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A Poet’s Postcards: Writing as Connecting in Agha Shahid Ali’s Poetry

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Abstract:

Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry is patently about communicating – between a lover and his beloved. The meaning of beloved, however, is broad in its scope in Ali’s poetry. It could be home, parent, friend, another poet, a singer or an art form. The act of communication – or the inability to communicate or the impossibility of it – make the subject of several of Ali’s poems. The poems range from impressionistic to surrealistic in appearance and elegy to ghazal in form. The poems brilliantly sustain their emotion or situation – communicating or communication, to be precise – yet the presentation and structure of the poems, however, are invariably fluidic. In other words, the poet is at once immersed in and experimenting with his subject as well as art. Through his act of writing verse, then, the poet is connecting consciously at various levels with the readers and the world. This article explores the kinds and ways of communicating in Agha Shadi Ali’s poetry.

Keywords: Agha Shahid Ali, poetry, writing, connecting, communicating.

Agha Shahid Ali attached much importance to putting things in writing. “You must write about me,” Amitav Ghosh remembers Ali’s words to him and apprises the readers in his blog, “he wanted me to remember him not through the spoken recitatives of memory and friendship, but through the written word” (“Agha Shahid Ali in Brooklyn”). Ali in his own writing remembers, records and redefines places, people and poetic forms he held close to his heart. His poems are like postcards written to his readers.

Agha Shahid Ali the poet communicates under extraordinary circumstances: a Kashmiri living in America when Kashmir is in turmoil; a poet writing in English drawing his inspiration not just from English poets but also from Persian, Arabic and Urdu traditions; a lover of the art
form ghazal trying to adopt it into the English language; a son watching his terminally ill mother die; and himself dying young in exile. Indeed, it is because of these circumstances, as much as it is in spite of them, that Agha Shahid Ali wrote his poems. Ali comes across as a genial, fun-loving person in Amitav Ghosh’s touching tribute to him. Yet, his poems display an inescapable, stinging loneliness. His friendly nature and his desire to connect are certainly at the core of Ali’s poetry. As Edward Hirsch reasons, “Poetry is the social act of a solitary person…the loneliness is built into poetry, people gravitate to poetry who understand a certain kind of solitude” (“UnLonely Project”).

In the second section of “The Blessed Word: A Prologue” (Collected Poems 171) in The Country Without a Post Office, Agha Shahid Ali tells his readers, that he is crying in the void. He writes in that void even as he sets out to list the variant spellings of Kashmir. He lists as many as eighteen alternative ways in which Kashmir, his blessed word, can be spelled. He may be writing in the void; he is nonetheless recording in his poem the assortment of ways of denoting and recognizing Kashmir.

The poem “Dear Shahid” (194-195) from the collection is actually a letter. We learn from the letter/poem that the writer of the letter is someone very close to the poet. The letter records the terrible killings in Kashmir and goes on to emphasize how difficult it is to get across a letter to anyone. There is also an interesting detail. As the speaker goes to post the letter to the poet, he finds another letter addressed to the poet. The speaker encloses that letter along with his own, thinking it is from someone the poet is longing to hear. It is a letter that wants to convey the loss to its reader, here the poet. It is also a letter that conveys of something lost and found, that is, another letter. Writing of Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry, Bruce King notes, “Nostalgia is not of an ideal world, a place of origins or roots, but of something missed, a past or future, relationships that will not develop, lives he will not have, histories he can not share except through an extension of the self through desire and imagining” (3). The poet’s writing, hence, is a continuous endeavour in that direction.

The most important poem in the collection is indeed the title poem “The Country Without a Post Office” (202-206). The difficulty of getting the message across is at the heart of the poem. Dedicated to his friend and mentor the American poet James Merrill, the poem which begins with an epigraph from Gerard Manley Hopkins, “…letters sent/ To dearest him that lives alas! Away,”
speaks throbbingly of a simple yet important aspect of life, writing and sending a letter, rendered next to impossible in the strife-ridden Kashmir. The setting of the poem, a masque in ruins and a makeshift post office, may seem like a throwback to a very distant past. But the poet is writing of the Kashmir of 1980s and 1990s which, unfortunately, has remained as disheartening today as it was then as far as communicating is concerned, with communication blackout on civilians imposed by the government lasting more than a month from 5 August 2019, the day Article 370 was abrogated (“Revocation”). It is certainly not what Agha Shahid Ali would envision for Kashmir in his writing. Although the circumstances in the poem are bleak, even sinister, there is a certain hope that is the character of human spirit. There is waiting, longing, consoling and waiting. One of the voices troubles the writer: “Nothing will remain, everything finished,”/ I see his voice again. “This is a shrine/ of words. You’ll find your letters to me. And mine/ to you. Come soon and tear open these vanished/ envelopes” (204). The tome of undelivered letters is inviolable, it is a shrine. There is both a sense of urgency and desperation in “Come soon and tear open.” Lost letters are lost selves; however, the speaker’s “phantom heart” refuses to give up and the writing of the poem is, “drawing the map of longings with no limit” (205). The speaker’s phantom heart takes a shape in the end with a phrase that lives on the border between admonishment and encouragement: “Mad Heart, be brave” (206). The heart is mad because it is hoping against hope; it needs to be brave because, on the one hand, it needs to endure the uncertainty and on the other, the news, when it hears, may not be good. To look back at the epigraph to this poem, “away” could mean away from the earth itself. It is as if the poet is completing in his writing a thought that inspired him in a predecessor poet and offering his creation to his friend, a contemporary poet. Epigraphs and dedications are a regular feature of Agha Shaid Ali’s poems. This is a phenomenon in his writing. It is quite possible to surmise, Ali’s poems reach out to their readers from beyond the text of the poems; and the epigraphs and dedications are what Gerard Genet would term as paratexts. Even in this poem, there are references to letters that are undelivered and the speaker quotes some poignant, puzzling lines such as “We are inside the fire, looking for the dark” (203). As much as it is a commentary on the plight of the people of Kashmir, it is the poet’s attempt at recording voices through his writing. Curiously, Agha Shahid Ali published some found poems; for instance, “Suicide Note” (296). While the authorship of such poems raises a lively debate, what is unmistakable is the poet’s sensibility in choosing what to pick and publish. “The Country Without
a Post Office” is important also for containing several of the lingering metaphors in Ali’s oeuvre: mirrors, letters, prayers, rains.

In Agha Shahid Ali’s next collection of poetry *Rooms are Never Finished*, which mourns the death of his mother, the poem “Lenox Hill” (247-249) is an effort at connecting eras separated by centuries and places separated by oceans to gather the common thread of tragedy. It connects the living and the dying/dead. In New York’s Lennox Hill Hospital, Ali’s mother, battling brain cancer in late 1990s, hears in the wailing of the sirens the cries of elephants during the Hun era when they were “forced off Pir Pinjal’s rock cliffs in Kashmir” (247). It is followed by an anecdote: “one elephant’s story: his return (in a country far from Kashmir) to the jungle where each year, on the day his mother died, he touches with his trunk the bones of his mother” (248). Through his mother’s hospital-dream the poet doubtless alludes to the massacre of Kashmiris and through the elephant’s story he, indeed, refers to his own mourning. It is a story he wanted to tell his mother but could not. But he is able to tell her in the poem when he asks, “Do you hear what I once held back: in one elephant’s cry, by his mother’s bones, the cries of those elephants…” (249). Writing offers the poet a kind of completion to his mother’s life, a closure to his mourning and a catharsis to his soul. But writing is not easy when thoughts are engulfed by imminent parting of the loved one, and the writer records it in the poem itself: “Mother, / they asked me, *So how’s the writing? I answered My mother/ is my poem*” (248). By this Shahid’s universe, the reader understands, is his mother. The grief upon his mother’s death is so immense that it overshadows all other griefs, including the grief he feels for Kashmir: “For compared to my grief for you, what are those of Kashmir, / and what (I close the ledger) are the griefs of the universe/ when I remember you – beyond all accounting – O my mother?” (249). It appears, at this point, there is nothing beyond the present for the poet to write. However, just before the lines quoted above, the following words ring in the poet’s mind “*The Beloved leaves one behind to die*” (249). The word “die” could apply to the departed mother as well as the devastated son, the writer.

The familiar faces appear and depart through symbolic mirrors in “I Dream I am at the Ghat of the Only World” (313-321). The faces are those of a ghazal singer, most probably Shahid’s muse Begam Akhtar, the poet James Merrill and the political thinker Eqbal Ahmad. To quote King again, “There are literary allusions, literary echoes and self-conscious intertextuality. Like that of many contemporary authors, his writing is self-referential in pointing to what it is doing and how,
both alluding to its structures and creating a metapoetic that governs its conventions” (17). In the poem, the poet is led by the voices of people who appear in the mirror/dream to a boat where an oarsman waits. The dream sequence moves back and forth, perplexing yet revealing. It’s the oarsman of the poet’s boyhood but the oarsman produces a book by James Merrill and the poet reads from a card that falls out from the book: “Before his untimely death, James Merrill/ requested that a copy of A SCATTERING OF SALTS, / now his last book, be sent to you with his compliments” (314). The boatman is the restorer of the lost time and the poet’s writing of it is, to quote from the poem, “ANOTHER CHRONICLE OF LOSS…AND LOVE” (314). To put it another way, the past is connected with the present through writing. What constitutes past in the poem is a long band: the Hun era of the fifth century at the one end and his mother’s life until yesterday at the other. The present is the moment in which the reader is reading the poem. The words “The beloved leaves one behind to die” of “Lennox Hill” echo in the concluding lines of “I Dream I am at the Ghat of the Only World,” but this time the poet recognizes the speaker: “SHAHID, HUSH. THIS IS ME, JAMES. THE LOVED ONE / ALWAYS LEAVES” (321). The fact that James Merrill, too, is dead, enhances pathos of the words of Merrill recalled by Shahid.

Agha Shahid Ali worked with various verse forms such as villanelle, sestina and canzone in his poetic career. However, his experiments with the Ghazal form in his poems, especially in his last collection of poems, Call Me Ishmael Tonight, stand out. The ghazals can be seen as embodying the influence as well as the confluence of multiple traditions: Persian, Arabic, Urdu, Hindu and English. According to Christine Benvenuto, who records some of Ali’s observations on the Ghazal form in English, Ali appreciates the work of James Harrison and Adrienne Rich, but he thinks their ghazals in free verse cannot be regarded as real ghazals; and he notes the achievement and departures made by John Hollander with respect to the Ghazal form (264). Ali’s idea of achievement, especially with departures, can be seen when he quotes Edward Said on Faiz Ahmad Faiz: “His major – indeed it is unique in any language – achievement was to have created a contrapuntal rhetoric and rhythm whereby he would use classical forms (qasida, ghazal, masnavi, qita) and transform them before his readers rather than break from the old forms. You could hear old and new together” (131-132). We see here the importance Ali gives to combining traditions, which he carried fervently forward in his own writing. Highlighting Ali’s contribution to the growth of ghazal in English, Jason Schneiderman writes, “Agha’s rehabilitation of the ghazal in English both restored the formal constraints for the English language reader and insisted on a
historical dignity for the form that it had been denied in the West” (11) and Malcolm Woodland in his study of Ali’s ghazals where he assesses the poet’s achievement chiefly as hybridizing the ghazal form in English, offers the following example: ‘The quietly luminous “Shines,”’ for example, takes its refrain from a poem by Mark Strand and alludes to at least another half-dozen of Strand’s poems. Such intertextual hybridization recontextualizes both the ghazal tradition and the poetry of Ali’s American contemporaries’ (255). Undeniably, by integrating the ghazal form into the English language, Ali has put it in a new perspective.

Ishmael in the title is a reference to two figures: Ishmael the religious figure, the father of the Arab nation and Ishmael the literary figure, the lone survivor in Herman Melville’s epic *Moby Dick*. Whereas Ishmael of The Koran symbolizes love and sacrifice, Melville’s Ishmael is a witness to the epic adventure and disaster, who narrates the tale to the readers, an act Agha Shahid Ali undertakes in composing his ghazals in English, although the chronicle of loss he recounts are of another time and place. Notably, Ishmael in *Moby Dick* begins his narration with the words “Call me Ishmael” (21), and Ali adopts the endearing words and manner for his title and ghazal. One of the ghazals in the collection, “In Arabic,” ends with the couplet: “They ask me to tell them what Shahid means: Listen, listen:/ It means “The Beloved” in Persian, “witness” in Arabic” (373). One can infer the intricacy, Agha Shahid Ali the writer of ghazals in English is both the beloved and the witness to the loss of the beloved.

The couplet at the beginning of the collection encapsulates the motive for Shahid’s writing: “I must go back briefly to a place I have loved/ to tell you those you will efface I have loved” (326). Hence, the poet is revisiting briefly, for the ghazals are a few and he knows that he doesn’t have much time left to live; the place he has loved is perhaps Kashmir or, perhaps, a long reach of memory where he can find Kashmir, his mother, James Merrill, Begum Akhtar and ghazals. His ghazals, he wants to ensure, prevent erasure of memory and of culture.

The leitmotifs of letters and writing, which are central to Ali’s writing, appear in many ghazals; to cite a few examples: ‘Your country also hod no post office until now? / “But no one’s left to write to there” – Ah! – to do things”’ (“Things” 333); “Shahid’s junk mail has surfaced in a dead-letter office…” (“Of Water” 344); “I read letters of the dead and am a helpless god…” (“About Me” 354). Absence and death of people and of an establishment resurface in the ghazals which reinforces the loss, thus connecting the circumstances of the present and the past.

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Writing his introduction to the collection, Agha Shahid Ali informs his readers of the aspects of the ghazal in Arabic and Persian traditions, “autonomous or semi-autonomous couplets that are united by a strict scheme of rhyme, refrain, and line length” (325). Achieving all such aspects while attempting to write ghazals in a language like English with its markedly different syntax is no mean task and Agha Shahid Ali is able to achieve much through his dogged perseverance and imaginative departures, often achieving depth in reflective humour. A quality of ghazals that is easily recognizable in the collection is that in many ghazals the word “Shahi d” appears in the last couplet as “Ghalib” does, for example, in the ghazals of Ghalib. As for departures, for instance, in ghazals inspired by Ahmad Faraz (“As Ever” 345-346) and Ghalib, there is the flouting of the strict scheme of rhyme, in all probability with the intention of being faithful to the original, and the astonishing result is that little is lost in translation and much is gained. To quote from “Not All, Only A Few Return,” Ali’s adoption of Ghalib:

Just a few return from dust, disguised as roses.
What hopes the earth forever covers, what faces?

I too could recall moonlit roofs, those nights of wine –
But Time has shelved them now in Memory’s dimmed places.

She has left forever, let blood flow from my eyes
Till my eyes are lamps lit for loves darkest places. (349)

Ali’s strength in recreating the ghazal form in English lies also in permeating the traditional tropes of ghazals such as moonlight and wine with his immediate and pervading images from American life such as telephones, big cities, travelling and consumerism. We can see him straddling the two worlds of Kashmir and America and also of ghazals and English verses, working constantly with the forms and words and improvising: “Yours too, Shahid, will be a radical departure. / You’ll go out of yourself and then into my word’ (“My Word” 338). Intertextuality is another striking feature of Ali’s writing. In epigraphs and dedications, he acknowledges his sources and inspirations; in several other instances, he effortlessly incorporates words, lines, texts, thoughts and ideas from his wide array of resources. Among such specimens, Ali echoes T. S Eliot in the words “WHAT THE THUNDER SAID Shantih Shantih Shantih” (“Shines” 335); recalls
Emily Dickinson in the structure of section 5 of his poem “In Search of Evanesence” (127) from his earlier collection Nostalgist’s Map of America, with several dashes between words and phrases, halting the mind in order to reflect the evanescent thought; and parodies broadly Dante’s Divine Comedy in “A Secular Comedy” (286-290). Ali acknowledges in Call Me Ishmael Tonight the earlier versions of some of his ghazals (380-381), which is a pointer to his fascination for and perseverance with ghazals. Ali playfully points at the powers and confines of the English language in “Beyond English”: “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!” (361). Similarly, his playful irreverence is noteworthy in his attitude towards God: “How come you simply do not age, Shahid? / Well, I wish everyone well, including God” (“God” 368) and “You’ve forgiven everyone, Shahid, even God – / Then how could someone like you not live forever?” (“Forever” 370). Wishing and forgiving, nevertheless, indicate the wretchedness of several things, given the poet’s background – of Kashmir in distress, the passing away of the loved ones and his own approaching death. There is also a recognizable urge in the lines where Shahid wishes to rise above human transience and to feel his own power. Such a wish gets a humorous expression in the ghazal “After You” where a hurricane is named after him and he fancies a news headline: “SHAHID DEVASTATES FLORIDA” (371). It is a kind of humour that moves from being self-deprecating to wry, again, given the writer’s background. “Tonight,” the penultimate poem in the collection, attains the quality of a prayer, yet records the loss, hurt and devastation and ends rounding off the major concerns in the collection, “And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee – / God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight” (375). The poet reminds the readers, in the last ghazal, a couplet, “Existed”: “If you leave who will prove that my cry existed? / Tell me what was I like before I existed” (376). You and I of the couplet could be the poet and his muse ghazal in that order or, even, in the reverse. The readers are left to wonder who’s saving who, or conclude, each making the other unforgettable.

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