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AGHA SHAHID ALI: A TRUE CHAMPION OF ENGLISH GHAZAL

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Abstract

It can be said without fear of contradiction that translation is the most widespread mode of accessing the key literary and theoretical texts from all over the world. Dante, Ghalib, Hafiz, Kafka, Tolstoy, Marquez, Rumi, Marx, Iqbal, Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Habermas, Mahasweta Devi, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Mohan Rakesh, Kalidas, Vidyapati, Tulidas are available to the students only in and because of translation. Literary translation is part of the larger processes of remixing and hybridization of cultures. The translation of a work not only makes that work accessible to a new culture but also helps mend the fracture between the two cultures. Agha Shahid Ali is well known translator. Agha Shahid Ali is essentially a one-man champion of what he calls the “true ghazal”. The ghazal is a poetic form consisting of rhyming couplets and a refrain, with each line sharing the same meter. A ghazal may be understood as a poetic expression of both the pain of loss or separation and the beauty of love in spite of that pain. Through writing, teaching and collecting the English- language ghazal, Ali is aiming to put it on the same popular footing as that other Asian poetic form that has jumped the East-West divide. The ghazal is an ancient Persian form of poetry and Ali uses this traditional structure to his advantage in contemplating modern life. Within the strict schema of the verse, Ali finds space to stretch his impressive linguistic muscles. In language that is the voice of a man looking back on his life with wisdom and humour.

Key Words – Literature, Culture, Translation, Ghazal, Hybridity.

The origin and evolution of language, the most distinctive aspect of our species, has intrigued the human mind since ancient times. In our time English has achieved the international status. In India, after 1857 English became the language of administration and it was promoted among the Indians. From the mid-19th to the early 20th century, Indian society underwent massive creative interaction with Western thought, art, technology and mores. This was the so-called Indian Renaissance, social and economic no less than artistic and cultural. There were large-scale efforts to translate English books into Indian languages and promote English language. Although there is an official encouragement to translate between Indian languages, the majority of translation activity is from Indian languages into English.

The Government of India has also recently responded to this interest by launching a new mission, Indian Literature Abroad (ILA). Big Indian publishing concerns like Penguin, Macmillan, Orient Longman, Oxford University Press, Harper-Collins etc as well as smaller houses are encouraging translations of literary and discursive works in a big way. As far as the field of Translation studies is concerned, it is an academic research area that has expanded massively in these years. It can be said without fear of contradiction that translation is the most widespread mode of accessing the key literary and theoretical texts from all over the world. Dante, Ghalib, Hafiz, Kafka, Tolstoy, Marquez, Rumi, Marx, Iqbal, Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Habermas, Mahasweta Devi, Faiz Ahmed

Faiz, Mohan Rakesh, Kalidas, Vidyapati, Tulidas are available to the students only in and because of translation. Literary translation is part of the larger processes of remixing and hybridization of cultures. The translation of a work not only makes that work accessible to a new culture but also helps mend the fracture between the two cultures.

Agha Shahid Ali is well known translator. He translated many famous Urdu poems into English. Agha Shahid Ali (1949- 2001) was born in India in a respectable Kashmiri family of Shiite Muslims. He authored several collections of poetry, including *Bone-Sculpture* (1972), *In Memory of Begum Akhtar* (1979), *A Walk through the Yellow Pages* (1987), *The Half- Inch Himalayas* (1987), *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991), *The Country without a Post Office* (1997), *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001) and *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* (2003). Ali was the translator of *The Rebel's Silhouette*. He translated the work of Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz in *The Rebel's Silhouette* (1992) and frequently alluded to the poet's influence on his own poetry. Agha Shahid Ali wrote poetry in both free verse and traditional forms, experimenting with verse forms such as the sestina and canzone. He is credited with introducing and popularizing the Ghazal form in American poetry. Ali was born in New Delhi on February 4, 1949 and grew up in Kashmir. He was later educated at the University of Kashmir and later on in Delhi University. He was awarded a PhD degree in English from Pennsylvania State University in 1984 and an M.F.A. from the University of Arizona in 1985. He spent his childhood in Kashmir, and after completing his studies from Presentation

Convent School, Burn Hall School and University of Kashmir he moved to Delhi, to do his post-graduation from Hindu College, where he was also a teacher. Agha Shahid Ali left Kashmir and settled in the United States.

Ali grew up with English as the language of intellectual discourse; still he loved the soft tones and delicate sentiments of Urdu poetry. Known particularly for his adroit allusions to European, Urdu, Arabic and Persian literary traditions, Ali's poetry collections revolve around both thematic and cultural poles. Agha Shahid Ali is essentially a one-man champion of what he calls the "true ghazal". The ghazal is a poetic form consisting of rhyming couplets and a refrain, with each line sharing the same meter. A ghazal may be understood as a poetic expression of both the pain of loss or separation and the beauty of love in spite of that pain. The ghazal is always written from the point of view of the unrequited lover whose beloved is portrayed as unattainable. Most often either the beloved does not return the poet's love or returns it without earnestness or else the societal circumstances do not allow it. Each ghazal is made up of a series of couplets. In general the second line of each couplet repeats a rhyme and refrain (with the first couplet of the series using this rhyme and refrain in both lines). For example, the poem "By Exiles" ends three sample lines" ...torn wild by exiles," " ...compiled by exiles," and "...beguiled by exiles. Through writing, teaching and collecting the English- language ghazal, he is aiming to put it on the same popular footing as that other Asian poetic form that has jumped the East-West divide. The ghazal is an ancient Persian form of poetry and Ali uses this traditional structure to his advantage in contemplating modern life. Within the strict schema of the verse, Ali finds space to stretch his impressive linguistic muscles. In language that is the voice of a man looking back on his life with wisdom and humour. The construction of the ghazal involves the use of a repeated rhyme followed by a refrain, usually one word or a short phrase, which Ali also uses this format creates a sense of suspense not often found in poetry, leaving readers wondering how each couplet would end and whether it makes

reader laugh, cry or merely wonder at his creativity. Agha Shahid Ali chooses the form and style of his ancestral homeland. The significance of the choice of ghazal has been two-fold. On the one hand, it is the link between the ancestral homeland and their cultures that is lost and remains only in memory with the exiled son of terrestrial heaven Kashmir. Ali worked assiduously to establish a place in American Literature for the formal discipline of the ghazal.

Ali was also a translator of Faiz Ahmed Faiz (*The Rebel's Silhouette; Selected Poems*) and editor (*Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English*). He was widely credited for helping to popularize the vibrant ghazal form in America. Ali's translations of one of the most prominent masters of the ghazal, namely, Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911-1984), from Urdu into English, as well as Agha Shahid Ali's own uses of the ghazal in his English language poems, and his editing a volume of ghazals entitled *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English* by over a hundred Western poets, are prominent literary achievements. An important point about Ali's poetry is that it drew as much upon English poetic traditions as it did on Urdu literary forms. This needs to be stressed because Ali's influences were as varied as James Merrill on the one hand and, on the other, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, whose work he has translated with great meticulousness. There is no denying the fact that no other Indian poet writing in English came close to attempting what was Ali's great achievement—the elaboration of a poetic voice that was representative of the Subcontinent's own mixed history. This reflected his growing historical and political awareness. Actually, in writing about Faiz (in "Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz") who most of the times lived in exile; Ali recalled and relived his own exile. Faiz Ahmed Faiz was born on February 13, 1911, in Sialkot, India, which is now part of Pakistan. Faiz combined in his poetry the themes of love, beauty, wonder and political ideals into a vision of a better world and integrity. He is especially celebrated for his poems in traditional Urdu forms, such as the ghazal and his remarkable ability to expand the conventional thematic expectations to include political, economic and social issues. When Bhutto was overthrown by Zia -Ul-Haq, Faiz was forced into exile in Beirut, Lebanon. There he edited the magazine *Lotus*, and continued to write poems in Urdu. He remained in exile until 1982. After a period of exile in Lebanon, he returned to his home country. Faiz passed away in Lahore on November 20, 1984. Throughout his tumultuous life, Faiz continually wrote and published, becoming the best-selling modern Urdu poet in both India and Pakistan. While his work is written in fairly strict diction, his poems maintain a casual, conversational tone, creating tension between the elite and the common, somewhat in the tradition of Ghalib, the renowned 19th century Urdu poet. With the passage of time Ali's poetry was more influenced by that of Faiz. Therefore, he wrote "Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz" in *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, followed by the *Rebel's Silhouette: Translation of Verses*, a book of translation of Faiz's selected ghazals. In "Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz", Ali calls upon Faiz:

When you permitted my hands to turn to
stone, as must happen to a translator's
hands.

I thought of you writing Zindan-
Nama on prison walls, on cigarette
packages,

on torn envelopes. (*The Half-Inch Himalayas* 32)

It can be said without fear of contradiction that no other Indian poet writing in English came close to attempting what was Ali's great achievement—the intensification of a poetic voice that was representative of the own mixed history of Indian sub-continent. Ali was also influenced by popular Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib. Ghalib was a classical Urdu and Persian poet from India during British colonial rule. Most notably, he wrote several ghazals during his life, which have since been interpreted and sung in many different ways by different people. Ghalib is considered, in South Asia, to be one of the most eminent and influential poets of the Urdu language. There is worth mentioning that Ghalib today remains popular not only in India and Pakistan but also amongst diaspora communities around the world. Ghalib offered Agha Shahid Ali a refuge from the ravages of time and historical change.

As editor of *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English* (2000), Ali described the long history of fascination of Western writers with ghazals, as well as offering a concise theoretical reading of the form itself. Although Ali selected and collected these 'real ghazals in English' as the subtitle indicates. This anthology brings together ghazals by a rich gathering of 107 poets including Diane Ackerman, John Hollander, W. S. Merwin, William Matthews, Paul Muldoon, Ellen Bryant Voigt, and many others. As this impressive collection shows, epigrammatic terseness of ghazals brings the writer a unique set of complexities and opportunities. Agha Shahid Ali edited this book of Ghazals named as the *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English* in the year 2000, which included several Ghazals in English from various poets across the world. Dr Nishat Zaidi points out:

Ali's innovative use of the ghazal form reaffirms the dialogic possibilities in dialectically juxtaposed cultural spaces. In sharing his experience of multiple- linguistic, geographical, and historical-dislocations, and allowing his contemporary American poets the same experience of border crossing by inviting them to write in a poetic form completely new to them, Agha Shahid Ali asks his readers to see culture not as a static, fixed or given entity, but as something dynamic in its interaction with other cultures. He demonstrates the performative processes of cultural engagement. (66)

Agha Shahid Ali has also written of book, *T.S. Eliot as Editor* which was published in the year 1986. Ali received fellowships from The Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, the Ingram-Merrill Foundation, and the New York Foundation for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation and was awarded a Pushcart Prize. He held teaching positions at the University of Delhi, Penn State, SUNY Binghamton, Princeton University, Hamilton College, Baruch College, University of Utah, and Warren Wilson College. Ali's poetry swirls around insecurity, memory, death,

history, family ancestors and nostalgia. Ali died peacefully of brain cancer in December, 2001. He was laid to rest in Northampton, Massachusetts. Having lived a brief life of only 52 years (1949-2001), Agha Shahid Ali has achieved great heights in the world of literature.

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