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Agha Shahid Ali and the Form of Ghazal: Shahid's Contribution to Ghazal Writing in English

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Introduction:

Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001), a Kashmiri - American poet who was born in Kashmir and died in America, lived in Kashmir, Delhi and in the US during lifetime and wrote only in English. His fascination towards the form of ghazal from his early youth gradually developed into conscious practice of the form. This article is a study of Shahid's ghazals, it aims at presenting an overview of his ghazal writing and his endeavors with the form of ghazal.

Arguably, ghazal is one of the oldest forms of poetry still in practice; it emerged in 7th century Arabia, matured in Persia and therefore it is called an Arabic-Persian form of poetry. Rooted in the Arabic-Persian traditions, ghazal has a set of rules different from any other forms of poetry. In order to write a ghazal, its practitioner has to follow a particular format and structure. Defining ghazal, Agha Shahid Ali writes:

The ghazal can be traced back to seventh-century Arabia. 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. The opening couplet sets up the scheme by having it in the both lines, and then the scheme occurs only in the second line of every succeeding couplet- i.e., the first line (same length) of every succeeding couplet sets up a suspense, and the second line (same length but with the rhyme and refrain – the rhyme immediately preceding the refrain) delivers on that suspense by amplifying, dramatizing, imploding, exploding. (Ali *Call Me Ishmael Tonight 19*)

A ghazal is made up of couplets; each line of every couplet has the same metrical length; each line is called *misra*. The first couplet called *matla*, sets the rhyme and refrain, both the lines (*misra*) of the first couplet have rhyme and refrain (termed as *Qafia* and *Radif* respectively) which would then reoccur in second lines of subsequent couplets. Here is an example from Shahid's ghazal:

Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight?

Whom else from rapture's road will you expel tonight?



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Those “Fabrics of Cashmere—” “to make Me beautiful—”

“Trinket”—to gem— “Me to adorn—How tell”—tonight?

I beg for haven: Prisons, let open your gates—

A refugee from Belief seeks a cell tonight. (Ali *Call* 82)

The first couplet mentioned above is a *matla* having rhyme and refrain in both the lines, in subsequent couplets rhyme and refrain will be repeated only in the second lines. A ghazal has couplets totally different in nature from each other. Each couplet of a ghazal is an independent unit in itself, every couplets may vary in their thematic expressions, but they do share an emotional coherence, yet, ghazals having all the couplets about one single subject are also written. Traditionally, ghazals do not have titles but sometimes they are titled after their refrains. Three ghazals by Shahid firstly appeared in his anthology *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997) titled as ‘Ghazal’ which were later published with titles in *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, a collection of ghazals by Shahid published posthumously by his siblings Iqbal and Hena in 2003. Out of three ghazals published in *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997), two were republished in *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* after Shahid had revised them, third one was excluded as it does not adhere to the stringently formal structure that a ghazal requires.

Shahid added three couplets in the revised version of his first ghazal which was eventually published with thirteen couplets titled as ‘Tonight’. In addition to this, Shahid used epigraphs from different writers over his ghazals which is not the case with ghazals published in other languages such as Urdu and Gujarati. Epigraphs over ghazal hint its reader about perceptions, thoughts and ideas of the ghazal. Shahid used epigraphs over four ghazals out of 31 ghazals published in *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*. A ghazal published in *The Country Without a Post Office* underwent considerable modifications and was republished in *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*; Shahid kept both the versions in the anthology. Here are several couplets from both the versions:



(1) Arabic

The only language of loss left in the world is Arabic—

These words were said to me in a language not Arabic.

Ancestors, you've left me a plot in the family graveyard—

Why must I look, in your eyes, for prayers in Arabic?

Majnoon, his clothes ripped, still weeps for Laila.

Oh, this is the madness of the desert, his crazy Arabic. (Ali 24)

(2) In Arabic (with revisions of some couplets of "Arabic")

A language of loss? I have some business in Arabic.

Love letters: a calligraphy pitiless in Arabic.

At an exhibit of miniatures, what Kashmiri hairs!

Each paisley is inked into a golden tress in Arabic.

This much fuss about a language I don't know?

So, one day perfume from a dress may let you digress in Arabic. (Ali 80)

Changes with the rhymings can be clearly observed in the second version. The earlier version does not follow proper order of rhyme and refrain as per the requirement of the form while the latter sets a proper rhyme scheme followed by the refrain 'in Arabic'. This depicts how conscious Shahid was with the practice of the form and his efforts to come up with couplets abiding by the rules.

Shahid's stay in the US was not only fruitful for his academic endeavors, at the same time, it established him as a poet, translator and editor in America, but he was quite disappointed with the practice of the form of ghazal by the American poets. The form of ghazal ventured into America with the translations of Ghalib's ghazal carried out by Aijaz Ahmad and his team of translators and from there on, it was picked up by Arianne Rich and a few other American poets who started writing their original ghazals. Shahid registered



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disapproval for how the form of ghazal was being practiced in America and how Americans had ‘got it quite wrong’. In his opinion, Americans had failed to recognise its true essence and had the slightest idea about the opulence that the form of ghazal attained in languages other than English. Shahid’s keen interest and early exposure of ghazal during his life spent back in India had bestowed him with a deeper understanding of the form and therefore he was unhappy with how the form was being perceived in America. Shahid said:

Many American poets (the list is surprisingly wrong) have either misunderstood or ignored the form, and those who have followed them have accepted *their* examples to represent the real thing. (Ali *Ravishing 2*)

Any form of poetry would require its practitioners to know its structural and formal qualities along with its internal elements. Any couplet of a ghazal is an independent poem in itself, it could be read in isolation without any context to the previous or next couplets. Its strictness of *qafia* and *radif* (refrain falling immediately after rhyme) and the metrical constraint are also to be taken into consideration avoiding arbitrariness of thoughts in a single couplet. Shahid advocated a kind of a practice true to the form. Thirty-one ghazals compiled in *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* can be observed in these regards. Those ghazal in fact serve as an example of how ghazals in English look like. Mostly, these ghazals adhere to the strictness of the form except in some couplets where metrical length was not justified, number of such instances are very less. Shahid was a proponent of the form in America, he invite poets of America to contribute with their original ghazals in an anthology called *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English* which was published in 2000 wherein 153 ghazals from 110 poets are included. Among them two ghazals are the translations of ghazals by Ghalib and Faiz Ahmed Faiz.

With Shahid’s practice of the form, the form attained a definite place in the tradition of American poetry. He experimented with the form by using new devices such as epigraphs, he discussed the form in a way that an American poet would be able to comprehend. Shahid had internalized the form by reading, reciting and writing it, he was well aware of the true practice of the form as from his childhood days he was exposed to the practice of the form in languages like Urdu and Persian. Shahid through his efforts contributed ghazals which are fully English in nature. Shahid, of course, to some extent was successful in his practice of the form in a new language which had no established models of ghazals available. Had he been alive, he could have contributed more to ghazals writing in English. He died of a tumor at the age of 52 in 2001.



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