority space and the dispute of Kashmir,
reading Ali from his position of his un-homely condition, and compares it with French colonialism and post colonialism in Algeria.

In his article “Indigenous Tradition and The Individual Talent: Agha Shahid Ali, Laila/Majnoon, and the Ghazal” Patrick Colm Hogan talks in detail about Ali’s poem “From Another Desert” and shows how Ali mixes Urdu Ghazal tradition with the western modernist poetic tradition. Patrick Colm Hogan goes on further to show proximity between T S Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Ali’s “From Another Desert” showing how Ali uses the famous Sufi allegory of Laila and Majnoon to give a new setting to the waste land. He further talks about Sufi Islam and Radical Islam and the perils of radical Islam, and tries to read Ali’s poem in this context. Further he sees Ali as Ishmael (Ali juxtaposes story of Ismail with Laila Majnoon) and how he mixes his own exile with that of Ishmael, the prophet.

Lawrence Needham’s essay on Ali “The Sorrow of a Broken Time”: Agha Shahid Ali and the Poetry of Loss and Recovery” looks at Ali as a poet of loss who like other Indian diasporic writers “thematized separation, absence, exile, and loss”(63). Needham discusses Ali’s earlier five works including Bone Sculptor and In the Memory of Begam Akhtar which are usually left out by critics. Needham reads Ali as a poet of loss and he shows how Ali in his early writings was influenced by the modernist poet T S Eliot and the romantic poet P B Shelly simultaneously, which was followed by the influence of Urdu poetry leading to his own particular poetic sensibility.

Jean Chui in his article “Melancholy and Human Rights in A Nostalgist’s Map of America and Midnight Children” compares Agha Shahid Ali with Salman Rushdie. He
makes the comparison from a psychoanalytical perspective reflecting on mourning, nostalgia and loss in the two writers. Chui also discusses human rights violations like ethnic cleansing, state terrorism, religious and class conflict and American Imperialism. Xiewan Mai in his article “Mapping America Re-Mapping the World: The Cosmopolitanism of Agha Shahid Ali’s A Nostalgist’s Map of America.” discusses Ali as a post-war travel poet. He has discussed Ali’s mapping of America like a cartographer, and tried to show how Ali’s mapping is his acknowledgement and acceptance of his second home.

“Memory has a Homeland: Tropes of Exility in Agha Shahid Ali’s The Country Without a Post Office” is the chapter of a thesis by Mahwash Shoaib. It discusses Ali relationship with his home both in terms of nostalgia and with reference to the violence in Kashmir. He discusses his overt political leanings and the protest against human rights violation rendered in lyrics like that of W B Yeats. Comparing the anthology with his other books he notes that it has been written in an angrier tone seen such as “there are traces of suppressed rage in lyrics”. (93). He further analyzes how Ali has become witness to the atrocities in Kashmir. He reads the anthology as an elegy on the death of a city.

“American by translation: Agha Shahid Ali’s "real" American ghazals”, the chapter of a thesis by Hallie Elizabeth is about his ghazals and gives a general background to the genre of ghazal. He sees him as a “translated” man” since the way he wrote has itself challenged the notion of distinction between original and translated (127). It also deals with the translation of Faiz, his obsession with Urdu poetry and how he internalized Faiz by listening to him in the voice of Begam Akhtar. He compares his
ghazals and translation with Ijaz Ahmad's *Ghazals of Ghalib* and Noami Lazard's translations of Faiz. In addition, he discusses Ali's translation of a long eleven canto poem of Mahmoud Darwiash "Eleven Stars over Andalusia". He has also discussed *Rooms are Never Finished, Real Ghazals in English* and its various forms and themes besides discussing history and growth of the Ghazal in the US.

"The Diaspora: Agha Shahid Ali’s Tricultural Nostalgia" is an essay by Bruce King in which he discusses Ali’s exile, his multilingual and multicultural upbringing and how it had a lasting impact on his life and poetry. He has discussed seven of his anthologies and concludes by calling him "increasingly a major poet" with plenty of forms, themes, styles and a distinct tone (274).

The thesis has tried to work out in detail some of the already written critical material which the author found quite brief and therefore needed some more explanation. In the chapter V on ghazals I have tried to show how mushairas (Urdu poetic symposium) and Urdu ghazal singers had a strong effect on the writing of Ali. Moreover, thesis has tried to look in to some other aspects of Ali’s poetry which have not been worked upon; for example deconstructive study of his parody of Grimm’s tales and some of his poems from *The Country Without a Post Office*; the position of Ali in Indian English poetic tradition; Sufi influences on him; comparison with Osip Mandelstam; his Canzones etc. The thesis is divided into five chapters.

Chapter I deals with Ali in the context of post independence modern Indian English poetic tradition, particularly that of Nisim Ezekiel, A K Ramanujan, Kamala Das, Arun Kolatkar, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Gieve Patel, Meena Alexander and Shiv K
Kumar. The chapter tries to show how Ali was less influenced by his senior contemporaries in India and more by English modernists like T E Hume and T S Eliot. The chapter has focused on Ali’s earlier poetry which he wrote while living in India. In *Bone Sculptor* the influence of Eliot is quite vivid as he has depicted a kind of a wasteland and he sees himself and others as skeptics like Eliot’s Gerontion and Hollow Man. The chapter further discusses his engagement with the Indo-Islamic tradition and his lament for the same. Ali has written poems on Faiz, Begam Akhtar and other connoisseurs of Indo-Islamic art and literature. The chapter has dealt with Ali’s longing for Urdu language which has suffered negligence in the land of its birth, India, due to partition and post partition politics. In some poems he laments the exile of last Indian Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar, and dwells on colonial crimes like the amputating of hands of weavers of Bengal. The chapter further discusses how Agha Shahid Ali has been marginalized by the Indian critics, and has tried to find some reasons for that: Ali writes more about Indo-Islamic tradition which is not seen as a typically Indian tradition by many Indian critics. Moreover, his explicit criticism of the Indian state for the gross human rights violations is Kashmir is another reason for his marginalization.

Chapter II deals with Ali’s engagement with Kashmir in diaspora: how he feels to be away from his home and how he relies on memory to seek home. He considered himself a mélange of multiple identities which have affected his upbringing, a Muslim, a Kashmiri, an Indian, and an American. He was passionately involved with his homeland, Kashmir and preferred to be called a Kashmiri American, and in his last days he wished to die there. While living away from home he banks on the “shards of memory”, which in exile seems to be the only solace. (Rushdie 12) However, with the rise of violence in
Kashmir, Ali’s vision shifts from diasporic longing to the pain of fellow sufferers in Kashmir. The chapter has read Ali’s poems as elegies on Kashmir, Rizwan and Srinagar. In addition, the poems have been read using Forche’s concept of “The Poetry of Witness” where to bear witness is to protest against the atrocities. These witness poems of Ali are marked with strong sense of the hidden anger, protest and a fractured language with some gothic imagery. The thesis has tried show how his poetry is similar to Ghassan Kanafani’s concept of Resistance Literature, which, to use Barbara Harlow’s phrase, becomes an “arena of struggle” (8). The chapter has further shown how Ali’s secular outlook makes him also to feel the pain of Hindus who were forced to leave the valley; of Muslims who live under terrible oppression; of tourists like Hans Christian Ostro who was murdered. Ali’s poetry, dealing with post office, stamps and a letter-poem “Dear Shahid”, has been read using J L Austin’s concept of Performative text: statements where saying about an act is performing the act; which is differentiated from true/false statements called “constatives”. These letters, like other letters, (as Derrida says) are kind of performative texts which “produce” its absent, “mute” and “hollowed-out” addressee. (qtd. in Royle 32)

Chapter III discusses Ali’s poetry dealing with America and sees him in the context of Asian American poetry, particularly South Asian American. Like many other diasporic poets America became Ali’s second home and he began to write about it. Ali’s two books A Walk through Yellow Pages (1987) and A Nostalgist’s Map of America (1991) entirely focus on America. The chapter reads Ali as a travel writer, working as a cartographer who sets out to sketch a geographical and psychological map of America. The chapter has focused mainly on Ali’s engagement with the politics of mapping, and
how Ali’s mode of sketching the map is actually an attempt to deconstruct the colonial project which “relied heavily on the science of mapping. (Howard 148).” He has mapped both North and South America particularly focusing on the plight of Native Americans, destruction of their lives, culture, places and languages in the post Columbian times. The chapter has shown how Ali empathizes with them as his fellow sufferers along with different people around the world; and how his attitude towards Natives in his writing is something in between the European-American writers’ “construct” and the Native American writers’ “writing back”. Ali has talked about the vanishing of the Native American tribes and has particularly focused on their dying languages in his poems “A Nostalgist’s Map of America” and “In Search of Evanescence”. Ali has used Emily Dickinson’s metaphor evanescence; a tendency to disappear, to vanish away, to fade away, and to evaporate: a tendency of non existence. Agha Shahid Ali has exploited this idea in some poems parodied from Grimms tales. The chapter has read these tales in comparison with earlier readings by some critics like Jack Zipes, Talairach-Vielmas, Carol Mavor, etc. Hence, rereading these parodies tells us about the violence and ideology used in language by the authority to augment power. By changing the line, “How dark inside it was inside the wolf!” (Grimm) to “How warm it was inside the wolf!”, (Ali 99) Ali, to use Derrida’s concept, deconstructs the whole text, so as to reveal the inconsistencies and contradictions within the text. (Bertens 72)

Chapter IV has discussed Ali as writer with a plural sensibility writing somewhat hybrid poetry, which is rooted in the eastern tradition and, at the same time, tightly glued with the western tradition. The chapter has attempted to read Ali as a transnational poet who transcends to be categorized as a poet belonging to certain area and writing about
something particular. The chapter has tried to read some poems like “From Another
Desert” in detail to discuss diaspora, métissage, creolization, transculturation in his
poetry which mark his plural identity. The chapter has further discussed Sufi influences
on Agha Shahid Ali which have been as a result of his upbringing. The chapter has tried
to show that the influence is only mechanical and not a result of some experience,
therefore not to be confused with tradition of Rumi and Kabir as Amitav Ghosh writes.
(322) Ali, however, has used lot of Sufi symbols and the concept of *whadatul wajood*
(Unity of Being) which has been discussed in the chapter. Ali’s identity is formed due to
this culturally plural and transnational living. He carries this exilic identity always with
him. The chapter has tried to work out in detail on his use of the metaphor of Ishmael,
who becomes a prototype for him.

Chapter V concentrates on the formal aspects of Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry
particularly with reference to his ghazals and translations of Faiz Ahmad Faiz. Another
important aspect is Ali’s use of language, like that of postcolonial writers, is which he
abrogates, appropriates, subverts and rejects the Standard English. (Ashcroft et.al. 6-8).
The mode of language adopted is quite syncretistic where sounds and modes of Urdu
language get conjugated with English. His use of language is eclectic where one finds a
mélange of different styles which in turn affect the semiotics of his poetry. Ghazal is one
of the oldest poetic forms which came from Arabic to Persian and then to Urdu. The
ghazal like any other type of poetry is both about form and content. The subject of a
ghazal is normally love written in the form of couplets called *sher* and each line of a
couplet is called *misra*. Ghazal has rhythm and rhyme which are called *qafia* and *radif*
respectively; both *radif* and *qafia* follow a scheme aa ba ca da ea and so on. Each couplet
is independent in respect of its subject. The chapter has discussed the evolution of ghazal in English literature which started with the translation of Persian classics into English. It, however, got impetus with Ijaz Ahmad’s *Ghazals of Ghalib* followed by ghazals by John Hollander and Adrienne Rich. Ali wrote ghazals in the Indo-Islamic tradition of Ghazal writing called *Sabke-Hindi*, and he borrowed his metaphors and symbols from this tradition. The chapter has discussed both the books of ghazals: Ali’s *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* and his edited book *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English*. The chapter also deals with Ali’s translation of Faiz Ahmad Faiz which Ali published as a book entitled *The Rebel’s Silhouette*, where his translations are more of a transcreation. Ali has transcreate the essence in free verse which is poetic and known the best translations of Faiz in the English language along with that of Naomi Lazard and V G Kiernan.

The thesis is a humble attempt to study the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali, and does not claim to be conclusive work on his poetry.
Works Cited


