



## The Master Palimpsest: Decoding Intertextuality in Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry

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### Abstract

Agha Shahid Ali is a poet of international repute and is known for bringing to English, the poetic forms and themes from Urdu and other languages that are spoken in the middle east Asia and the Indian Subcontinent. Not only is he a master of versification but also travels to the far ends of human civilization temporally and spatially to find sentences and sensibilities for his poetry. This research article tries to analyze the use of intertextuality in the poems of Agha Shahid Ali by exploring his palimpsestic writing style which is layered and has loaded connotations. The article attempts to understand Ali's multicultural belief system and the impact of shifting geographical locations to investigate the construction of the poetic self of Agha Shahid Ali. The article endeavors to perform a qualitative textual analysis of select poems of the poet to figure out his place in the great tradition of English poetry, Indian English Poetry and World poetry. The paper, seeking the various connections drawn into his poetics from works of art and literature, also considers the use of memory as a technical device to create a transnational solidarity amongst world citizens.

**Keywords:** Palimpsest, Intertextuality, Allusion, Memory, Transnational Solidarity.

*Journeys end in lovers meeting*

*-William Shakespeare*

### Introduction

All great poetry has at least two things in common- it is churned out of empathy arising in response to pain and suffering, usually arising due to parting or loss, and secondly, it

has undertones and insights from all the nooks and corners of human civilization. The capability of a poet can be judged by deciding how ably the poet responds to the above-mentioned criteria and how ably he crafts his poems in view of this, the second also defining the individual talent of the poet and how aware a poet is, of his artistic process and his craft.

Agha Shahid Ali's poetry transcends the very language in which it is written and therefore reflects the cultures beyond a single notion of worlding containing, the voices, undertones and sublime truths from every nook and corner of civilizational history and geography. Mihaela Moscaliuc, in an article on Agha Shahid Ali's palimpsestic tendencies, writes that Ali's works attempt:

...to navigate rich webs in intertextuality, shifting geographies, and the pull of synchronic and diachronic histories that place them, within a few pages, in the underworlds of Greek myth, World War II concentration camps, Native American reservations, the Kashmir Valley, Ohio highways that "exit" to Calcutta, New York subways, or Golgotha. The more sophisticated students recognize threads of Apollinaire, Dickinson, Plath, Shakespeare, Milton, George Trakl, James Wright, Melville, Rushdie, Borges, the Koran, Hafiz, or other Western and non-Western writers whose voices are interwoven in the fabric of Ali's work. (Moscaliuc 156)

This 'travel' lends to his expression, not only the finesse recognizable only in the great poets but also explicitly becomes a window into recognizing the techniques employed by the poet in his poetry-making, ultimately leading to giving the reader a good understanding of the poet's construction of his self and his politics. Any such analysis would require a thorough qualitative textual analysis of select poems, connecting dots to perceive the poet's influences and the dimensions into which his poetry proliferates. This paper tries to analyze various poems of Agha Shahid Ali to bring out salient intertextual elements in his poems and the influence these have in the construction of his politics and identity. The paper also positions Agha Shahid Ali as a world citizen and shows that the poet transcends time and space to voice human woes and suffering. A few biographical

details about the poet and a thorough understanding of intertextuality as a concept is necessary, however, before any such attempt is made.

### **The Poet**

Ali's primary voice is that of longing and if attempts are made to summarize his entire poetics into one word probably 'longing' defines it the best. However, this longing takes varied shapes and forms on various levels and in different dimensions, each of these connected and intertwined in such a manner that they always remain in the demand of detailed investigation and always little traced. A poet from Kashmir, who made it his business to voice the suffering of the powerless and subjugated, all through the world, Ali, also travels and expands on the already present like no other contemporary poet and with an acute understanding of the civilizational traits of humanity, ones that transcend time, space, nationalities, identities, religions and all the labels one can think of. Another prime feature of his poetry is his engagement with the Western and Eastern traditions of literature, culture, and mythology all interconnected and one reflecting the significance of the other.

Born in 1951, he spent most of his time in America where after his friendship with James Merrill, Ali also strived to write poems in the most difficult of poetic forms. Sonnets, Villanelles, and canzones in the later part of his life show his poetic caliber and his awareness of the technicalities of poetry, an essential skill required to create quality poetry in Urdu and Persian traditions. It is only because of this efficiency of skill that he was also able to bring and adapt the form of 'ghazal' to English explaining the aesthetics of it in detail and editing an anthology of English Ghazals. It is not far-fetched to say that poets like Agha Shahid Ali, because of the abovementioned qualities transcend nationalities, boundaries and languages and can be truly called world citizens.

7Everything about him is fluid, all flowing, never contained and all-encompassing.

### Intertextuality and Palimpsestic Style

All this, not in exaggeration and pride, but in pure humility is achieved by Agha Shahid Ali through one of the defining features of his work i.e., intertextuality. According to Daniel Hall, his memory is staggering and even in the last days of his life, when Ali was suffering from a form of brain cancer, he could recite Milton's 'Lycidas'. In the same paragraph, Hall writes:

...and he was a fearsome mimic. He had an ear cocked at all times for the surprising turn of phrase, the unintentional joke, the fresh bit of slang—anything that might be of use.

(Hall 17)

Ali, with his memory and with his avid and diverse reading, could, while weaving a poem, pick up the most sublime of the voices from human civilization and make them do his bidding to convey what was the need of the hour, in the most contemporary manner on the most contemporary issues. In one poem, a reader could chance upon Homer and Ghalib together. For instance, in a poem called "Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz", the echo of one of the most famous couplets of Ghalib appears. The poet writes:

...You knew Ghalib was right.  
blood must not merely follow routine...  
sometimes it must flood the eyes... (Ali 57)

Intertextuality, according to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, is "the connections between different works of literature and art, and the meanings that are created by them" (Intertextuality). Considering this definition, and Ali's usage of the device, it can be argued that Ali was a master palimpsest, and his style was palimpsestic. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a Palimpsest as, "something having usually diverse layers or aspects beneath the surface..." (Palimpsest). There cannot be a simplified

reading of Ali's poetry, and any interpretation of his poetry requires a deep dive beyond what appears on the surface, often expressing a particular side of his life, writing, politics or cultural inclination. Another device that requires proper understanding before dealing with his poetics is 'Allusion'. The Britannica dictionary calls 'Allusion', "an implied or indirect reference to a person, event, or thing, or to a part of another text...In traditional western literature, allusions to the Bible and from Greek Mythology are common" (Allusion). Ali, with his intense and intricate reading, does not only visit these common referents in Greek and Christian literatures but truly travels continents and epochs to consult, engage and imitate writers and texts to convey his construction and woes of the people of similar fate as his. The various examples and analyses of these follow further in the paper. Britannica also traces the roots of the use of allusions to Modernism in English literature, commenting that, "...the modernist writers such as T.S. Eliot and James Joyce, deliberately used obscure and complex allusions in their work that they knew few readers would readily understand" (Allusion).

One of the major influences on Agha Shahid Ali while growing up was T.S. Eliot and it is not an exaggeration to say his approach towards writing shows considerable traits that speak of Eliot's style and his sense of tradition. The way in which Ali extends it further is that he mixes with his learning of Eliot's style and notion of tradition, the tradition of Urdu poetry where it is not uncommon for the poet to use the *radiff* (Refrain) and *qafia* (Internal rhyme) of the ghazals of previous masters in their verse.

### Intertextuality and his major influences

It is without much thought that one can trace Ali's notion of poetics to T.S. Eliot in English. T.S. Eliot would have been the most influential of English poets when Ali was growing up, one, who would have exercised immense impact upon younger poets and in more than one aspect of poetry. Eliot's use of

various meters and command of free verse must have influenced younger poets but not more than his use of allusions that showed off his varied readings and negotiations with the literatures of the world. While Agha Shahid Ali was growing up, T.S. Eliot was arguably the most popular poet in the English-speaking world, and it is quite clear that Eliot would have immensely influenced the younger generation. Ali's first collection of poems, *Bone Sculpture* was modelled after the same high modernist style and the influences of Eliot are too apparent to miss. Secondly, a familiarity with Urdu Poetry brought Ali closer to Faiz Ahmed Faiz who was, again arguably, the most popular Urdu poet in the subcontinent in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Known for his anti-establishment ideals and poems on love and revolution, Faiz was sung by the elites and the masses alike. Eventually, Ali was going to write a long essay on the poetry of Faiz where he was going to acknowledge the influence of the great poet on him. The essay titled "The True Subject" was also going to look into Faiz's purpose of poetry, building on which, Ali establishes his idea of writing poetry. Along with it, there are several poems of Ali where sentences from Faiz's poetry drop, giving rich texture to the poems and at the same time conforming to the tradition of Urdu poetry to write picking up sentences from the previous masters. If another section of the above-quoted poem, called "Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz" is looked at, the acknowledgement is clearly visible. Ali writes in the poem:

and you became, like memory  
necessary. *Dast-e-saba*  
I said to myself. And quietly  
the wind opened its palms. I read  
there of the night, the secrets  
of lovers, the secrets of prisons. (Ali 58)

#### Intertextuality and his engagement with western and eastern tradition

It can be argued that these engagements with these poets and several others who appear

in the poems of Agha Shahid Ali are his efforts to negotiate with two different traditions- the tradition of the East, specifically the geographical region of South Asia and the tradition of the west that comprises of poets in English but also of antiquity, namely the western masters like, Dante and Homer, the tool being intertextuality and his palimpsests style that allows him to connect and weave stories using the material and myths of the poets of the past. Daniel Hall begins his Foreword to *the Veiled Suite* by underlining Ali's heritage:

Agha Shahid Ali was, by his own count, the beneficiary of three cultures- Muslim, Hindu, and, for lack of a more precise rubric, Western. (Hall 15).

Not only does this allow him to add a concrete richness to his poetry, but also adds the civilizational element to his poems enabling him to touch the very core of human sentiment. An instance from each should suffice. He alludes to the Pakistani poet Ahmed Faraz in one of his poems. He inserts a trans-created couplet from one of Faraz's ghazal to begin a poem:

So I'll regret it. But lead my heart to pain.

Return, if it is just to leave me again. (Ali 345)

Similarly, from the west, Osip Mandelstam's example can be seen. Mandelstam, a Russian poet, lived his life in exile during the Stalinist Regime. A sentence from his poem, "We Shall Meet Again in Petersburg" becomes the basis for Ali's "We Shall Meet Again in Kashmir":

"We shall meet again, in Srinagar," I want to answer Irfan. But such a promise? I make it in Mandelstam's velvet dark, in the black velvet Void. (Ali 171)

#### Intertextuality and transnational solidarity

Agha Shahid Ali, as he himself iterates in several of his interviews and poems, does not conform to the conventional and rigid definitions of nations and nationalities. To him,



a poet is a world citizen, a messenger of his people and a keeper of the memories of an entire civilization. So, he is a world citizen, yearning for but not limited or constrained to one spatial location or identity. It can be argued that Ali, using intertextuality, yearns for solidarity among the oppressed across the modern boundaries of the nation-state and looks to build an intercultural network of the oppressed and exiled. His choice of poets he invokes and the texts he alludes to seem to have a twofold purpose. On one level, it allows Ali to make a deep exploration of the history of human civilization and look at similar-fated people-people who are compelled to leave home and then continuously yearn for it. Therefore, poets like Darwish and Faiz appear in his poems as do Neruda and Cavafy:

On the empty shelves,  
absent books gather dust: Neruda.  
Cavafy.  
I know he knew their poetry, by heart.  
the lines I love. (Ali 63)

On another level, it instils in him a sense of belonging, shaping his identity as a poet who lives in Exile and speaks of a people in distress.

### Conclusion

In the light of the above-mentioned examples and explanations, it can be argued that Ali's style is essentially palimpsest and in his use of intertextuality, he creates for himself a unique kind of poetry that emphasizes inclusivity and co-existence. Intertextuality serves as a significant tool to connect and weave, allowing Ali to convey the newer contexts of the changed world and enabling him to perform his retelling of the mythical material to connect with the very core of humanity.

The use of the palimpsest style also serves as a method to pay homage to the poets of his liking and poets with similar predicaments. Tradition remains a very important word for Agha Shahid Ali and that he

collects all his favourite poets and contains them in his poetry remains his second most significant vigil.

Ali's construction of his poetics also contributes to the shaping of his identity as in his case it is very difficult to separate the poems from the poet. In a perennial exile, when he yearns for his home, his voice constitutes all the voices that convey the suffering of humanity. He is all the poets he alludes to, and he is all the people whose sufferings he voices. Most importantly, the palimpsest in Ali majorly contributes to defining his subject position which if anything is far from one rigid point and emanates plurality and multiplicity. It allows him to continuously move between several locales, enabling him to constantly escape and resist any imposing narrative.

The most refined form of any language can be found in the best poetry of that language. The great poets of our civilization have always toiled to further refine the sublimity that they have received from their predecessors. At the same time, a poet always stands with the people who suffer. He is the messenger of the voiceless, the guide to those who have lost their ways, and a vital factor in the building of resistance against the oppressor. Acutely aware of his inheritance and the tradition he belongs to, Agha Shahid Ali, uses the tools at his hand, intertextuality (and memory), to serve the centuries-old task assigned to poets – to document and to remember.

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