



Writing/Adapting Ghazal in English: A Select Study of Agha Shahid Ali's *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*

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Abstract

Poetry in English is characterized by its diversity of various poetic genres: ballad, sonnet, elegy, epic, lyric, ode, and so on. But the introduction of ghazal form in English poetry was a kind of 'paradigm shift' as, for the first time; an 'exotic' poetic genre was successfully experimented. Ghazal is an archetypal poetic form in oriental languages that originated from the Arabic language and then traversed into many languages of the world. Agha Shahid Ali, a Kashmiri born American poet, is credited with introducing the authentic Persian ghazal form into the English language. He made this classical poetic form known to the western world by editing a landmark anthology which comprises of ghazals written by 107 poets and by writing his own book of ghazals in English language. The experimentation of ghazal form in English widened the horizons of English poetry and the scope of ghazal genre. This paper, taking theselect ghazals of Agha Shahid Ali's ghazal collection *Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals* (2004) as a reference point argues how he defies the English poetic canon and explores a new way of writing poetry. It further seeks to find out whether he was successful in adapting this genre in the English language, both in terms of its form and theme, in the ways it was used in the Arabic, Indo-Persian and Urdu poetry.

Key Words: Adaptation, Agha Shahid Ali, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, Canon, English, Ghazal.

Introduction

Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001), Kashmiri-American poet, translator, essayist and anthologist is a globally acknowledged ghazal writer in English who has among his admirers, people like Noam Chomsky, Amitav Gosh,

Edward Said and Mahmoud Darwish. He grew up in Kashmir in a highly educated Kashmiri, Urdu and English speaking Agha family where poetry was quoted in English, Persian and Urdu all the time. Ali is a poet of Exile but this exile is self-exile and intentional. He called himself a ‘triple exile’, ‘multiple exile’, ‘expatriate’. He blissfully lived the life of exile but his mind was engrossed with diasporic consciousness that is overtly reflected in his poetry. The poetry of Agha Shahid Ali is replete with the themes of loss, longing, exile, home, homeland, culture, political uncertainty etc. It is characterised by the crafty use of allusions from diverse literary traditions—Urdu, Kashmiri, Arabic, Persian and European.

Shahid started writing poetry in free verse but ended up as a ghazal writer. “His mother’s illness and death, and a chance meeting with James Merrill [...] made the shift inevitable” (Hall 12). Shahid’s passion for the music of Begum Akhtar, the reverence for Faiz and the influence of James Merrill also impelled him to write ghazals in the English language. Agha Shahid Ali is considered a pioneer who introduced the authentic Persian form of ghazal in English poetic tradition. The paper analyses the three ghazals from his poetic collection *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* to ascertain whether he succeeded in adapting the authentic ghazal form in a foreign language.

Ghazal: History and Structure

The word “ghazal” etymologically means the wail of the wounded gazelle. It also means love cooings to the beloved. It originated from the pre-Islamic Arabian Qasida. From Arabia, the ghazal spread into Africa, Spain and Persia. The Persian form became its authentic version which innovated certain features that were absent in Arabic form. Like English sonnet, it is an untitled poem in the

form of couplets woven together in the same metre. Agha Shahid Ali says that “in its canonical Persian (Farsi) form, arrived at in the eleventh century, it is composed of autonomous or semi-autonomous couplets that are united by a strict scheme of rhyme, refrain, and line length.” (*Call Me Ishmael Tonight* 19). Each couplet exists as a miniature poem that can be quoted or comprehended without the context of other couplets.

One couplet may be comic, another tragic, another romantic, another religious, [and] another political [...] One should at any time be able to pluck a couplet like a stone from a necklace, and it should continue to shine in its vivid isolation, though it would have a different lustre among and with the other stones. The organic unity among the couplets of a ghazal is only because of its form (Ali *Ravishing* 2-3).

The opening couplet called *matla* sets the tone and scheme of the poem and concludes with a signature couplet called *makta* that often contains the pen name of the poet called *takhalus*. The last couplet is more subjective in its tone. Here “the poet may express his/her state of mind, or describe his/her religious faith, or pray for his/her beloved, or indulge in poetic self-praise” (Chatterjee 184). The rhyme scheme throughout the poem is aa, ba, ca, da and so on. Another convention of classical ghazal is the use of *radif*, where the end words of the introductory couplet are repeated in the second hemistich of each subsequent couplet. Once the poet establishes this pattern, “she or he becomes its slave” (Ali, *Ravishing* 3). A ghazal without *qâfiyah* and *radif* is called *ghairmuradaf* ghazal. However, the defining feature of a ghazal is “formally, a specific type of metrical construction (*bayt/sher*) with monorhyme (*qâfiyah*), and thematically, the topic of longing for some

object of desire” (Jalal). This theme of longing and the particular verse form has been inherited from Qasida. But from the thirteenth century, because of the influence of Sufism, the theme of erotic or romantic love of ghazals began to lessen and it becomes a form for the expression of a spiritual longing for the Divine. Sufi poets used the love and erotic images of the ghazal to express their Divine love.

The efflorescence of Persian ghazal form gradually materialised in other parts of the world. The translations of ghazals by Goethe and his oriental-influenced *West-Eastern Divan* (1819) motivated German poets like Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866) and August Graf von Platen (1796- 1835) to write in the ghazal form. John Thompson, English-Canadian poet is “credited with introducing the ghazal to Canadian readers during 1970s through his underground classic, *Stilt Jack* (1974)” (Sewall 112). In the Indian subcontinent, Amir Khusro was one of the earliest poets who wrote ghazals in the Persian language. Mir, Ghalib, Faiz, Iqbal were renowned writers of Urdu ghazal. In 1968, “the ghazal as an idea if not a poetic form, entered American poetry” (Caplan 2). The wave of New Criticism in America made the florescence of ghazal form more convenient and receptive to the American poets. Poets like James Harrison and Adrienne Rich etc. experimented paradoxically with free verse ghazals in English poetry. Adrienne Rich, who worked on the translation project of the ghazals of Ghalib, wrote a sequence of free verse ghazals which include *Homage to Ghalib*, the first ghazal sequence published by an American poet, and *The Blue Ghazals*. But Ali says that what those American poets wrote are not ghazals, because “the ghazal has a very strict formal unity, with a certain cultural location” (Benevento 264). These American poets have either misunderstood or

ignored the form, but Ali “mounted a campaign for the Persian model as ‘the real thing’” (Caplan 10). He promoted it by editing a landmark anthology, *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English* (2000) and by writing his own book of ghazals *Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals* (2003).

Call Me Ishmael Tonight:

Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals (2003) is a climax of Agha Shahid Ali’s poetic oeuvre that was published posthumously. The book consists of thirty-four ghazals of varied length and nature dedicated to different persons. A ghazal is “composed of a series of between five and twelve autonomous or semi-autonomous two-line verses called *shi’r*” (Sewell 105), but the number of couplets in Ali’s ghazal collection range from single to fifteen couplets. The thematic concerns that dominate *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* are love, loss, longing, language, nostalgia, culture, identity, Kashmir, American life et al. It is “filled with references to the first Gulf War and to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and it confronts ultimate realities of war, faith, and mortality in personal as well as political terms” (Damrosch 8). It is his seminal work for it both expounds his outset of ghazal and resumes his project of revivifying the ghazal genre by writing his ‘authentic’ ghazals in English. I have selected only three of his ghazals from this volume to explicate the argument.

“By Exiles”

The ghazal “By Exiles” is dedicated to Palestinian-American poet, Edward Said. The poem defies the tradition of love and longing of the Persian ghazal and ventilates the contemporary themes of estrangement,

displacement, loss and exile. Although it exploits the traditional theme of erotic or Divine love and longing, it employed the same imagery of Persian ghazal like heart, Mansoor, God, Physician, Majnoon, wine, saqi (Cup-Bearer), beloved etc. to address the postmodern and post-colonial crisis of exile. The refrain 'exile' mirrors the repetitive nature of the poet's agony of loss and separation that he suffers throughout his life. The poet intends his readers to experience the pangs and pains that one confronts in exile. "Exploiting the full length that the canonical form permits, the twelve stanzas of the ghazal collect a community of exiles, according to the values of mutual trust and forgiveness" (Kumar). Just like the twelve rhymes of the word 'exiled' in conjunction with the refrain 'by exiles' glossed throughout the poem, the poet finds the exile dispersed from 'Earth' to 'unborn Galaxies'. From his homeland Kashmir to other places like Jerusalem, Egypt, Hudson, Palestine, the people experience the horrors of exile. In the opening couplet, "In Jerusalem a dead phone's dialed by exiles. / You learn your strange fate: you were exiled by exiles" (Ali, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* 28), the poet is seen lamenting. The phrase "exiled by exiles" alludes to the Jerusalem which is a bone of contention between Palestine and Israel. The People of Palestine are the victims of exile by the State of Israel which itself used to live in exile thus 'exile begets exile'. This couplet sets the mood of the rest of the poem.

Agha Shahid Ali refers to historical/mythological figures like Mansoor Hallaj and Majnoon to objectify the predicament and repercussions of exile. The poem identifies a diverse group of exiles—Oscar Wilde, Bach, Majnoon, Saqi (Pen name of Hector Hugh Munro), and himself and proposes that "estrangement and dispossession are fundamental to the human condition; in one way or

another, we are all exiles” (Sewell 110). The mention of the Oscar Wilde also refers to the exclusion because of their sexual preference. All these figures face the same horrors of exile that Mahmoud Darwish mentions in the epigraph, “Where should we go after the last frontiers, /where should the birds fly after the last sky?” (Ali, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* 28). It indicates that there is no hope for the victims of exile. However, in the penultimate couplet, the poet provides us with a glimpse of hope for a better future. Within the community of exiles that Ali speaks of, there is a tendency toward forgiveness and tolerance. The poem counsels “If my enemy’s alone and his arms are empty, /give him my heart silk-wrapped like a child by exiles” (Ali, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* 29).

The concluding couplet of the ghazal: “Will you, Beloved Stranger, ever witness Shahid—/ two destinies at last reconciled by exiles?” (Ali, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* 29), presents an ideal model for reconciliation. The reconciliation between different cultures or different languages is possible because of exile. The blend of Eastern and the American culture or the English Poetry and Persian ghazal form is an outcome of an exile. So the exile here has imperative outcomes. The inevitable clash of cultures might finally be reconciled. A figurative reading, however, may suggest a juxtaposition or reconciliation of the literary forms of English poetry and the Persian ghazal form. The concluding couplet reveals three forms of Ali’s name: “Beloved, which is an adjective, ‘witness’, which is a verb, and ‘Shahid’, which is a noun. This way, Ali makes use of ghazal form both to indicate that exile’s destinies stay incompatible and to reconcile them” (Kumar).

“By Exiles” was written in total conformity with the authentic form of the Persian ghazal. It consists of twelve

autonomous couplets with traditional iambic pentameter lines. Following the Persian pattern of ghazal, the end words “by exiles” of the first couplet (*matla*) are repeated in the second hemistich of each subsequent couplets to create a refrain (*radif*). The words proceeding “by exiles” in each line rhyme with each other in the subsequent couplets thus make the rhyme scheme (*qafia*) of the ghazal as aa, ba, ca, da and so on. In conformity to the ghazal conventions, the poet incorporates his name, Shahid, into the final couplet (*maqta*). Kumar says that “By Exiles” is a poem of “isolation and relocation that Ali had to go through by being exiled first from Delhi, then from Kashmir, though technically it is not an exile”.

“Beyond English”

“Beyond English” tackled the issue of a preoccupation of English language, a former coloniser’s language and now a global language or *lingua franca*. Agha Shahid is aware of the imprints that this language has left on the psyche of people. He urges his readers to look beyond the prejudices of the English language. The opening couplet of the poem, “No language is old—or young—beyond English. / So what of a common tongue beyond English?” (Ali, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* 68), obliges his readers to look and think beyond the contours of the English language. It raises a rhetorical question for using a common language ‘beyond English’. Agha Shahid Ali has a vantage of being familiar to various languages and cultures. Therefore, in the rest of the poem, the poet displays the richness and diversity of languages and cultures beyond the English language. The words like “*jung*” for war, “*bhung*” for hashish are so precise and vivid that they have no equivalent word in the English language. According to Woodland, Ali “incorporates italicized non-English words such as— “*jung*”

(war) and “*bhung*” (hashish)—to make points about linguistic and cultural incommensurability, to resituate English’s own verbal and conceptual field in relationship to a wider interlinguistic and intercultural territory, thereby revealing the lacks and absences within English” (266). The third couplet, “If you wish to know of a king who loved his slave/you must learn legends, often-sung, beyond English” (Ali, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* 68), also mirrors the richness of cultures other than English. In the fifth couplet, “Go all the way through jungle from aleph to zenith/ to see English, like monkeys, swung beyond English” (*Call me Ishmael Tonight* 68), the etymological wordplay of Shahid Ali reminds us that “the jungle of English itself has been invaded and hybridized by foreign seeds—by words of Hindi derivation (“jungle”), as well as Hebrew/Phoenician (“aleph”) and Arabic (“zenith”)” (Woodland 258).

Although the subject matter of “Beyond English” is different from the traditional ghazal, it aptly abides the conventions of Persian ghazal form. It consists of eleven autonomous couplets with proper rhyme and refrain. The end words “beyond English” of the first line of the first couplet (*matla*) are repeated in the second hemistich of the first couplet and then in the second line of each subsequent couplets to create a type of refrain (*radif*). The words proceeding “beyond English” in the first couplet and then in each line of the subsequent couplets rhyme with each other, thus making the rhyme scheme (*qafia*) of the ghazal as aa, ba, ca, da and so on. It is written in rhymed iambic pentameters, creating a conspicuous form. The iambic pentameter seems apt for a ghazal concerning the recurrent war between English and other languages. To retain the Persian ghazal convention, the poet incorporated his name in the concluding couplet, “If someone asks where Shahid

has disappeared/He's waging a war (no, *jung*) beyond English" (Ali, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* 69). Ali is waging a cultural war of reconciling the two cultures of east and America by writing ghazals. It also implies his attempts of reconciling the English language with other orient languages.

“In Arabic”

“In Arabic” is a kind of tribute to the Arabic Language where poet both reckons the worth and laments the loss of the language of his forefathers. In this poem, Ali revises and modifies some of the couplets of the poem “Arabic” (“Arabic” was first collected in Ali’s *The Country without a Post Office*, where it was titled “Ghazal”) from the same collection. According to Woodland “Ali had shifted from a largely nostalgic to an anti-nostalgic stance by the time he wrote In Arabic[...] one dominated by nostalgia and the desire for return, and one dominated by an anti-nostalgic acknowledgement of cultural hybridity” (250). The poem revolves around cultural, historical, religious and linguistic circles. He rhetorically opens the poem by calling it as “a language of loss?” In the rest of the poem, through the myriad number of allusions, the poet states that the Arabic language is not “a language of loss” but a rich and vibrant language. In the second hemistich of the first couplet, “Love letters: calligraphy pitiless in Arabic” (Ali, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* 80), the poet explicates the sway of Arabic over love letters and calligraphy. He also presents its influence on perfumes and Kashmiri arts. The book *Guide for the Perplexed* (1881) was written in Arabic by a Jew Maimonides. The manifestation of Arabic is seen in the Qasidas of Federico Garcia Lorca (Spanish poet and playwright) who wrote in Hebrew. When one inhales a perfume, it reminds him/her an Arabic language. The

aesthetics of an Arabic language were present in the cries of a Majnoon. The wails that he utters were also in Arabic, “Majnoon, by stopped caravans, rips his collars, cries ‘Laila!’/ Pain translated is O! much more—not less—in Arabic” (Ali, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* 80). In the ninth couplet, the poet alludes to the Heaven where the language of houris will also be Arabic, “Ah, bisexual Heaven: wide-eyed houris and immortal youths!/ To you each desire they say *Yes! O Yes!* in Arabic” (Ali, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* 80).

The mention of the Palestinian poet Shammas in the sixth couplet and Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai in the penultimate couplet mirrors the confluence of Arabic and Hebrew language. It affirms linguistic and cultural hybridity. The use of these diverse allusions carries a message of love, longing, cultural identity and the need for reaffirmation. He attempts to deem his loss as universal by alluding to the literary figures like Maimonides, Anton Shammas, Garcia Lorca, and Yehuda Amichai. Ali has become successful in expressing their common love for “a language of loss”.

The signature couplet, “They ask me to tell them what Shahid means: Listen, listen:/ It means “The Beloved” in Persian, “witness” in Arabic” (Ali, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* 81), expounds the ambiguity of his name in Arabic and Persian. It displays the derivation of poet’s name or its meaning that effectuates love, longing and melancholy. It wittily exemplifies the intercultural play of language, form and meaning.

“In Arabic” is an antepenultimate poem of Ali’s ghazal collection comprises of twelve autonomous rhyming couplets. It is so rich in allusions that organic unity is possible only by its form. Following the Persian pattern of ghazal, the end words ‘in Arabic’ of the first line

of the first couplet (*matla*) are repeated in the second hemistich of the first couplet and then in the second line of each subsequent couplets to create a type of refrain (*radif*). The words proceeding “in Arabic” in each line rhyme with each other in the subsequent couplets thus make the rhyme scheme (*qafia*) of the ghazal as aa, ba, ca, da and so on.

The use of the refrain “in Arabic” and the employment of the rhyming words “pitiless”, “tress”, “digress”, “Maimonides”, “less”, “caress”, “seamless”, “Borges”, “Yes”, “S”, “stress” and “witness” adds musicality to the poem. In the ghazal “By Exiles” the *radif* “by exiles” rhymes with the *qafia* creates an internal rhyme. But, the *radif* of the ghazal “In Arabic” does not rhyme with the *qafia*. “This variation to the intentional rhyme of the ghazal is not an innovative improvisation. Rather, it could be a device meant to parody the naïve ways in which Westerners look at Arabic. Just as Westerners are not attuned to the true nature of Arabic, so are the *qafias*, not harmonious with the *radifs*” (Jalal 391). Ali remains devoted to the ghazal tradition by using his pen name, “Shahid” in the signature couplet. The meaning of his name dwells in the languages in which the origin of the ghazal also lies.

Conclusion:

From the above discussion and the analysis of Ali’s ghazals, it follows that Agha Shahid Ali skilfully and successfully appropriated the Indo-Islamic poetic form, the ghazal form and English poetry. The multicultural and multilingual background of Agha Shahid Ali has not addled his memory but provided him with an opportunity to assimilate novel things in English poetry. One witnesses a cultural crisscrossing in his writing. His ghazals are not the traditional and abstract reflection of love and longing

but dwell on the themes of a personal and political oeuvre. The structure of “By Exiles” shows the controlling hand of a talented poet who creates a true ghazal that is historical in form and modern in the subject matter. His success and artifice is seen in this poem where he depicts the postmodern crisis of exile in the classical Persian ghazal form. Ali in the ghazal “In Arabic” explicates the status and attitude of outsiders vis-à-vis the Arabic language that is undesirable. In “Beyond English”, we discern that the theme of English as a colonizer’s language runs throughout the poem as a kind of leitmotif. Contrary to the authentic ghazal convention, the subject of love and longing for the beloved that is predominant in the Persian ghazal form, Ali’s subject matter is more contemporary and compatible to the postmodern era. He renews trite ghazal imagery with contemporary themes and consolidated these in the English poetic tradition. Therefore, the central theme in the ghazals of Agha Shahid Ali is exile, and the central form is ghazal. Ali not only experiments but adopts the new poetic form, the ghazal form, in the English Language. He defies the canonical poetic form of English poetry and gifts it with new poetic genre or ghazal form. He rejuvenates both the ghazal genre by liberating it from the traditional archetypes of love and longing and the English poetry by introducing the orient ghazal form. Like English sonnets, Japanese Haiku and Indian Bhakti poetry, the ghazal too demands serious contemplation and re-working which Agha Shahid Ali did dexterously. He is globally acknowledged and acclaimed for adapting an ‘exotic’ ghazal genre, to synthesise it with the English language and made it known to those who are unfamiliar about it.

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