

# Hybrid Identity in the Poetic Form *of Agha Shahid Ali's Ghazal*



(Jones 1856)<sup>i</sup>

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If home is found on both sides of the globe,  
home is of course here—and always a missed land.

Agha Shahid Ali, "Land," *The Veiled Suite* (347)

This couplet represents the tension and ambiguity surrounding the concept of "home." Home is safety, the private sphere of life where an individual feels at ease from prying eyes. The emotional connections to "home" stand as an endearing personal location that the poet resolutely maintains as "here," but still "missed." This ambiguity is complicated by the use of a singular "home" that can be available to plural parts of the world. The dialectic between the present "here" and the nostalgic "missed" sets the stage for a home that can maintain a singular identity despite its presence in multiple physical locations.

The late Agha Shahid Ali's couplet has been chosen from a ghazal poem, an ancient seventh-century "Arabic lyric, whose couplets operate within an exacting scheme of rhyme, repetition, and syllabic consistency" (Benvenuto 264). Ali was born in 1949 in New Delhi, India, to a mixed couple (Hall 15). His father, Agha Ashraf Ali, was a minority Shiite-Muslim from Kashmir while his mother, Sufia Nomani, was a native Urdu-speaker of Sufi heritage from Lucknow, North India (Ganapathy-Doré 35; Kabir, *Territory* 140). Agha Shahid Ali grew up in an upper-class Muslim household in the "legendary Vale of Kashmir" where three languages, "Urdu, Kashmiri [Koshur], and English," were spoken, musicians and poets invited, and Muslim, Christian, and Hindu religious expression encouraged (Benvenuto 261-262). He later spent twenty-five years in the United States, earning his doctorate from Penn State University, an M.F.A. from the University of Arizona, and holding teaching positions at nine universities before his untimely death in New York City in 2001 (interview with Lyden; Ganapathy-Doré 36).

Ali's life was fraught with various identities, some intersecting and some parallel: "Kashmiri-American poet, Indian-American poet, South Asian-American poet, Muslim-

American poet" were just some of his self-described hyphenated identity combinations possible because of his writing at the cusp of cultural and territorial "complications" (Benvenuto 267). However, Ali was very insistent of disowning such artificial constructions if they threatened to oversimplify his identity:

First and foremost I consider myself a poet in the English language . . . All of those [hyphenated] designations would be true, in one way or the other, and if they are used in larger ways I don't have an objection to them. But if they're used simply to restrict me, I'm not interested in them. (267)

Ali's ardent insistence to preserve his identity as a poet, "I'm not interested in them," while still retaining the right to exercise his multi-faceted hyphenated beings, "I don't have an objection to them," would have been unremarkable had it not been for his asseveration of the orthodox form of ghazal in English language.

I will use this paper to show how the poetics of Ali's ghazal exemplify his hybrid identity while still preserving his position as a poet of the English language.<sup>1</sup> Ali was an American writer and a self-identified exile who so aptly represented Kashmir in his poetry that he was hailed as Kashmir's national poet. But Ali claimed to be neither a nationalist nor an exile facing discrimination and difficulties. He just wrote with the language abilities he possessed, with the poetic talent he had honed, and with the determination to be a harbinger of the Kashmiri struggle for freedom.

By arguing for an "authentic" and "real" ghazal, Ali was able to re-create a hybrid ghazal

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<sup>1</sup> Despite the different degrees of impact by the historical colonialism on diverse peoples, the burden of "postcolonial discourse" is [unduly] borne by writers and academic practitioners whose personal histories include birth, childhood and possibly an early education in one of the former colonies, but whose work is published and received by western publishing houses and academic (as well as other readers)" (George 172). Agha Shahid Ali, a "self-professed triple exile," thus fell under George's observation as a writer who carried the burden of the immigrant genre despite writing in the English language (Caplan). George suggests that English writers' immigrant history is a baggage they carry with them before and after their writings. Ali desired to avoid being pigeonholed in such categories because he saw his status as an English writer simply because he was writing in the English language, a logical demand (Benvenuto 267).

in the English language that had already been thriving in dozens of languages and cultures for centuries. This was important because the orthodox "real" ghazal has strict rules that ostensibly limited its use in English, a language with a long tradition of free verse poetry. Ali demonstrated that a ghazal's depth of meaning and aesthetic beauty were ingrained in the very rigor of its form; a rigor that many American poets were habitually ignoring. Ali's "real" ghazals are now not only an integral part of English language poetry, but also symbolize his hybrid identity due to their own hybrid poetic form.

I will begin by historicizing the ghazal as the oldest form of poetry in popular use (A.S. Ali, *DisUnities* 1), following which I will relate the structure and orthodox rules of the form itself as a creative metaphor for usurping the idea of a monolithic, essentialist identity in Ali's life. The professed rules of the "real" ghazal will assist in making the connection of a unique form that is particularly conducive to embracing hybridity. Multiplicity in language as expression, religion as devotion, history as remembrance, and geographical location as reality, combine to form a hybrid identity that become intimately linked to Ali's ghazal poetry. I will sequentially explore each aspect of this hybrid identity by demonstrating how Ali vacillates between a nostalgic past and a realistic present through couplets from his ghazals written in English language. I will conclude by highlighting how Ali negotiates the paradoxical locations of "home" by reifying ghazal poetry in English language.

The ghazal has been on the global literary map since seventh century, but only very recently (twentieth century) has been introduced into English language. During this long period many transformations have occurred that have bestowed ghazal poetry with its distinctive taste. Since ghazals' recent introduction in English poetry, poets have become accustomed to arbitrarily selecting components of ghazal to suit their tastes. Ali led a reactionary movement against this

sort of a selection and wanted to preserve the ghazal in its original format for the English language. It would be useful for readers to appreciate the history and rules of the ghazal over time to comprehend Ali's contributions to introducing the orthodox form to English poetry.

The ghazal originates from the Arabic word, "taghazzul," conversation with women. More aptly, however, "ghazal" means the woeful and anguished cries of the gazelle when "it is cornered after the chase and realizes that the game is up" (Ahmed Ali, *Golden* 12-13; Schneiderman 6). The sadness and longing of the gazelle's cries is a painful theme for the oft-troubled pairing of the lover and the beloved in the ghazal.

Derived from the longer Arabic epic, the qasidah, the ghazal did not separate as a stand-alone genre until the seventh-century Islamic Umayyad Caliphate. The Arabic form was constructed of two lines of equal meter where the lines, called bayt in Arabic and she'r in Persian, end on the same rhyme, called qafia. The Persians were so impressed by the Arabic ghazal that they adopted it, gradually making changes over time to suit their sensibilities. The Farsi ghazal became much shorter, added innovations such as repetition, called radif, after the rhyming qafia, and takhallus, the practice of mentioning the poet's name in the last couplet by the thirteenth-century. The radif was prominent in the poetry of Persian mystics such as Jalal al-Din Rumi and later Shamsud-Din Hafez. (Jalajel)

Thirteenth-century Persian ghazal innovations have evolved into professed rules to the ghazal over centuries. This has undoubtedly led to the form concretizing its place in the rich literary annals of languages as diverse as "Farsi, German, Hebrew, Hindi, Pashto, Spanish, Turkish, Urdu ... [and, more recently] ... English" (A.S. Ali, *DisUnities* 1). The first ghazals published by an American writer were Adrienne Rich's sequence, "Ghazals (Homage to Ghalib)" in 1968 (Caplan). She published this collection as an English translation of Mirza Asadullah

Ghalib, the great nineteenth-century Urdu ghazal poet. Pakistani literary critic, Aijaz Ahmed, was instrumental in convincing Rich to contribute to the specially commissioned centenary edition. He also furnished Rich with literal translations of Ghalib's ghazals (Barua 102-103). Other writers such as Judith Wright, Jim Harrison, John Thompson, D.G. Jones, Phyllis Webb, Douglas Barbour, and Max Plater became inspired to write ghazals after Rich's introduction of the form in the United States (Chatterjee and Malshe 191).

Rich was attracted to the "disjointed" nature of the ghazal through which she had the ability to express a certain "rapture" (Schneiderman 7). She was also fascinated by the "lyric form and aural appeal" of the ghazal that created a compelling aesthetic despite the mandatory structural discontinuities between the couplets (Chatterjee and Malshe 191). Rich's interests in the ghazal were more developed than a mere aesthetic appeal. Rich reminisced:

I found a structure [in Ghalib's ghazals] which allowed for a highly associated field of images. And once I saw how that worked, I felt instinctively, this is exactly what I need, there is no traditional Western order that I have found that will contain all these materials.  
(Rich 426)

The structure of a ghazal enabled the inclusion of many radically different ideas, emotions, and thoughts within one poem without harming or overburdening the aural appeal. According to Rich, there was no form originating in the West that could compete with the ghazal in harboring such versatility. Rich did not adhere to the strict rules of the ghazal by forgoing the monorhyme scheme. Consequently most of Rich's ghazals were in free-verse, which already has a long tradition in English language poetry (Barua 109).

Although Rich's translation of Ghalib's ghazals was a great service to English language poetry, the flouting of the orthodox rules of the form was tragic. Prosaic ghazals gained popularity; the rigid rules that characterize the real ghazal in Persian or Urdu were largely ignored. It was not until the 1990s when the conventionally correct form of ghazal poetry was

advocated by Agha Shahid Ali in American universities and academia. If Rich appreciated freedom in ghazals without employing their rigid rhyme scheme and refrain, Ali argued for the incorporation of the comprehensive rules of ghazal in English poetry without sacrificing ghazal's unique structure and aesthetic.

"If one writes in free verse—and one should—to subvert Western civilization, surely one should write in forms to save oneself from Western civilization?" (A.S. Ali, *DisUnities* 13). Writing in a form, as opposed to free-verse, is an intriguing way to "save oneself from the Western civilization," especially when one of Ali's self-described cultural permutations was "Western." By writing in an authentic form of poetry (ghazal) that had become corrupted by the Western poetics through free-verse (ironically, another reactionary literary movement) in a Western language (English), Ali felt that he was saving it from further disgrace. Everything about the ghazal from its actual form to its pronunciation was abused (the Western *g'zaal* versus the accurate phonetic *ghuzzle*). Ali wrote in form and "saved" it from "Western civilization" by making the orthodox ghazal an important part of Western poetic discourse.

Inspired by the tradition of the Indian sub-continent Urdu ghazal, Ali taught:

The opening couplet (called *matla*) sets up a scheme (of rhyme—called *qafia*; and refrain—called *radif*) by having it occur in both lines—the rhyme IMMEDIATELY preceding the refrain—and then this scheme occurs only in the second line of each succeeding couplet. (A.S. Ali, *DisUnities* 3)

Each couplet of a ghazal is independent of its neighboring couplets in a sense that enjambment is not permissible. The separation of the couplets of any thematic manner is of paramount importance (Schneiderman 4; Chatterjee and Malshe 184). This gives a unique feel to the couplets as "independent or semi-independent poems within a poem" (Ahmed Ali, *Golden* 8). The semi-independence of ghazal couplets represent an intriguing "blend of unity and autonomy" (Faruqi and Pritchett; Kanda 3). The ghazal as a whole represents the unified poem, but the

couplets, integral parts of the unified ghazal, are unapologetically separate from any abounding themes or characters. This disjointed, yet connected nature of the ghazal is what convinced Adrienne Rich to write in the form.

The semi-independent nature of ghazals is extremely important to the hybrid texture of the form. This structure of a ghazal allows for a staggering plurality of subjects, images, and moods to be captured in a modest construction:

[In addition to pain in loss of love, a ghazal can chart] spiritual self-improvement, moral affairs, philosophical points, bitter conditions, reflections on contemporary situation, despair, affliction and grief . . . that is any problems in life and any topic humanly conceivable.<sup>2</sup> (Akhtar 9)

Thus, a ghazal can encompass multiple themes as one poem with each complete, standalone thought as an unadulterated couplet. If couplets were randomly strung together and passed off as a ghazal, then the artistic value of the form would cease to exist. The subtle, almost playful changes in the qafia are literally paired with the rigid, pillar-like anchors in the form of radif to collect the gems in a string to showcase an even more beautiful collection. Agha Shahid Ali very poetically states that "one should be able to pluck a couplet like a stone from a necklace, and it should continue to shine in that vivid isolation, though it would have a different lustre [*sic*] among and with other stones" (A.S. Ali, *DisUnities* 2-3).

Each couplet in a ghazal, owing to its semi-independence, acts as a separate idea, a complete thought. Thus, a ghazal can consist of couplets alluding to a wide range of ideas, with only the unchanging radif stringing them together as a necklace. Here is a sampling of couplets from a ghazal written for Edward Said by Agha Shahid Ali:

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<sup>2</sup> My own translation. See Akhtar 9. Original text in Urdu:

تصوف، اخلاقی امور، حکیمانہ نکات، تلخی حالات، معاصر صورت حال کی عکاسی، یاس، غم و اندوہ . . . . . الغرض  
زندگی کا ہر مسلہ اور آسمان تلے ہر موضوع اس میں اظہار پا سکتا ہے۔

In Jerusalem a dead phone's dialed by exiles.  
You learn your strange fate: You were exiled by exiles.

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

"Even things that are true can be proved." Even they?  
Swear not by Art but, dear Oscar Wilde, by exiles.  
(A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 297)<sup>3</sup>

"By exiles" is the radif while the "-ed" sound in exiled/beguiled/Wilde is the qafia. However, each couplet represents an individual thought. The poet realizes the strange irony of the Palestinians being exiled by the proverbial people of exile in the first couplet. The second couplet invokes the "two poles" of the poet's life, "India" [I amend this to the more accurate pole: Kashmir] and "America," by relating them to an analogous freedom struggle in Palestine (Ghosh 11). The second couplet also pays homage to Edward Said, his friendship with the poet, and his love for the German organist, Bach. The third couplet playfully exhorts Wilde to swear by "exiles" instead of his high definitions of "Art" because exiles are just as real as true Art. In just a sampling of couplets in one ghazal, the astute reader can observe a "pronounced awareness of international politics" in the Palestinian question, the effect of music in bridging gaps of the exile, and a jab at a master literary critic, to wit (Zaidi 63). The range of subjects, colorful emotions, and moods in a ghazal truly make it a fascinating aesthetic of poetry.

Although the range of themes in a ghazal can be tremendous, similarity in themes, key allusions, and word associations across many ghazals can act as markers to relate couplets in a meaningful manner. The reader can make full use of the semi-independent nature of the ghazal to

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<sup>3</sup> Lines 1-2, 9-10, 15-16, "Ghazal." *Rooms are Never Finished*. See A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 297-298. The whole poem as an example of a full ghazal is in the attached Appendix (after Works Cited).

legitimize this seemingly odd collection. Ahmed Ali contrasts the ghazal with "European verse" by maintaining:

Although there is no structural unity in the form, as there is in European verse, atmospheric and emotional cohesion and refinement of diction hold the poem together, permitting at the same time terseness, intensity, and depth of feeling, uniqueness of imagery, nobility of language, and a high conception of love in its structurally unconnected she'rs [couplets]. (12)

The combination of intensity, depth of emotions, unique imagery, and nobility represent such a challenge for a poet that the act of writing a ghazal itself is a calculated tradeoff between deliberate assertiveness and ensuing entrapment. The allure of a ghazal is in the precision of this calculation followed by a departure from the poetic work. Once the qafia and radif are set in the matla, the "poet—with total freedom, I might add—he or she becomes its slave. What results in the rest of the poem is the alluring tension of a slave trying to master the master" (A.S. Ali, *DisUnities* 3). It is pertinent to understand that Ali's allusion to a slave-master relationship is in a stylistic sense of the ghazal and not as a literal, historical connection. Ali is writing from the direct Urdu ghazal tradition of poetry that had flourished in majestic courts of the Indian subcontinent and claimed perpetual knowledge of "subtle nuances . . . as a tradition" in ghazal poetry (Ahmed Ali, *Golden* 11). The slave-master relationship is such a subtlety that the metaphor is analogous to the traditional lover-beloved pairing. The poet, just like a lover, becomes the slave to the form as soon as the rhyme scheme is set because the poet has to abide by it at all costs or the beloved will never be "reached." Will the slave ever be reunited with his master? Will the lover ever find his beloved? These questions morph into the central tension that the poet is striving to unravel: Will the poet ever finish the ghazal based on the parameters he/she has set as qafia and radif?

The tension of the poet becoming the slave of the ghazal, the master, of his/her own free is built by the qafia and radif in the act of *writing* a ghazal. But ghazals are rarely read out loud from the first couplet to the last in popular discourse. Any couplet of a ghazal can be quoted "on the spur of the moment," recited out of order, or even incorporated into "another ghazal in the same rhyme and meter" (Faruqi 15). Ghazals are, therefore, not poems in the traditional sense of the term at all. They are part of the poetic oeuvre and, at the same time, removed from the customary definitions of poetry. This unusual tension places them in an exalted position of being in constant, irresistible flux much like the dynamicity of expression as it eventually yearns to break the shackles of a rigid category defined by society.

The charm of the ghazal is in its universality and omnipresence even when it is in pieces. Agha Shahid Ali wrote in this form to express his hybrid identity in a lyrical way that was personally affective: language, religion, history, and location. This identity is deeply ensconced as multiple couplets connecting across many ghazals because of their semi-independence from the ghazal. The popular discourse in a variety of ghazal-cultures recites couplets in no specific order, but the order relevant to the situation at hand. This will serve as a template for analyzing Ali's hybrid identity and foregrounding them in personal aspects of Ali's life. The "popular ghazal discourse" idea has never been used as a basis of analysis for ghazal poetry; this method will be used to analyze couplets in multiple ghazals from Ali's poetry, a first in English scholarly research. Since Ali was an incredibly versatile writer, writing in free verse, dramatic monologues, sonnets, sestinas, pantoum, and villanelle, ghazal couplets under analysis will also be contextualized with some of Ali's non-ghazal poetry (Shamsie 26).

call me a poet  
dear editor  
they call this my alien language

i am a dealer in words  
that mix cultures  
and leave me rootless<sup>4</sup>  
(A.S. Ali, *Silhouette* xii)

The "All-American Shiite-Muslim Kashmiri" Agha Shahid Ali was a poet of a peculiar disposition: at twenty he had already begun experimenting with free verse in a language that was considered "alien" in his milieu and left him "rootless," but he continued onwards despite the danger of social isolation (Collier and Plumly 349; A.S. Ali, *Silhouette* xii). Most of Ali's beginning poetry was free verse, prosaic with no rhyme scheme, refrain, or set meter. Ali rapidly progressed to more challenging forms such as the sestina and the pantoum, but he was always awed by the uniqueness of ghazals. Ali's multicultural heritage gave him an enviable plethora of cross-cultural allusions, word choices, and symbolisms to employ in his poetry, adorning even his free verse poetry with a sumptuous and enviable variety. No wonder a younger Ali unabashedly claimed, "i am a dealer in words" (A.S. Ali, *Silhouette* xii).

During colonial times, English language was scorned by populists as foreign and alien due to the British forcing its official use on the natives. Undivided 19th century India saw the rise of so-called "Anglicists," who favored English over Indian "vernacular" languages as a means of exerting domestic policy. Lord William Bentick, the Governor-General of India from 1828 to 1835, ordered the systematic replacement of Persian with English as "the language of government" in 1835 (Mohanty 57-58; Kiernan 28). Thus, English was viewed as a colonial encroachment by Indians before and after Partition. In his piece above, Ali observes that natives scorn English as an Indian language only because of its loaded colonial legacy. He never questions his practical attachment to it. In fact, the possessive pronoun "my" alien language strongly hints at the poet's intimate, and possessive, relation to the language.

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<sup>4</sup> Lines 1-6, "Dear Editor." This is not a ghazal. See A.S. Ali, *Silhouette* xii.

Ali grew up in a "culturally sophisticated, socially enlightened upper-class Muslim home" where his grandmother used to enthusiastically quote "Shakespeare, Keats, and Hardy in English; Hafiz and Rumi in Persian; Ghalib and Faiz in Urdu; Habba Khatun, Mahjoor, and Zinda Kaul in Kashmiri" (Benvenuto 261-262; A.S. Ali, *Silhouette* xi). Such a linguistically and culturally rich pedigree was going to be crucial to Ali's ambition of translating ghazal poetry from Urdu to English and writing ghazals in English as it imparted him with a "remarkable range and variety of sources . . . the literature of several continents" (Hall 15).

Ghazals are very much a part and parcel of the literary culture of the Indian subcontinent. From a rich tradition of Persian and Urdu ghazal poetry to oral recitations by poets at poet-gatherings called *mushairas*, ghazal poetry is also incorporated into music with extremely popular and well revered singers. Ali was heavily influenced by the permeation of ghazal and chose to write in an Arabic lyric, with "rules" devised in Persian, popularized especially as Urdu of the subcontinent, and finally transmitted by him in its orthodox form to English language. This linguistic diversity is a reflection of Ali's culturally-diverse familial background and upbringing. His household was trilingual with Urdu, Kashmiri, and English as the mainstays, but he chose to mark only two of the three as his "first" and "mother" languages: English and Urdu. He grew up

breathing Urdu in such a way that it is entitled to be called, at a culturally emotional level, my mother tongue, even though I used and use English for all practical and creative purposes; that is why I call English my first language. (A.S. Ali, *Silhouette* xi)

Ali considered Urdu a language whose "mere mention evokes poetry" and English as his working, practical language (A.S. Ali, *DisUnities* 1). Though Kashmiri was spoken at his home, he never mentions it directly in his interviews. His ghazals, on the other hand, are replete with references to the language that is the oral mother tongue of 97% of Kashmiris, but lacks official

support on either side of the Line of Control, the de facto border dividing Indian-Controlled Kashmir and Pakistani-Controlled Kashmir (Kabir, "A Language" 141). The Kashmiri language, called Koshur, suffers from what Ananya Kabir calls the "colonized linguistic consciousness," a systematic way to downgrade Koshur as "domestic vernacular" compared to the vortexing "affective orbit" of the more elite lingua franca, Urdu (142-144). Ali realizes the extent of this injustice and uses the ambiguous nature of ghazals to address this issue:

If someone asks where Shahid has disappeared,  
he's waging a war (no, *jung*) beyond English.  
(A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 362)<sup>5</sup>

At an exhibition of miniatures, such delicate calligraphy:  
Kashmiri paisleys tied into the golden hair of Arabic!  
(A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 225)<sup>6</sup>

These couplets have been selected from two different ghazals because in a ghazal, as a refrain poem, "words and phrases are transported across boundaries" (Woodland 253). The radif "beyond English" and "of Arabic" recall English and Arabic (Urdu is a Perso-*Arabic* language much like the ghazal) respectively. In the first couplet, the poet uses the word "beyond" to examine critically how Koshur is being lost in Kashmir. The poet is struggling to find an answer, but cannot reach a definitive conclusion because he is not only restricted by English, the language he is writing in, but also, Urdu, his mother-tongue. The struggle of the poet is metaphorically located beyond the English language, but the poet is not waging a war, an English word. Instead, he is waging a "jung," an Urdu word that also means "war." The juxtaposition of "war" with "jung" (also, war) exemplifies the conflicted mindset of the poet; he cannot even complete a couplet without Urdu intervening with his thoughts, in addition to English.

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<sup>5</sup> Lines 21-22, "Beyond English." *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*. See A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 362.

<sup>6</sup> Lines 13-14, "Ghazal." *The Country Without a Post Office*. See A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 225.

The second couplet shows that the poet has sincere sympathy with and sadness for Koshur. Arvind Mehrotra states that "though Ali has made exile his permanent condition, it is not what he writes about. Exile offers him unconfined and unpeopled space into which, he introduces human figures . . ." (139). Ali's exile might have separated him from Koshur, but ghazals traverse "boundaries" and are "unconfined" in their range of impact. Thus, the "unpeopled" space of the second couplet is populated by the paisleys, a droplet-shaped vegetable motif popular in Kashmiri shawls. These paisleys represent the Kashmiri people in their natural surroundings, adorned with their own, original language: Koshur. However, the reality is that the paisleys are "tied into" and possibly bound by the veneer that is Arabic. Ali references the paisleys earlier in a different poem:

O, alibi of chronology, in what script  
in your ledge will this narrative be lost?  
(A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 219)<sup>7</sup>

This piece from an earlier non-ghazal poem sets the poignant tone to the "paisley bound by Arabic" ghazal couplet. The poet sardonically questions the time, the history of the whereabouts in the story of the paisley. If Koshur stops existing, then the poet imagines a crucial component of Kashmiri identity to be lost. Many Kashmiri poets have expressed shame over their inability to write in their original tongue (Kabir, "A Language" 146). Ali does not pretend to write in Koshur, but instead he focuses on the more emergent situation: if he must write about Koshur in English in an Arabic tradition of poetry, he will write.

The radif of a ghazal gives the couplet its identity: a sense of belonging to the poem. The self-sufficiency of the couplets reflects their independence: freedom from any overarching themes. The rhyming qafia loosely retains a semblance of a relationship, like a veil, of the

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<sup>7</sup> Lines 45-46, "A History of Paisley." *The Country Without a Post Office*. This is not a ghazal. See A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 219.

couplets to each other. These professed rules combine to confer hybridity to the form. The ghazal is a hybrid; a united sum of its intrinsic components. The multiplicity in language has already been highlighted as a component of Ali's hybrid ghazal. Since Ali characterized his childhood experiences with open exploration of faiths as full of "possibilities of self-expression," religion as devotion is the next component of the hybrid form under discussion (Benvenuto 262).

Ali hailed from a family that opened religious expression beyond the confines of any one religion. Upon a young Ali's wish, his parents let him build a little Hindu temple with Krishna's statue and a little chapel with Jesus' pictures in his bedroom. The extent of his parents' liberal attitude towards devotion can be estimated when Ali reminisced, "daddy brought me a beautiful leather-bound book [to write poetry] . . . I wrote horrible poems, horrible poems. But that first poem was not a bad poem. It was a poem of Jesus" (interview with Lyden).

Ali's expression of hybridity in religion is especially crucial considering the historical misuse of religion as a way to gain power and control in and over Kashmir by various groups. According to Nyla Ali Khan, granddaughter of the foremost prominent and charismatic Kashmiri leader, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, nine-tenths of the population was Muslim when Sikhs invaded Kashmir in 1819. The Sikh rule "surpassed . . . [even] the unruly Afghans in its barbarism and cruelty. Discriminatory policies ruled the roost and the Sikh rulers made short shrift of the Kashmiri Muslim majority" (3). The Anglo-Sikh war in 1845 resulted with the British "selling" Kashmir for a paltry sum of seventy-five lakhs (7.5 million) rupees to a Hindu Dogra leader. During the century-long Dogra dynasty, Kashmiri Muslims were prevented from becoming officers in the state's military, their political opinions were disallowed, their lives were in "despicable conditions;" they were "traumatized and victimized [through] official corruption" (Khan 4-6).

The combined effect of discriminatory domestic policies of the Sikh and Dogra rule cut short access to education for the majority Kashmiri Muslims while preserving it as a privilege of the four percent Hindu Brahmin Pandits. This perpetuated the stark designations of the "learned Pandit" versus the "ignorant Mussalman" and the "purity" of Pandit speech against the "contamination" by Kashmiri Muslims (Kabir, *Territory* 89-90). The Pandits worked in concert with the Maharajas to "confirm and clarify" a strategy through which the former used their scholarly privilege to validate the latter, in return for exclusive access to more "critical [state] apparatuses" (Kabir, *Territory* 88).

The struggle and war ensuing Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 resulted in the subsequent dissolution of the Dogra dynasty as India took control over the Vale of Kashmir, Jammu, and Ladakh, while Pakistan had control over a thin strip of land it dubbed "Azad" (Free) Kashmir. The Pandit strategy of maintaining intellectual and economic privilege upon the abolishment of royalty was not available post-Partition. According to Robert Wirsing, Indian heavy-handedness in Kashmir and Pakistan's training of guerilla fighters fanned the flames for separatist movements in the 1990s (114). These movements gained steam in the forefront of human rights abuses against the Kashmiri people, but ironically many of the separatist fighters "routinely inflicted upon the Kashmiri people the same forms of brutality as the Indian troops" (137). Although numbers vary a wide range and are often contested, Wirsing estimated a mass exodus between 150,000 to 200,000 of the Pandits out of the Valley (141). Nyla Ali Khan places the number closer to 100,000 Pandits migrating to Jammu and other parts of India (114).

Thus, it is apparent that religion has played a complicated role in recent Kashmiri history with unnerving consequences for both Kashmiri Muslims and Hindus. Ali relates these painful chapters of Kashmiri religious history in one of his poems:

My memory is again in the way of your history  
.....  
In the lake the arms of temples and mosques are locked  
in each other's reflections.  
.....  
In your absence you polished me into the Enemy.  
Your history gets in the way of my memory.  
(A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 175-176)<sup>8</sup>

The poem reads as a "plaintive" letter from a Kashmiri Muslim to a Kashmiri Pandit (Kabir, *Territory* 174). The Kashmiri Muslim compares his memory to both the memory and history of the Kashmiri Pandit. In a land where temples, representing the Pandit, and mosques, representing the Muslim, are intertwined with each other, forgiveness and fraternity should be abounding. But the loaded historical and present legacies of the people from both religious backgrounds are a barrier towards reconciliation and peace. The Kashmiri Muslim and the Kashmiri Pandit are stuck in a destructive vortex of "memory" and "history" that begins and ends with finger-pointing, "my" and "your," signifying the hopelessness of the exchange.

Both Kashmiri Muslims and Kashmiri Pandits have a painful history, with the Pandits possessing a superior (discriminatory) power in the distant past and facing expulsion in the recent past. Still, Ali is optimistic for a solution to the religious dilemma: the common denominator to both religious groups is the demonym, "Kashmiri." This imparts a shared geographical location, if not a shared history, between both groups. Ali seizes this chance of reconciliation by giving prominence to the Kashmiri Muslim-Pandit similitude in his couplet:

At the temple and the mosque the rose petals  
lay all night perfuming the stunned water. (A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 350)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Lines 11, 16-17, 27-28, "Farewell." *The Country Without a Post Office*. This is not a ghazal. See A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 175-176.

<sup>9</sup> Lines 11-12, "Water." *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*. See A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 350.

Similar to the overlapping reflection in the lake of the temple and the mosque in "Farewell," this couplet appeals to a related aesthetic present in both places of worship. Rose petals, also proverbial symbols of love, are steeped in ritual waters overnight to perfume the worship houses for devotees. Ali uses the word, "stunned" not only to stylistically showcase the beautiful collage of bright rose petals swimming in water, but also as a literal descriptor—surprisingly both Pandits and Muslims use the rosewater. In similitude to its shared Kashmiri origins, the rosewater has become a shared ritual to prepare oneself before worship.

The mutual connection of rose petals in ostensibly "opposing" locations of worship is compounded by the radif, "water," symbolizing the hybridity of the ghazal. It signposts reconciliation between the people of the temple and the people of the mosque. The water used for steeping rose petals, much like the lake with "locked reflections," is merely a medium to express the love and closeness that the two religious communities should have for each other to live in a peaceful Kashmir. The actual unity is apparent in the "arms" and "roses" of the temples and mosques, retrieved from a lake reflection and "stunned" water respectively. This is also the corollary of the retrieval of land from the sea, Kashmir's eponym.<sup>10</sup> Ali's hope through his hybrid religiosity and poetics was not to remove the differences between Hinduism and Islam in Kashmir, but to convince the adherents of each faith to respect and love the other as neighbors and inheritors of their own Kashmir.

However the sad realities of detractors endanger Ali's vision of a pluralistic Kashmir. Their actions are agonizingly destructive to the Kashmiris, as Ali records:

It's 1994: ARMY LAYS SIEGE TO SHRINE,  
He appears beside  
me, cloaked in black: "Alas! Death has bent my back.  
It is too late for threads at Charar-e-Sharif."

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<sup>10</sup> The word "Kashmir" etymologically means "land retrieved from the sea" (Ganapathy-Doré 34).

(A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 186-187)<sup>11</sup>

Clearly, these men were here only to destroy,  
a mosque now the dust of a prejudiced land.

(A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 347)<sup>12</sup>

Chrar-e-Sharif was the Sufi shrine of Sheikh-ul-Alam Noor-ud-Din, a Medieval Kashmiri poet highly revered by both Hindus and Muslims. The shrine's fragile wooden structure was completely destroyed by the fire resulting from a battle between "militants hiding inside and Indian security forces outside" (Kabir, *Territory* 51). In the first piece, the poet has a conversation with the spirit of Noor-ud-Din, in the apocalyptic black cloak. The free-verse form appears as unstrung ideas, but the thoughts are complete. In a confrontation where the guerilla militants claim to be fighting to liberate the Kashmiri people and the Indian forces ostensibly responsible for Kashmir's security, the end result was the destruction of a hallowed shrine of a saint. The Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits alike lost one of their most enduring cultural legacies to religious paranoia—from the so-called "Muslim" militants and "Hindu" security forces. Violence breeds anger and frustration, but the free-verse form is punctured by sober sympathy rather than signs of anger. The poet expresses his sadness through the resolute finality in Noor-ud-Din's voice, "Death has bent my back." This is the lost legacy both Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits mourn.

Mourning the loss of invaluable Kashmiri history, Ali transitions from grief to resolute condemnation. He does not even impart the dignity of identifying the "men" who are responsible for the destruction of places of devotion, like shrines and mosques. They could either be militants, the Indian army, or both. In Ali's view, their identity is a non-issue because their

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<sup>11</sup> Lines 43, 63-65, "I Dream I Am the Only Passenger on Flight 423 to Srinagar," *The Country Without a Post Office*. This is not a ghazal. See A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 186-187.

<sup>12</sup> Lines 9-10, "Land." *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*. See A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 347.

actions are so devastating. The second hemistich of the couplet forlornly expands on what action the men in the first hemistich undertook: razing the mosque to dust. The finality in Ali's tone and the heaviness in his voice is apparent in the word "clearly." The poison of communal hatred and political violence is destined to register an expected result: the prejudice held by the aggressors seeps into the very land they claim to defend—Kashmir.

The beautiful landscape of Kashmir, with its cool climate, gorgeous valleys, shimmering lakes, silvery rivers, celestial chinar trees, colourful [*sic*] and perfumed flowers, sweet fruits, and birds of all kinds could only be matched by the peace-loving way of life of its people, which is familiarly known as Kashmiriyat and transcends all their differences—their majestic houseboats, their rich thirty-six course banquets called '*waziwaan*,' and their innumerable arts and crafts such as storytelling, dance, theatre, woodwork, papier-maché artefacts, pashmina shawls, and golden embroidery, with which they while away the winter months. (Ganapathy-Doré 34)

These highly stylized and colorful descriptions offer a miraculous escape from the ugly problems of the world—murder, rape, war, Machiavellian politics, plunder. Yet, in a sad twist of irony, Kashmir, the epitome of allure, bears the brunt of every single one of these devastations. To seventeenth-century Mughal emperor Jehangir, Kashmir was paradise (Ganapathy-Doré 34). To contemporary modern-India, Kashmir is their "integral part" (Kabir, *Territory* 1). To contemporary Pakistan, Kashmir is its "jugular vein" (Kabir, *Territory* 2). But Kashmir's paradisiacal and divine-like beauty attracted outsiders to its extensive shade, who then proceeded to burn the very shelter that gave them the generous refuge. This breach of trust occurred due to the complex political history of Kashmir generated during and following the British Raj in India.

"The British Government transfers and makes over, for ever [*sic*], in independent possession, to Maharajah Gulab Singh and the heirs male of his body, the Kashmir Valley as well as the area of Gilgit to the north" (Aitchinson 21-22). Notwithstanding the loaded gendered denotation (typical of the time period) of this declaration, the territorial implications were just as,

if not more, flagrant: the British gifted the territories of "Kashmir, Ladakh, Gilgit, and Chenab" to the Hindi Dogra ruler in the Treaty of Amritsar of 1846 without the consent of the diverse Kashmiri population (Khan 4). Although historically Kashmir referred to the Valley between the Himalayas and the Pir Panjal mountain range, the nineteenth-century mercantile dealings homogenized the ethnically disparate region under one convenient, political label, the "Princely State of Kashmir and Jammu."

The history of the princely state and post-Partition Kashmir provides a compelling political backdrop to Ali's ghazal poetry, which assumes the readers' familiarity with the complex power and political struggle of the troubled region. The repression of the majority of the population resulted from a power inequality and hypocrisy in the upper echelons of Kashmiri politics. With the power concentrated in the hands of the Maharaja, the Dogras developed tourist infrastructure in Kashmir from the 1880s, reaffirming "the Happy Valley" effect: a paradisiacal area that welcomed everyone with no worries for its own people. But, of course, this was not true. Just because Kashmir was becoming the "heyday of the [European] photographer-explorers and their framing of the Valley as pastoral fantasy," did not mean that its inhabitants were also living a blissful and comfortable life (Kabir, *Territory* 96). Ninety-six percent of Kashmiris earned their bread from land and the average annual income of a Kashmiri peasant family was up to a paltry sum of \$25. The Maharaja hogged one-third of the state's tax revenues for his private expenditures and the military; he spent nothing on education and healthcare (Thorner 174).

The imminent loss of despotic power and comfortable lifestyle was a reality for Hari Singh, the last Dogra ruler of Kashmir, upon Partition of British India in 1947. The division of British India was based on the Radcliffe Award, which made boundary demarcations to carve out the two new nations, Pakistan and India. The Award's writ, however, did not extend to the 565

semiautonomous princely states in British India; technically they were not British possessions, but under the suzerainty of the British Crown (Wirsing 14). Almost all of the princely states peacefully acceded to either India (552 out of 565) or Pakistan. But Junagadh, Hyderabad, and Kashmir states were to cause severe tensions. Junagadh was a Hindu-majority state with a Muslim nawab who chose to accede to Pakistan. India retaliated and forcibly integrated Junagadh in its territory. Hyderabad went through the same ordeal except it had declared independence before India stormed it with its troops and absorbed the state (Wirsing 36-37).

Kashmir was unique—it had a heavy Muslim-majority population with a Hindu Dogra ruler.<sup>13</sup> The Maharaja personally disliked Jawaharlal Nehru, India's Prime Minister and coincidentally hailing from Kashmiri-Pandit stock, and Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, the leader of Kashmir's largest political party, National Conference. Thus, the Maharaja signed a standstill agreement with Pakistan through which Pakistan was responsible for Kashmir's postal and telegraph system. Communal violence among Muslims and Hindus resulted in destruction of a number of Kashmiri villages and soured relations between Pakistan and Kashmir. The Maharaja released Abdullah from prison, who made fiery speeches advocating for "responsible government" rather than accession as the main issue of Kashmir. Pakistan panicked, painted a less-than-flattering portrayal of Abdullah on official radio, and warned the Maharaja from acceding to India. Armed bands crossed into Kashmir from Pakistan and attacked the state military apparatus. The Maharaja panicked and fled to Jammu, negotiating for military help from India (Thorner 175-176). Nehru agreed to help only if the Maharaja signed an "Instrument of

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<sup>13</sup> Out of the three most problematic states of the undivided India (Junagadh, Hyderabad, Kashmir), Kashmir was the only state with a Muslim majority population, but a Hindu ruler. Since religious separation was one of the bases for the Partition in 1947, Kashmir was in an incredibly tense situation. Accession to India would have caused unrest among the Muslim majority population, while accession to Pakistan would have been unacceptable to India. Independence was impossible because the Maharaja was under pressure by Lord Mountbatten.

Accession" to India. The Maharaja signed it and the same morning Indian troops landed in Srinagar to successfully repel the insurgents (Khan 30).

"We do not wish to win people against their will with the help of armed force; and if the people of Kashmir wish to part company with us, they may go their way and we shall go ours. We want no forced marriages, no forced unions" (Khan 36). This was Nehru's speech to the Indian Parliament in 1952. He had already promised the United Nations (on his own initiation) to hold a free and impartial plebiscite in Kashmir in 1948, but had never followed up with his promise (Khan 31). India objected to UN's decision to conduct the plebiscite following "progressive withdrawal of both Indian troops and tribesmen [from Kashmir]" because it violated its "sovereignty" (Thorner 177). Pakistan was incensed by India's reticence and obstinate refusal to honor Nehru's promised referendum in Kashmir. The two countries have fought three more wars since the bloody 1947-1948 conflict. The unfulfilled promise of the plebiscite remains a consistent demand from both Kashmiri separatists and Pakistanis to this day.

Agha Shahid Ali was well-versed with the tenuous history of the Partition that eventually contributed to the violent uprising in Kashmir in the 1990s. This was also the time period when Ali published a majority of his poetry collections, including his favorite form of poetry, the ghazal. Thus, it is unsurprising that most of Ali's poetry regarding Kashmir relates to the events of the 1990s uprising. The uprising or the "secessionist movement" began in 1989 with horrific consequences for the Kashmiris: excess of 50,000 Kashmiris<sup>14</sup> were brutally murdered and over 5,000 Kashmiri women were violated by the Indian forces for over two decades (Khan 114). The heinous collusion of the judiciary with the murderers and rapists was to such an extent that "since 1989, not a single case of murder, assault, torture, or rape brought against the Indian armed forces [was] allowed to proceed" (*Kashmir's Torture Trail*). The 1990s uprising resulted

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<sup>14</sup> *Kashmir's Torture Trail* estimates 100,000 Kashmiris dead since the 1989 violence.

in such unprecedented violence and loss of life that it heavily influenced Kashmiris and Kashmiri expatriates. By correlation, Ali must have been influenced by then-contemporary events and penned his poetry mourning the loss of innocent lives, destruction of holy sites, and sadness for his burning Kashmir.

The 1990s Kashmiri unrest resulted from a combination of complicated factors, ranging from abject "political mismanagement" and Indian culpability towards "violence and brutality in the state," the irony of the world's largest democracy rigging elections regularly—notably state elections of 1986 and 1987, the "lengthy" separatist politics of many Kashmiris eager to maintain their "Kashmiriyat,"<sup>15</sup> and Pakistan's "covert military support of infiltration" (Wirsing 114-119). Kashmiris had been living in an "unpleasant reality—one of Indian and Pakistani dominance" (Khan 114). During the 1990s violence, if Indian forces were exercising their draconian *carte blanche* power to crush the "rebellion," Pakistani intelligence agency was exacerbating the uprising by providing material support to "large numbers of disaffected Kashmiri Muslim youth"<sup>16</sup> (Wirsing 118-119). Some of these "dispossessed youth . . . unleash[ed] a reign of misguided terror"<sup>17</sup> that added fuel to the already quickly-spreading fire of separatist principles and by-hook-or-by-crook objectives. However, most of these youth were "improperly equipped," extremely undisciplined, and lured with "promises of generous pay by Pakistan" (122).

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<sup>15</sup> Kashmiriyat, according to Nyla Ali Khan, was a construction or "syncretic cultural ethos" propagated by Sheikh Abdullah's National Conference that called for a peaceful Kashmiri co-existence despite the ethnic, social, religious, and/or political differences among Kashmiris. The concept should not be simplified as a mere "secular credo" or a unification of the "complex . . . religious, social, and cultural [Kashmiri] identities." Instead, Kashmiriyat is a heavily charged ideology that forces the partitioned states, India and Pakistan, to "confront an alternative epistemology" compared to the historical partition based on political/religious lines (40-41).

<sup>16</sup> Indian police officials claim that anywhere from 10,000 to 15,000 Kashmiri men crossed the Line of Control to Pakistan for weapons training (Wirsing 136). This number is coming from a highly biased source (Indian army official claims) and should be treated with caution. By comparison, in 1993, the Indian counterinsurgency forces in Kashmir greatly outnumbered the "insurgents." The Indian forces numbered between 100,000 and 150,000 (Wirsing 144-145).

<sup>17</sup> The communal killings included an instance of random shootings of Hindus in Jammu, targeted murders of Kashmiri Pandit lawyers, politicians, and judges, and rape of a Kashmiri Pandit nurse (Khan 107-108).

The atrocities committed during the 1990s violence had a lasting and debilitating impression on Kashmiri psyche. Indeed, Ali shared in one his interviews that "India's political troubles made him ache for Kashmir." The historical loss was a reality and he mourned it in his expressive poetry, "I think of people who because of historical forces have lost so much" (Benvenuto 266). Ali's sense of loss and pain for his troubled homeland prevailed even though he "self-identified as an exile" (Mattawa 1595). This sense can be felt in his inescapably dark yet unassumingly real poems on Kashmir:

A brigadier says, *The boys of Kashmir*  
*break so quickly, we make their bodies sing,*  
*on the rack, till no song is left to sing.*  
"Butterflies pause / On their passage Cashmere—"  
And happiness: must it only bring pain?  
The century is ending. It is pain ..... (A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 241)<sup>18</sup>

The troops left our haven hanging in the night and said  
the child's skeleton was made of militant bones.  
(A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 358)<sup>19</sup>

The children of Kashmir were different from the so-called insurgents who had crossed the border. These innocent young-ones had nothing to do with the chauvinistic "grandiose" ambitions of the political military or the insurgents. Their only crime was their chosen home: Kashmir. So they were accordingly punished.

The first piece is from a lament in which a brigadier, from the Indian Army is sadistically torturing young Kashmir boys. It was quite common for children to be shot dead for no reason whatsoever or kidnapped and physically/sexually abused by the Indian forces (*Kashmir's Torture Trail*). The army officer employs a heartbreaking analogy of singing—young children sing to

<sup>18</sup> Lines 55-60, "After the August Wedding in Lahore, Pakistan." *The Country Without a Post Office*. This is not a ghazal. See A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 239-241.

<sup>19</sup> Lines 23-24, "Bones." *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*. See A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 357-358.

express their early-forming ideas and emotions. The brigadier perversely describes the act of beating young Kashmiri boys as "singing" on the torture rack. They "sing" (read: scream) until they have no song left to sing (they have no voice). This alludes to death as these children have literally lost their voice forever or the severe psychological impact that has traumatized them into silence for life. The one who has no voice cannot ask for *azaadi*, freedom. The second part of the first piece is a reference to an Emily Dickinson poem<sup>20</sup> in which butterflies from "Cashmere," the archaic Anglo spelling of Kashmir, are analogous to each other because of their soft beauty. "Cashmere" also hearkens to the paradisiacal qualities that framed it as a territory of "desire" and "the Happy Valley" effect during the early Dogra rule. It is highly ironic that a place with an exalted beauty akin to the Garden of Eden and graceful movements of butterflies does not have its share of happiness. Ali questions in sorrow: "must it only bring pain?" Towards the end of Ali's poetry and the decreased activity of the Kashmir uprising in the late 1990s, Ali notes that the century is almost over, but the pain remains.

The first piece brings relevant context to the short, but brimming with meaning, ghazal couplet in "Bones." The troops refers to the Indian soldiers in the context of the 1990s uprising. They are working in the mysterious darkness of the night to hide their extrajudicial actions. The word "haven" brings a similar connotation to that of "home." A haven is a place that harbors safety and refuge from trouble. In common military parlance, "haven" may also refer to hideouts of the opposition. A place that was before safe for the subaltern, now becomes a battleground for the aggressor with superior military might. The first hemistich mimics a colloquial army imagery: troops in the cover of the night, leaving a haven (double-edged meaning). The second hemistich plays on a peculiar tendency of the ghazal: "the first line of every succeeding couplet

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<sup>20</sup> Dickinson's poem: "South Winds jostle them:" South Winds jostle them— / Bumblebees come— / Hover— hesitate— / Drink, and are gone— // Butterflies pause / On their passage Cashmere— / I—softly plucking, / Present them here! (86).

sets the reader (or listener) up so that the second line amplifies, surprises, explodes" (A.S. Ali, *DisUnities* 8). After a relatively harmless first line, the reader is, however, unprepared for the horror that awaits: "the child's skeleton was made of militant bones." The troops were not just performing a routine inspection, but also nonchalantly murdering a child. The brutality of the action is so moving that the poet chooses not to speak of the actual murder, just the cold and calculating statement of the army—the child was a separatist militant.

Investigations of the state-sponsored violence in Kashmir revealed the "barbarism" of Indian troops during 1990s (Khan 104). The Army *jawans*, soldiers, had "no excuse of self-defence [*sic*]" yet they fired at unarmed demonstrators, "pumped bullets into bodies of injured people in Gow Kadal [Srinagar]," and killed bus passengers after "inventing a false story," to name just some of a multitude of atrocities (Bose et al. 652). The Armed Special Powers Act granted immunity to the troops and the much-reviled euphemistic Public Safety Act (PSA) gave the military the power to imprison any Kashmiri accused of terrorist inclinations for up to a year without charges, trial, or legal counsel (Wirsing 156-157). Some Kashmiri families awaited news of their loved ones indefinitely because their relatives were never heard from again<sup>21</sup>. Ali captures this paranoia in another ghazal couplet:

Just a few return from dust, disguised as roses.  
What hopes the earth forever covers, what faces?  
(A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 349)<sup>22</sup>

This couplet (and the ghazal) is actually a very well-done translation by Ali of the 19th century Urdu ghazal maestro, Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib. Ali introduced into English language the practice of "writing ghazals on the *zamin*, or ground, of another poet's writings." A couplet, a

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<sup>21</sup> Since 1989, 8,000 Kashmiris have "disappeared," suspected kidnapped and killed by Indian troops, according to a UN Report. Parvez Imroz, a Kashmiri pro-bono human rights lawyer, found evidence of 6,000 unmarked, mass graves, with only one-quarter of Kashmir surveyed. India denies these reports and refused entry to the UN Special Rapporteur on Disappearances (*Kashmir's Torture Trail*).

<sup>22</sup> Lines 1-2, "Not All, Only A Few Return (*after Ghalib*)." *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*. See A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 349.

radif or a qafia, or both, of another poet "could be taken and improvised, adding new possibilities" (Zaidi 63). Ali is fantastically successful in coining and maintaining a radif in English, "roses / faces / places / effaces etc." Nevertheless, Ali is technically not writing on the *zamin* of Ghalib because he is translating the poem in his own expressive way:

Full of fine forms who went into entombment,  
Not all but some in flowers surface.<sup>23</sup>

Ali has accomplished something unique in this couplet that he courteously writes "after Ghalib," not "translated from Ghalib." Ali has written on the *zamin* of Ghalib's couplet and transformed it to a Kashmiri allusion a century and a half later. Ghalib's original lines speak of the "lala-o-gul," tulips and roses, and that only some of the flowers can showcase such delicate beauty from the same soil. Ali's translation, rather adaptation, has a more apocalyptically relevant feel to it: mass graves of noncombatant Kashmiris who "disappeared" during the 1990s. In the documentary *Kashmir's Torture Trail*, an overflowing-grassland-turned-graveyard is shown. The grave-markers are short wooden sticks with a white plaque. Written in Urdu, a grave-marker says: "In the Name of God. Martyred on 24th August 2009. Black bearded young man." Another reads: "White bearded person."<sup>24</sup> These graves are the "few" that "returned from dust" in Ali's words. There are many Kashmiris whose relatives are lying in unmarked graves, their faces, their hopes covered forever in dust and wilderness.

It is pertinent to note that Ali died of brain cancer in December of 2001 so the deaths in the documentary had occurred eight years after his death. However, similar murders and mass graves had occurred at the height of the insurgency. Furthermore, the power of this couplet to

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<sup>23</sup> Original text of Ghalib "Sab kahan, kuch lala-o-gul / mein numayahan ho gaeen, / khak kya suraten / honghi ki pinhan ho gaeen (translated into English by Geeta Chhabra).

<sup>24</sup> These men were lured by the Indian troops with paid-jobs. According to the local villagers, the Kashmiri men were then murdered by the troops who later claimed reward money from the government for killing "foreign militants." The bodies were exhumed and later identified as unarmed civilians (*Kashmir's Torture Trail*).

speak for an event offset by time is reminiscent of the timeless quality and history of ghazals. This connection recalls Faruqi's earlier assertion that ghazals are recited out of order to fit the need of the speaker, listener, or the situation at hand (15). This constitutes the charm of this poetic genre and bestows it with much relevance to our contemporary world.

A UC Berkeley student once shared with Ali after his guest lecture how much she loved his poetry and how familiar to her he was. He asked curiously if she was Kashmiri. She briefly explained her complicated identity (exilic background, lives in the United States, born in Pakistan, of Kashmiri ancestry). Ali smiled understandably and wrote beneath the title of *The Country Without a Post Office*:

for HUMA  
whose country this is —  
Agha Shahid Ali;<sup>25</sup>

There is a kind of an epic simplicity in Ali's dedication to Dar, a fellow Kashmiri-exile. "This" country can refer to Kashmir because *The Country Without a Post Office* is Kashmir, but "this" country can also be a qualifier for the present, America, a place where both Ali and Dar were conversing and called home.

Just a few months before his untimely death, Ali maintained in his characteristically charming, child-like laugh:<sup>26</sup> "actually, I am an American, you know? . . . And I feel very happy about it" (Plumly; interview with Lyden). Ali felt very much that he was an American, but cherished his complicated homes: "I am lucky to be imbued with what I'd call permutations of Hindu, Muslim, and Western cultures" (Benvenuto 267). When Ali wrote that dedication to Dar, he was helping her see that identity was as simple as assertively declaring: this is my home.

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<sup>25</sup> Informal conversation between Huma Dar and Agha Shahid Ali in the Lipman Room of Barrows Hall at the University of California, Berkeley on December 3, 1998. Ali was a guest poet-reader for the Lunch Poems Reading Series.

<sup>26</sup> I interviewed Dr. Plumly in-person on his friendship with Agha Shahid Ali. Dr. Plumly mused that Ali was beloved by everyone in the poet community. He had a child-like laugh; it was very charming.

The contemporary society is the "age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration" and the literature of "exile (risks to) banalize the mutilations" of the sufferers of exile (174). Ali had identified his poetry as written in exile because of his emotional attachment to Kashmir despite the physical separation from the struggle. But did that physical separation "disqualify" him for empathizing with the people of his heritage? Ali's writing was not a political statement used to further fanaticism or zealotry. In response to a question that he was the closest Kashmir had to a national poet, Ali remarked, "'A national poet, maybe. But not a nationalist poet; please not that'" (Ghosh 14). There is a gulf of difference between the two similarly-sounding words. Ali was content as *an* accomplished writer of the Kashmiri struggle, not *the* chauvinistic, nationalist poet. Indeed V.K. Kiernan, a translator of poems by Urdu ghazal maestro, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Ali's poetic inspiration, claimed that "to be a nationalist writer is easy, to be a national writer hard" (29). Ali had accomplished the difficult by embracing his Kashmir in a unique way: sponsoring conventional ghazals in the American English academia.

Rosemary George rethinks Said's "literature of exile" as "the immigrant genre" of the postcolonial era where writers of the genre vacillate between their pasts and their present. This is crystallized by the "distance that exile imposes on a writing subject" (171). Agha Shahid Ali was part of a trifurcation of cultures, various literary backgrounds, and spiritual inspirations that colored the way he viewed his history and his present. His greatest achievement, as a writer of the "immigrant genre" and as a self-described exile, was to situate his writing in a way that became familiar to his readers, notwithstanding their background. This familiarity removed any semblance of "detached reading" that has become the hallmark of writers of the immigrant genre.

Ghazal poetry has been called "the world's only popular literary piece that presents the

splendor of unity in abundance" (Akhtar 13).<sup>27</sup> Fittingly, Ali's ghazals are dynamic and interweaving—having the innate ability to house extremely diverse themes in a poetically pleasing fashion that hearken to a longstanding history of cultural enrichment. Agha Shahid Ali's hybrid identity had multiple locations, but he did not have to negotiate with what Bhabha calls the "beyond," the in-between nature of identity that produces the complexities of past and present (1-2). The comfortable concept of home through which Ali was able to not only negotiate, but fully exercise his multifaceted and kaleidoscopic identities is aptly portrayed in this couplet:

WHAT THE THUNDER SAID Shantih Shantih Shantih<sup>28</sup>  
 The peace that passeth understanding in Sanskrit shrines.  
 (A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 335)<sup>29</sup>

The Sanskrit hymn is the last line of "The Waste Land" and its closest translation, "the peace that passeth understanding," is in T.S. Eliot's footnote. Ali is writing these lines on the *zamin* of T.S. Eliot. In the original poem, scholars have often baffled on why Eliot did not add the Sanskrit word "Om"<sup>30</sup> before Shantih to make it a fully optimistic benediction. Chandran argues this was done deliberately by Eliot to show the inability of the "divided and distraught" personages to even meditate or utter Om (681-683). Ali does not add Om to his call for peace either. However, his is a ghazal couplet that is thematically independent of other couplets. The uppercase "WHAT THE THUNDER SAID" showcases chaos in the form of nature. But this chaos is met with a divine prayer for peace and understanding. Despite the missing Om, the prayer is said in a

<sup>27</sup> My own translation. See Akhtar 13. Original text in Urdu:

صرف غزل ہی دنیا کی واحد ایسی مقبول صنف سخن ہے جو کثرت میں وحدت کا جلوہ دکھاتی ہے۔

<sup>28</sup> Ali wrote his Ph.D. thesis on *T.S. Eliot as Editor* (The Poetry Foundation).

<sup>29</sup> Lines 15-16, "Shines." *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*. See A.S. Ali, *Veiled* 335.

<sup>30</sup> "Om" in Hindu Vedic cosmology is deemed as the source of life of all living creatures in the universe. According to the Upanishads, "The essence of these beings is the earth; the essence of earth is water. The essence of water is plants; the essence of plants is a person. The essence of a person is speech. The essence of speech is the hymn. The essence of the hymn is *saman* (chant). The essence of the *saman* (chant) is the *udgita* [Om]." The "wholeness of the Earth and its mutual relatedness" are explained by the Om, according to the Vedic tradition.

Sanskrit shrine, the birthplace of language, where there is sure to be a devotee who completes the prayer unsaid by Ali: Om.

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## Appendix

Ghazal<sup>31</sup> BY AGHA SHAHID ALI

*Where should we go after the last frontiers,  
where should the birds fly after the last sky?*

-MAHMOUD DARWISH

In Jerusalem a dead phone's dialed by exiles  
You learn your strange fate: you were exiled by exiles

You open the heart to list unborn galaxies  
Don't shut that folder when Earth is filed by exiles.

Before night passes over the wheat of Egypt,  
let stones be leavened, the bread torn wild by exiles

Crucified Mansoor was alone with the Alone:  
God's loneliness—Just His—compiled by exiles

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

Tell me who's tonight the Physician of Sick Pearls?  
Only you as you sit, Desert child, by exiles

Match Majnoon (he kneels to pray on a wine-stained rug)  
or prayer will be nothing, distempered mild by exiles

"Even things that are true can be proved" Even they?  
Swear not by Art but, dear Oscar Wilde, by exiles

Don't weep, we'll drown out the Calls to Prayer, O Saqi—  
I'll raise my glass before wine is defiled by exiles

Was—after the last sky—this the fashion of fire:  
autumn's mist pressed to ashes styled by exiles?

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<sup>31</sup> One of the many ghazals published by Agha Shahid Ali. Complete, for reference.

If my enemy's alone and his arms are empty,  
give him my heart silk-wrapped like a child by exiles

Will you, beloved stranger, ever witness Shahid  
two destinies at last reconciled by exiles?

(For Edward W. Said)

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If home is found on both sides of the globe,  
home is of course here—and always a missed land.

If someone asks where Shahid has disappeared,  
he's waging a war (no, *jung*) beyond English.

At an exhibition of miniatures, such delicate calligraphy:  
Kashmiri paisleys tied into the golden hair of Arabic!

At the temple and the mosque the rose petals  
lay all night perfuming the stunned water.

Clearly, these men were here only to destroy,  
a mosque now the dust of a prejudiced land.

The troops left our haven hanging in the night and said  
the child's skeleton was made of militant bones.

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

WHAT THE THUNDER SAID Shantih Shantih Shantih  
The peace that passeth understanding in Sanskrit shrines.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> The frontispiece is a celebrated ornament art image called "'Persian' Design" by Owen Jones (1856). It is permanent exhibit No. 1619 in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

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<sup>32</sup> A collection of all the ghazal couplets discussed in this paper. These eight couplets were chosen from seven different ghazals crossing the breadth of Agha Shahid Ali's poetry. For reference.