

ARTICLE

## “A Refugee from Belief”: Agha Shahid Ali’s Poetics of Rupture

Upasana Dutta 

University of Chicago

Email: [upasana@uchicago.edu](mailto:upasana@uchicago.edu)

### Abstract

This article attempts a reassessment of the political aspirations within Agha Shahid Ali’s poetics through a close reading of *The Country without a Post Office*. Although Shahid’s formal innovations have often been prioritized over his political commitments within scholarly evaluations of his work, I contend that in this collection, Agha Shahid Ali practices a “poetics of rupture”: holding themes of coherence and disruption, continuity and breakage, the global and the local in sustained tension with each other throughout the volume. Forged through a political commitment to represent Kashmir in crisis, his poetics of rupture is simultaneously formally founded on breakage and discontinuity, and itself ruptures, as I eventually propose, the very binaries (poetics versus polemics, personal versus political, local versus global) that shadow political poetry. I demonstrate the specifics of Shahid’s poetics of rupture through an analysis of his work with literary allusions and poetic forms. Eventually, this article contends that recognizing the political import of his poetics of rupture has consequences for our recognition of the crisis in Kashmir itself and the ethical and formal possibilities surrounding the representation of this crisis.

**Keywords:** Agha Shahid Ali; poetry; crisis; poetics; rupture; Kashmir; world literature

“Most political poetry is like free verse. The polemics remain and the poetry dies,” observes the noted Kashmiri poet and academic, Rashid Nazki.<sup>1</sup> In many ways, poetry—explicitly invested in questions of formal fidelity, structure, and innovation as conditions of its very articulation—becomes a privileged locus for the dilemma of writing within (and about) political crisis. Poetry seems doomed to be caught between the tension of being too political in a way that purportedly damages its formal autonomy (*pace* Nazki) or, alternatively, not political enough,

---

<sup>1</sup> Basharat Peer, *Curfewed Night* (Noida: Random House India, 2008), 190.

escaping into the sanitized aesthetics of form. The dilemma could not be clearer than in Kashmiri poet Shafi Shauq's review of Kashmiri literature from 1989 titled, simply, "Inexcusable Silence." After straightforwardly declaring that the poets "maintained an inexcusable silence and could not produce anything great," Shauq explains that "great poetry is generally born in periods of tension and turmoil, but a nightmarish experience or facing-the-wall situation is never congenial to the soarings of imagination."<sup>2</sup> The contradictions here are many: Shauq is both sympathetic and censorious, the poets are both creatively agential (they "maintain an inexcusable silence") and oppressed (they "could not produce"), and political upheaval is at once the midwife and the murderer of "great poetry." Shauq's evaluation captures some of the challenges implicit in composing, receiving, demanding, or evaluating poetry that contends with catastrophe. In *Against Forgetting*, Carolyn Forché connects this poetic double-bind to the existential tension between "the political" and "the personal," where "the distinction between the personal and the political gives the political realm too much and too little scope; at the same time, it renders the personal too important and not important enough."<sup>3</sup> What kind of poetry might thread this needle, delivering to us something "great" from crisis, and so challenging the very cogency of these distinctions between the political and the personal, the polemical and the poetical? How might a poetry of crisis reframe the way we read, recognize, and even *evaluate* catastrophe by meeting and complicating the demands that we make of such poetry?

Significantly, Nazki singles out the Kashmiri-American writer Agha Shahid Ali as a poet who sidestepped the pitfalls of poetic compromise. In fact, his previously quoted words are actually a continuation of his thoughts on Shahid, who "wrote political poetry but ... did not compromise on technique."<sup>4</sup> There is arguably no single writer who has played as large a role in imprinting Kashmir—as landscape, lexicon, and motif—upon contemporary American poetry and world literature as Agha Shahid Ali. Born in 1949, Shahid grew up Shia (a minority among the region's Muslims) in Srinagar, Kashmir, in a family that was deeply invested in values of religious inclusivity and embedded in practices of scholarship and pedagogy.<sup>5</sup> After college in India, Shahid moved to America for graduate studies and subsequently held teaching positions as a practicing poet and scholar at multiple American institutions till his untimely death in 2001. He continued to visit Kashmir, where his parents resided, during the summers. Shahid's early exposure to a confluence of literary, cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions seems to have shaped his consciousness about the many facets of his poetry wherein he reflected the worlds he had inherited through a dizzying array of allusions, forms, and inspirations. His poetic forms also suggest an exactingly global sensibility: experiments with technically rigorous forms like

<sup>2</sup> Shafi Shauq, "Inexcusable Silence: Kashmiri Scene," *Indian Literature* 34, no. 1 (January 1991): 157.

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn Forché, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-century Poetry of Witness* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 31.

<sup>4</sup> Peer, *Curfewed Night*, 191.

<sup>5</sup> See Amitav Ghosh, "The Ghat of the Only World," in *Mad Heart Be Brave*, ed. Kazim Ali (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

canzone, ghazal, villanelle and terza rima dot Shahid’s oeuvre and mark him, as Amitav Ghosh has remarked, as a poet “schooled in the fierce and unforgiving arts of language.”<sup>6</sup>

Little wonder, then, that Shahid’s fluency with an array of global forms and allusions, combined with his own essays and interviews stressing the importance of aesthetic rigor and innovation, has endowed him with a critical reputation as a poet of global stature and relevance. Even as he demonstrates a political sensibility attuned to specific geopolitical contestations, he is—critics eagerly assert—a poet that transcends the strictly local and parochial. It is true that in his verse, Kashmir is the exile’s beloved homeland, alive in all its particularity, but also stitched into the fabric of a larger tapestry of literary and spatial imaginings. Critical evaluations of Shahid’s poetry, however, frequently shift from his own preoccupation with “balancing” politics with aesthetics to regarding politics (especially a politics of the local and the specific) as the element despite which his poetry succeeds.<sup>7</sup> This tendency, however, results in the phenomenon within literary criticism that Claire Chambers has astutely characterized as a “posthumous soft-pedal[ing]” of his politics.<sup>8</sup> Chambers’s reading of Shahid’s poetry as “alert to the sufferings of Muslim people in recent history,” for example, leads to Abin Chakraborty’s anxious disavowal that such a view “falls short of acknowledging the play of ceaseless pluralities” in the verse that “bemoans the destructive violence wrought by all sides.”<sup>9</sup> In such readings, the politics of Shahid’s verse get collapsed into a blandly universalist approach where the critique of specific historical actors are all but absent. Shahid’s own approach to form in relation to politics is amply clear in the provocative essay “A Darkly Defense of Dead White Males,” where the poet presents a complex manifesto about political literature and canon formation. The crux of Shahid’s argument concerns the relation between the subject of a poem and its formal shape, and he concludes, “I don’t say we must not write politically; I simply don’t want us to write programmatically ... I don’t want politics to be a mere convenience. If we are politically engaged, as I always am, let’s make sure we deepen those concerns with content.”<sup>10</sup> His political engagement is so self-evident that it is almost an afterthought, and the essay is chiefly a reflection about how formal rigor might keep pace with and thus sharpen political consciousness.

<sup>6</sup> Ghosh, “The Ghat of the Only World,” 208.

<sup>7</sup> The language of “balance” and “compromise” present in Nazki’s produces a likely unwitting echo of Shahid’s own comment about Faiz Ahmad Faiz, whose “genius,” according to Shahid, “lay in his ability to balance his politics with his (in some ways stringently traditional) aesthetics without compromising either,” in the preface to *The Rebel’s Silhouette* (Salt Lake City, UT: Peregrine Smith Books, 1991), i–ii.

<sup>8</sup> Claire Chambers, “It Is This: Agha Shahid Ali’s Representation of Kashmir in *The Country without a Post Office*,” in *The World of Agha Shahid Ali*, eds. Tapan Kumar Ghosh and Sisir Kumar Chatterjee (Albany: SUNY Press, 2021) 173.

<sup>9</sup> Abin Chakraborty, “Beyond Borders, Nations, and Exclusivist Identities: Agha Shahid Ali’s Poetics of Plurality,” in Kazim Ali, ed., *Mad Heart Be Brave* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 63.

<sup>10</sup> Agha Shahid Ali, “A Darkly Defense of Dead White Males,” in *Poet’s Work, Poet’s Play: Essays on the Practice and the Art*, eds. Daniel Tobin and Pimone Triplett (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 160; emphasis mine.

In this article, I attempt a reassessment of the specifically political aspirations within Shahid's poetics through a close reading of *The Country without a Post Office* (henceforth *Country*). I contend that in this celebrated collection, Agha Shahid Ali practices a "poetics of rupture": holding themes of coherence and disruption, continuity and breakage, the global and the local in sustained tension with each other throughout the volume. Not only striking a balance between poetics and politics, in my argument Shahid renders the formal elements within his poetry that are considered the realm of the purely literary or the aesthetic always already, and irrevocably, political. Forged through a political commitment to represent Kashmir in crisis, his poetics of rupture is simultaneously formally founded on breakage and discontinuity, and itself ruptures, as I eventually propose, the very binaries (poetics versus polemics, personal versus political, local versus global) that shadow political poetry. *Country*, published in 1997, marked a distinctive turn with respect to the representation of Kashmir within Shahid's verse. Beginning from its very title, *The Country without a Post Office* heightens the sense of distance and disruption within Shahid's work through the invocation of a homeland that has been severed from the world as from the poet. He pulls Kashmir into a global literary legibility, such that Kashmir's troubles can no longer be considered as a thing restricted to a distant corner of the global south. At the same time, he steadfastly refuses to excise the specificity of the valley's torments, as well as its history, cultures, and cadences, from his poetry—making no attempt to dilute the acuity of his political critique. I argue that it is in *Country* that we thus see a significant shift in Shahid's verse: from seeing Kashmir wherever he was in the world (as he did in earlier collections like *The Half-Inch Himalayas* [1997]), Kashmir becomes the centripetal force in *Country*, drawing the world into itself.

In what follows, I go on to read his literary allusions and his practice with specific poetic forms as offering such a poetics of rupture, and in each case, I turn to particular examples to further illustrate my readings. When critics inventory Shahid's literary allusions, Emily Dickinson is an often noted but infrequently analyzed presence within the poet's work with Kashmir. As I demonstrate, Dickinson is a particularly rich case of Shahid's deployment of a poetics of rupture. Shahid embeds Dickinson's clipped utterances in a formal and affective clash with his own elaborate structures—such that both of their voices stand in a delicate and volatile counterpoise to each other, layering on shades of meaning that can only be excavated from that strategic confrontation. Turning to Shahid's work with specific forms, none of his experiments have perhaps been as sustained as that with the ghazal. Shahid wrote several—in his view, corrective—essays on what he considered was a contemporary misunderstanding of the ghazal form in America, while continuously translating, composing, and revising ghazals both of other poets and his own. Shahid's playful but unapologetic insistence on the form's Persio-Arabic history during a moment of the ghazal's popularity among American practitioners has been misread as an anachronistic insistence on formal purity and cultural possessiveness. My aim is to demonstrate how such a reception misunderstands Shahid's intention with his public writing about the ghazal. He wished to attune writers and audiences to the form's history—its ties to oral performance, its symbolic iconography—as a self-

described “point of departure.” With that understanding of the rigors of the form, Shahid’s hope was that poets could in fact strain against and play with those parameters themselves—possibilities that Shahid himself was engaged in exploring through his own ghazals. Through Shahid’s poetics of rupture, the seeming harmonies of the ghazal form implodes and shatters, formally reflecting his own affective disorientation in the wake of the crisis besetting Kashmir.

Recognizing the political import of Shahid’s poetics has implications for our recognition of the crisis itself and the specifics of its representation. Just how effective Shahid was in giving shape to Kashmir’s newly violent reality through *Country* is evident in the words of a generation of writers who have themselves taken on the responsibility of representing Kashmir’s continuing troubles. Mirza Waheed, author of the critically acclaimed novel *The Collaborator*, would say, “For many of us, growing up amid this horror, it was Shahid who shone a light on the darkness. When I first read *Country* ... it was akin to listening to someone making sense of my world to me for the first time.”<sup>11</sup> Evident in the work of contemporary authors who have themselves gone on to contribute significantly to Kashmiri Anglophone writing—Basharat Peer’s prose, Rafiq Kathwari’s poetry, Feroz Rather’s essays, Farah Bashir’s 2021 memoir *Rumours of Spring* where Shahid’s poetry is remembered as a “place of refuge for years”—is a sense of communion with the poet, not only through the lens of a shared experience, but also the shared commitment to recognizing and representing that experience. Shahid’s formal commitments, therefore, have always been an indispensable part of his reception amid Kashmiri readers, such that his eloquence as a poet has gone hand in hand with his ability to “make sense” of an incomprehensible political upheaval.

There is therefore something condescending in Stephanie Burt’s assertion that Shahid’s “allusions, his proper nouns, and his choice of forms all help him present the territory, and the city, where he grew up not just as a tragedy but as an attraction for English-speaking readers, most of whom will never go there.”<sup>12</sup> Given that Kashmir’s “attractions” to outsiders have historically led to successive cycles of conquest and occupation, it is difficult to miss that these attractions in *Country* have a decidedly elegiac slant, heightening—rather than offsetting—the sense of tragedy that besets the valley. In situating Shahid’s work as an “estimable” entrant within the annals of world literature, Burt’s rich reading of the poetry’s transcultural roots unfortunately makes of literature a somewhat rarefied realm that must be importantly distinct from “poetry of witness” or “from journalism, from unadorned or moralized war reportage”: genres where the political impulse is front and center.<sup>13</sup> In so doing, such a reading simultaneously erases the centrality of Kashmir and Kashmiris within the poet’s intervention.

---

<sup>11</sup> Mirza Waheed, “How to Award a Posthumous Sedition Award to a Poet,” *Scroll*, February 26, 2016, <https://scroll.in/article/804163/how-to-award-a-posthumous-sedition-award-to-a-poet/>.

<sup>12</sup> Stephanie Burt, “Agha Shahid Ali, World Literature, and the Representation of Kashmir,” in Ali, *Mad Heart Be Brave*, 106.

<sup>13</sup> Burt, “Agha Shahid Ali, World Literature, and the Representation of Kashmir,” 111.

Shahid creates a sphere of recognition for Kashmir within his poetry where journalistic headlines are part of poems and his own explanatory notes, and literary devices are enmeshed with the rumors, letters, and whispers of a people who are not being allowed to memorialize their losses on their own terms. Although little of Shahid's work can be characterized as "unadorned," what is this impulse if not a form of witness and of reportage, intensely literary and at the same time strongly moral? What do we make of the poet's own declaration: "They ask me to tell them what Shahid means— / Listen: It means 'The Belovéd' in Persian, 'witness' in Arabic"? In suffering from an anxiety to rescue Shahid's literariness—his unimpeachable poetic credentials, as it were—from imputations of partisanship or provincialism that come of reading him as a political poet, such critical accounts do not merely misread the political content of Shahid's verse, they miss the specifics of his poetics itself.

### I. A. Shahid's Allusions

Consider the first poem of *Country*, "The Blesséd Word: A Prologue." It begins with a double evocation of Osip Mandelstam's "We shall meet again, in Petersburg," first as an epigraph and then in Shahid's own opening words: "From an untitled poem, that opening line announces heartbreak as / its craft: a promise like that already holds its own breaking: 'We shall / meet again, in Petersburg / as though we had buried the sun there.'"<sup>14</sup> Shahid creates an intimate shared architecture of loss and longing between himself and Mandelstam. Voicing his desire to make a similar promise to his friend Irfan, "We shall meet again, in Srinagar"—a promise that, too, "holds its own breaking"—Shahid weaves Kashmir in and out of Mandelstam's poetic superstructure throughout the poem. In fact, the crucial bits of Mandelstam that will surface intermittently through "The Blesséd Word" are housed in an early section of the poem:

He reinvents Petersburg (I, Srinagar), an imaginary homeland, filling it, closing it, shutting himself (myself) in it. For there is the blesséd word with no meaning, there are flowers that will never die, roses that will never fall, a night in which Mandelstam is not afraid and needs no pass. The blesséd women are still singing.<sup>15</sup>

However, while Mandelstam's verse derives its power from the refrains that convey a sense of timelessness that shall defy the brutalities of the "the Soviet night," in Shahid's articulation, uncertainty has insinuated itself. In each successive iteration (barring the conclusive line of the poem), the refrains have been rendered hesitant: "Maybe the ages will die away and the loved hands of blessed women will brush the light ashes together?"<sup>16</sup> Like Mandelstam's Petersburg, Shahid attempts to create an aura of timelessness for Kashmir through its own

<sup>14</sup> Agha Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite: The Collected Poems* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 172.

<sup>15</sup> Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite*, 172.

<sup>16</sup> Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite*, 172.

history—his “blesséd women” sing the songs of Habba Khatun each fall—but what this history reminds him, eventually, is that Habba Khatun’s grief aroused her people to a futile rebellion, and “since then Kashmir has never been free.”<sup>17</sup> There comes a point in the poem that the voices of “the blesséd women” too fall quiet: “But the reports are true, and without song: mass rapes in the / villages, towns left in cinders, neighborhoods torched. ‘Power is hideous / like a barber’s hands.’ The rubble of downtown Srinagar / stares at me from the *Times*.”<sup>18</sup> In forcing a confrontation with reports from Kashmir, Shahid showcases a plaintive truth: brutality leaves no space for “song,” inscribing itself upon the formal consolations of poetry.

And yet Shahid returns again and again to Mandelstam, to W. B. Yeats, to Zbigniew Herbert—in other words to poets who embody Brecht’s oft-quoted but always moving words, “In the dark times / Will there also be singing? / Yes, there will also be singing / About the dark times.”<sup>19</sup> Shahid frequently incorporates these poets via his epigraphs, and these literary allusions bring with them an attendant framework of mourning and memorialization within which Shahid’s own work can immediately be placed: what we know about the Easter Rising or Stalin’s regime helps heighten our recognition that Shahid too is writing of a political and national crisis. But Shahid is also aware that the valley has so far been known for little else but its famed beauty, and thus within his poetry there is a simultaneous effort to portray Kashmir with a specificity born of the local and the particular, and to speak back to his people even as he writes out to the world. This creates a back and forth in Shahid’s work between the global significations that place his work amid the continuity of antecedents poetic and historical, and the local imprint that breaks forth onto the page with an insistence upon being recognized.

In “I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight,” we notice this circuit of exchange emerging from the epigraph itself, extracted from Yeats’s “Easter, 1916”: “Now and in time to be, / Wherever green is worn, ... / A terrible beauty is born.”<sup>20</sup> “Green” already assumes a specific resonance with respect to Kashmir given its traditional associations with Islam, and this sense of specificity only increases in the following verses where Kashmir—specifically, Srinagar—is rendered with cartographic detail:

From Zero Bridge  
a shadow chased by searchlights is running  
away to find its body. On the edge  
of the Cantonment, where Gupkar Road ends,  
it shrinks almost into nothing, is  
nothing by Interrogation gates  
so it can slip, unseen, into the cells:  
Drippings from a suspended burning tire

<sup>17</sup> Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite*, 173.

<sup>18</sup> Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite*, 173.

<sup>19</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *The Collected Poems of Bertolt Brecht* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2019), 320.

<sup>20</sup> Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite*, 178; omission in the original.



are falling on the back of a prisoner,  
the naked boy screaming, “I know nothing.”<sup>21</sup>

Who is this mapping in service of? The route that Shahid charts from Zero Bridge to the Cantonment to the Interrogation chamber manages at once to map Srinagar as an occupied city for an unfamiliar readership, while confirming the lived experience of Kashmiris with the granular knowledge of someone who has walked these streets. If “Easter, 1916” compelled us to familiarize ourselves with “MacDonagh and MacBride / And Connolly and Pearse” and their stories, “I See Kashmir ...” also creates a community of named and unnamed Kashmiris that demand our recognition: a shadow flits restively in search of its body, a boy screams during interrogation, Shahid’s friend Rizwan emerges cold and bloodied from a grave.

When the violent torture of the previous excerpt leads into the dreamlike three sections that follow, and the shadow reveals himself to be Shahid’s friend Rizwan, the poet’s despair for his own, dear, lost comrade merges with the boys screaming in interrogation chambers: personal angst and collective trauma mutually recognizing one another. Shahid and Rizwan, the living and the dead, commune for a while. A tenuous “we,” they walk together, witnessing shoes left behind by mourners scattered by gunfire who ran from a funeral, hearing the laments of grieving mothers, and watching as Kashmiri Pandits prepare to flee the valley. Acts of public mourning in Kashmir—especially in the massively attended funerals of victims of state violence and slain militants—have become highly visible sites for the people’s resistance to the occupation. The practices of mass mourning within Kashmir as well as the repressive state reactions to them evoke a specific political scene, one that Shahid conjures through images like the abandoned shoes that “the mourners / left behind, as they ran from the funeral, / victims of the firing.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, what the poem mourns is not merely the fallen but also the disruption of a community’s ability to grieve its fallen, what it memorializes is a community in the process of fracturing, and also the violence that continues to fracture it. Pivoting from Yeats’s pained ambivalence in “Easter, 1916,” Shahid frames the “terrible beauty” that is born in Kashmir as an act of poetic revelation, even prescience: amid apocalyptic scenes of blood on the streets and burning houses and raining ash, a community will continue to grieve and remember as deeply political acts.

We notice a pattern: Shahid’s literary allusions create a fragile continuity between disparate poetic voices and sites, threaded together by their shared investment in inscribing political upheaval into their verse. However, by the very nature of this shared ground, that is of necessity eruptive and singular (Petersburgh under Stalin is not equal to the Easter Rising is not equal to Kashmir), there is a point at which the exceptionality of Kashmir in the 1990s breaks forth onto the page. This shuttling between the local and the global in creating a meaningful encounter with Kashmir and its crisis assumes particularly generative shape in Shahid’s interplay with Emily Dickinson. A major influence on Shahid, Emily Dickinson is a vital

<sup>21</sup> Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite*, 178.

<sup>22</sup> Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite*, 179.



presence in *Country*. Phrases from her poetic oeuvre appear as titles and epigraphs to Shahid’s verses and are embedded within poems amid a mesh of references. The word *cashmere*, for example, is a tell-tale sign for Dickinson’s presence. Agha Shahid Ali seemingly combed Dickinson’s staggering body of work for nearly every reference and incorporated them in this single volume: “Lo, a tint Cashmere!”; “Butterflies pause / On their passage Cashmere—” “Some Vision of the World Cashmere”; and so on. What is surprising about Shahid’s use of Dickinson’s “cashmere”s is that he refuses to be limited by the antiquated nature of this Westernized name for the valley and the attendant histories of Europe’s fetishization and extraction of “cashmere.”<sup>23</sup> Instead, “cashmere” in Shahid’s verse becomes a mode of playing with readerly expectations. He uses discontinuity and distance—between himself and Dickinson, between her verse and his, between her “Cashmere” and his Kashmir—as a means for multiplying interpretive possibilities. In the next section, I demonstrate that in Shahid’s borrowings from Dickinson we find the most explicit articulation of his poetics of rupture: the use of breakage and discontinuity as a structuring mechanism for poetry.

### I. B. “From Amherst to Cashmere”: Emily Dickinson and Agha Shahid Ali

From the outset, Shahid’s relationship with Dickinson seems to be founded on a break in the logic of poetic convergences. Unlike James Merrill, a mentor; Begum Akhtar, a muse; or the plethora of interlocutors with whom he shared formal or subjective ground, such as Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Edward Said, Zbigniew Herbert, and Mahmoud Darwish, we are hard pressed to find shared ground between Shahid and Dickinson, seemingly so disparate in circumstance and style. What indeed does Emily Dickinson have to say to Agha Shahid Ali, one who prized clipped lines to the other who spoke with a “bardic register”; one who broke with formal traditions to the other who advocated for a commitment to it; one who was confined to a single place for most of her life to the other who was a global wayfarer?<sup>24</sup> And yet, perhaps what brought them together was a shared commitment to formal innovation notwithstanding their stance toward tradition and to frustrating the presiding tastes of their age. In his poetry, Shahid forces Dickinson’s short verse lines to yield their breadth of buried emotion through a strategic confrontation with his own work, impelling a clash of worlds through which the musings of each with respect to mortality, distance, and loss refract—what else but—*Cashmere*-Kashmir.

The proximity of “Some Vision of the World Cashmere” and “Lo, A Tint Cashmere! / Lo, A Rose!,” two of Shahid’s poems that appear consecutively in *Country*, might be instructive vis-à-vis this strategic confrontation. “Some Vision,” in fact, derives its title from one poem by Dickinson and its epigraph from another, “If I could bribe them by a Rose.” The originals by Dickinson both

---

<sup>23</sup> For a rich analysis of the formal-material underpinnings of Shahid’s poetry, see Robert Stilling, “Agha Shahid Ali, Oscar Wilde, and the Politics of Form for Form’s Sake,” in *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>24</sup> Ghosh, “The Ghat of the Only World,” 200.

carry an undercurrent of desperate, hallucinatory emotion: joy or hope cracking under the burden of its own weight. “Some Rainbow—coming from the Fair! / Some Vision of the World Cashmere—I confidently see! Or else a Peacock’s purple Train / Feather by feather—on the plain / Fritters itself away!”—she begins, a joyous vision of spring that melts into a militaristic tableau in the fourth and final stanza.<sup>25</sup> Dickinson’s “If I could bribe them by a Rose” is even more importunate, desire chafing at its restraints: “If I could bribe them by a Rose / I’d bring them every flower that grows / From Amherst to Cashmere! I would not stop for night, or storm— / Or frost, or death, or anyone— / My business were so dear!” Shahid’s epigraph in “Some Vision” stops at Cashmere and leads directly into his own opening words, “But the phone rings, here in Amherst: ‘Your grandmother is / dying.’”<sup>26</sup> The impression is both of a continuing exchange, Dickinson’s “Amherst to Cashmere” flowing seamlessly into Shahid’s Amherst, and of an irredeemable stoppage: death and loss in Kashmir. Written in free verse, the rest of the poem reflects Shahid shuttling breathlessly between Amherst and Srinagar, back to his family home (now occupied by the army) and to his childhood, when his grandmother is still alive and his world is still whole. The hallucinatory force of Dickinson’s emotions, somewhat buried in her own verse, implodes into Shahid’s fractured remembering.

“Lo, A Tint Cashmere! / Lo, A Rose!” thematically continues from “Some Vision,” both thickly crowded with remembrance and wistfulness. In these two poems as in *Country* more generally, we find an echo of Shahid’s own characterization of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, one of the subcontinent’s most celebrated poets of the Urdu language: “In Faiz’s poetry, suffering is seldom, perhaps never, private (in the sense the suffering of confessional poets is). Though deeply personal, it is almost never isolated from a sense of history and injustice.”<sup>27</sup> Shahid merges his own voice and his grandmother’s with Faiz’s and Dickinson’s, and his own loss with the loss of collective worlds in these poems:

It is the last summer of peace: it is the last summer of the last Yes: we are still somehow holding the world together: we are naming the roses: she lifts her lines of Fate and Life and Heart and Mind and presses them, burning, into my palms.

And then Lo, in her empty hands, I see a Rose!

<sup>25</sup> “Without Commander! Countless! Still!

The Regiments of Wood and Hill  
In bright detachment stand!  
Behold! Whose Multitudes are these?  
The children of whose turbaned seas—

Or what Circassian Land?” from Emily Dickinson, *Collected Poems*, (Philadelphia, PA: Courage Books, 1991), 50.

<sup>26</sup> Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite*, 188.

<sup>27</sup> Agha Shahid Ali, preface in *The Rebel’s Silhouette*, ii.

II

"So there is Revolution each day in the heart, / Let Sorrow's resplendent autocracy remain."

Now again, summer: a summer of the last Yes: we are in the verandah, listening:

"So there is Revolution each day in the heart" ... That must be Faiz?<sup>28</sup>

Just as Faiz, "when he addresses the Beloved ... is also addressing a figure that, depending on the context, may very well be the Revolution—Revolution as a lost lover, or a cruel lover refusing to return," in Shahid's attempted recovery of his grandmother through "her dream within a dream within a dream" (a refrain through "Lo, a Tint Cashmere!"), we see enmeshed his own loss with a sense of collective ending: "the last summer of peace."<sup>29</sup> Reginald Dwayne Betts's comment is particularly apposite when he identifies Shahid's use of quotations as the poet's "willingness to invest in the importance of other voices to both add on to what is said and acknowledge what the poet cannot invent: a language to repair the fissures of disconnection."<sup>30</sup> The two poems poignantly "add on," like Betts remarks, to the pathos of Dickinson's restless vision that traversed Cashmere and Circassia from a distance all the while staying bound within her home in Amherst. This reflects back to Shahid's own boundedness in *Country*: even in a globalized world he is forced to conjure "visions" and "tints" of Kashmir, his homeland cut off by the crisis from the world. Even if he cannot invent a language to repair the fissure of disconnection, he can—and does—use language itself to foreground its own faltering before unspeakable depths of individual and collective tragedy.

Dickinson's staccato pronouncements find their place even within some of Shahid's most formally demanding pieces that constitute a departure from the free verse of poems like "Some Vision" and "Lo, A Tint Cashmere!" A form with origins in song and explicit in its demands of refrain and structural progression, a canzone seems like a counterintuitive choice for housing a voice like Dickinson's. And yet, Shahid's canzone "After the August Wedding / in Lahore, Pakistan" weaves her into a clash of referents, registers, and worlds, a testament to Shahid's grief about Kashmir. In some ways thematically foreshadowing his final canzone "The Veiled Suite" in theme—the push and pull of a tormented love—"August Wedding" takes the eponymous gathering as a point of departure and then immediately shatters the sense of collectivity, the title flowing straight into the first lines of the poem:

we all—Save the couple!—returned to pain,  
some in Massachusetts, some in Kashmir  
where, wet by turns, Order's dry campaign

<sup>28</sup> Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite*, 191.

<sup>29</sup> Agha Shahid Ali, preface in *The Rebel's Silhouette*.

<sup>30</sup> Reginald Dwayne Betts, "Borrowed Words: The Use of Quotations and Italics in the Ghazals of Agha Shahid Ali," in Ali, *Mad Heart Be Brave*, 167.

had glued petals with bullets to each pane—  
Sarajevo Roses!<sup>31</sup>

“Sarajevo roses” are memorials, at sites where lives were lost to mortar explosions during the siege of Sarajevo, created by filling in the shattered concrete with red resin such that it resembles a blood spatter (and with some artistic license, a “rose”). Shahid is already, from the first lines, invoking the scattershot quality of violence in Kashmir (“bullets to each pane”) through references to another besieged city where civilians fell by the thousands. I would argue that he also gestures here to art’s tendency to render violence euphemistic even in memorialization, such that blood transmutes into petals, thus gesturing at once to the exquisite craft of his own lamentations.

With “glass” as one of the refrains of the poem, Shahid reflects and multiplies himself from the opening words of “August Wedding,” writing back to Kashmir from Amherst and foregrounding, always, the cracked dimensions of the reality that he finds himself in. He flits backward and forward from the fevered memories of “a night— / by ice-sculptures, all my words sylvanite / under one gaze that filled my glass with pain,” a single moment dilated to grasp ages and then shatter under their weight. With a question to history through, of all things, an article in *National Geographic*: “Those ‘Houseboat Days in the Vale of Kashmir,’ / for instance, in ’29: Did they sing / just of love then, or was love witnessing / its departure for other thirsts,” Shahid’s own thirst shimmers and shifts to unnamed thirsts that impelled an entire movement. Emily Dickinson appears in the second half of the poem, twice in relatively quick succession. I quote the section at length to illustrate how she adds to the poem’s shifting registers between now and then, the poet and his people, and a multiplicity of “Cashmere”s:

O, to have said, glass  
in hand, “Where Thou art—that—is Home— / Cashmere—  
or Calvary—the same”! In the Cašmir  
and Poison and Brut air, my rare Cashmere  
thrown off, the stranger knew my arms are glass,  
that banished from Eden (on earth: Kashmir)  
into the care of storms (it rains in Kashmir,  
in Lahore, and here in Amherst tonight),  
in each new body I would drown 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?<sup>32</sup>

From mining Dickinson’s archaic turn of phrase for its dramatic effect as an admission of love, Shahid moves straightaway to the sensuality of “Cašmir” and

<sup>31</sup> Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite*, 239.

<sup>32</sup> Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite*, 240–41.

"cashmere," a philologically playful twist that undercuts Dickinson's nineteenth-century Cashmere with a proliferation of fragrant and tactile "Kashmir"s.<sup>33</sup> Immediately after this brief escape into levity, the poem takes us back to Kashmir even as Shahid is banished from it and "into the care of storms."

But as "it rains in Kashmir," is not the valley, too, relegated to storms? The words of the brigadier that follow only heighten this impression, as the man speaks of the anguished screams of Kashmiri boys tortured on the rack in a naked perversion of "song." We encounter Dickinson once more here, "Butterflies pause / On their passage Cashmere—." Soft words that apparently accompanied the flowers that the poet used to gift to her friends, Dickinson's poem assumes a morbid slant in light of "August Wedding" when we consider the lines that follow in the original: "I—softly plucking, / Present them here!" Although the "butterflies" following on the heels of bodies being broken upon the rack strikes a jarring note, Shahid never makes a stultified oddity of Dickinson's verse. He effects instead a form of implosion through the clash of contexts and linguistic registers: the brigadier "breaking" Kashmiri boys shades the "plucking" of the original with hubris, such that what remains of the butterflies and flowers is their pathetic evanescence. Through wreckage determining the very shape of the poem, Shahid meets the highly specific contours of a canzone's architecture and forces the reader to confront the political possibilities of a poetics that is founded in rupture.

## II. A. Rhyme and Rhythm: Agha Shahid Ali and the Politics of Form

Speaking of Shahid's tendency to impel a confrontation between the structural coherence of a specific poetic form and an incoherent, incomprehensible reality, I turn now to the ghazal as a particularly generative case study for Shahid's practice. Through the lens of this form, we receive insight into Shahid's poetics not only through the ghazals he wrote, but also his public writing through which he was engaged in correcting what he believed were significant oversights in a contemporary Western understanding of the ghazal. In what follows, I attempt to draw attention to Shahid's work with the ghazal, with the hope that the analysis will illuminate some of the nuances of what he aimed to achieve with and for the form.

As Amy Newman movingly argues, in his later collections Shahid moves increasingly toward demanding poetic forms "as harbor, as house," and in *Country* "embodies pattern to ward off utter hopelessness in his apprehension of ruin, rendering absolute grief over such exile into a fine and tragic beauty."<sup>34</sup> Hopelessness, ruin, grief—the eruptive nature of Shahid's emotions about Kashmir is amply in evidence within Newman's characterization of Shahid's employment of poetic technique. To so acknowledge violence within the delectations of

---

<sup>33</sup> "Cašmir," a fragrance by Chopard, jostles with Brut and Dior's Poison to perfume the air at the wedding.

<sup>34</sup> Amy Newman, "'Separation's Geography': Agha Shahid Ali's Scholarship of Evanescence," in Ali, *Mad Heart Be Brave*, 76, 81.

poetic form—the “elaborate patterns of turn and return, of echo and interlocking; the ghazal’s doubling voices of *qafia* and *radif*; the villanelle and terza rima’s rhyme and repetition; the pantoum’s reprised, alternating lines; the canzone’s five end words in a spectacular arabesque”—one must be able to hold violence’s jaggedness, its ruptures, within the strict parameters of rhyme, rhythm, and meter, which is precisely what Shahid does in *Country*.<sup>35</sup> There is intentionality in that act of imposing formal harmony—to the eventual frustration and complication of harmony—upon a discordant narrative. There is intentionality, also, in the stylistic choice of making the specific parameters of the ghazal form recognizable alongside those of the canzone or the terza rima or the villanelle. Although the latter set has been recognized and acknowledged as formally exacting of poetic finesse by a global readership, the ghazal’s reception and practice—especially in America—was not particularly demonstrative of its formal rigors before Shahid’s interventions.

In analyzing Shahid’s choice of poetic forms as with his literary allusions, however, literary criticism tends to excise the persistent attunement to political possibilities that he brought to his aesthetics. We see this tendency amply in scholarship on Shahid’s work with the ghazal. David Caplan, for example, in the very act of acknowledging Shahid’s contribution, frames the poet’s work as anachronistic and militant:

During the last decade, the ghazal underwent a remarkable transformation that reversed the direction of metrical forms’ typical development. During this period, metrical structures tended to allow greater permissiveness and flexibility ... In contrast, the ghazal, which started in America as a largely free-verse structure, has recently tended to incorporate more of its traditional rhyme and stanzaic features. The main figure behind this movement has been Agha Shahid Ali ... who has mounted a campaign for “the Persian model” as “the real thing.”<sup>36</sup>

Even as Caplan notes that the ghazal’s development in America ran counter to the “typical development” of metrical forms—from adherence to experimentation—he bypasses the question of why, specifically in the case of the ghazal, that anomaly should have occurred and why therefore Shahid’s work was a necessary gesture, if not of correction, then of belated acknowledgment and recognition. Shahid wrote about the form in multiple essays, drawing attention to what he considered misinterpretations in the contemporary American practice of writing ghazals, alongside writing prolifically in the form himself. Just as he revised his own ghazals constantly (e.g., the ghazals “Tonight” or “In Arabic” have multiple published iterations across his corpus), so did he revisit his own public writing upon the form, treating it as an evolving conversation among his peers, himself, and the Western poetic establishment conceived broadly.

<sup>35</sup> Newman, “Separation’s Geography,” 76.

<sup>36</sup> David Caplan, “In That Thicket of Bitter Roots: The Ghazal in America,” *Questions of Possibility: Contemporary Poetry and Poetic Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 53.

## II. B. The Ghazal as/in the World

To reproduce his own, brief definition of the form appended to a volume of his ghazals in English:

In its canonical Persian (Farsi) form, arrived at in the eleventh century, it is composed of autonomous or semi-autonomous couplets that are united by a strict scheme of rhyme, refrain, and line length. The opening couplet sets up the scheme by having it in both lines, and then the scheme occurs only in the second line of every succeeding couplet—i.e., the first line (same length) of every succeeding couplet sets up a suspense, and the second line (same length but with the rhyme and refrain—the rhyme immediately preceding the refrain) delivers on that suspense by amplifying, dramatizing, imploding, exploding.<sup>37</sup>

His intent was to orient a Western audience to a long and continuing Persio-Arabic history of the ghazal with significant ties to oral practice, which in turn explains some of the stringent requirements of the form that are founded on the expectation of real-time interactions between the poet and his audience. Some of the prominent poets writing original ghazals in English in the twentieth century, such as Adrienne Rich, had employed the ghazal's convention of "each couplet being autonomous and independent of the others" without incorporating the form's rigors of rhyme and refrain. While acknowledging that he liked Adrienne Rich's ghazals and "could make a case for their discarding of the form in the context of the politics of the late sixties and early seventies in this country," he also wanted to provide a counterargument through a defense of the form and its possibilities for revealing "political truth."<sup>38</sup> As Nishat Zaidi asserts, "To him, what matters is the reciprocity of influence and not the unidirectional appropriate hegemonic interpretation of the other by the center on its own terms, or plain commoditization of the culture of the margins."<sup>39</sup>

Shahid's intent was not to take ownership of the ghazal nor to chastise his peers out of working with the form: and yet he has been misinterpreted by critics on both grounds. Caplan, for example, sees Shahid's essays as propounding "the rhetoric of cultural possession" through their focus upon the ghazal's origins and techniques.<sup>40</sup> He misquotes Shahid, saying at one point that "Ali describes how American ignorance of the ghazal tradition constitutes 'an insult to a very significant element of my culture,'" when in fact Shahid had made this comment in the context of having to explain who Faiz Ahmed Faiz was to Westerners, one suspects in a half-adoring, half-facetious tribute to the great poet.<sup>41</sup> Irreverence,

---

<sup>37</sup> Agha Shahid Ali, *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, University Press of New England, 2000).

<sup>38</sup> Agha Shahid Ali, "The Ghazal in America, May I?," in *After New Formalism: Poets on Form, Narrative, and Tradition*, ed. Annie Finch (Ashland, OR: Story Line Press, 1999), 128, 129.

<sup>39</sup> Nishat Zaidi, "Center/Margin Dialectics and the Poetic Form: The Ghazals of Agha Shahid Ali," *Annual of Urdu Studies* 23 (January 2008): 60.

<sup>40</sup> Caplan, "In That Thicket of Bitter Roots," 55.

<sup>41</sup> Caplan, "In That Thicket of Bitter Roots," 54–55.



in fact, runs through all of Shahid's declarations of cultural privilege regarding the ghazal, making it difficult to countenance Caplan's suggestion of possessiveness. It is hard to imagine that Agha Shahid Ali was taking himself entirely seriously when he started the introduction to his edited volume with the following declaration: "I turned politically correct some years ago and forced myself to take back the gift [of the ghazal] outright ... Of course, I was exercising a Muslim snobbery, of the Shiite elan."<sup>42</sup>

He is aware that he has privileged cultural knowledge with respect to the ghazal and he foregrounds his early immersion in the form at multiple points. At the same time, he refuses to dilute the form's Islamic origins and tropes. Insistently and to frequently unexpected effect, Shahid inverts what Jahan Ramazani describes as the tendency to de-Islamicize poets, such that "Muslim-specific content" is excised and poetry is adapted to "a target culture."<sup>43</sup> In fact, the extent to which Shahid incorporates and reworks elements traditionally associated with the Urdu ghazal leads Aamir Mufti to term Shahid's use of the ghazal form as a "remarkable transposition": "In Shahid's English, [the] 'medieval' structure of feeling in Urdu becomes available for an exploration of the modern dialectic of belief and unbelief, self and other, and belonging and community."<sup>44</sup> Shahid argues that the ghazal has lacked a point of departure for most American readers, unlike forms like the sonnet where free-verse innovations have had the Petrarchan model as that bedrock and suggests the Persian model as "the real thing," that missing point of departure.<sup>45</sup> Eliding this context of cultural effacement, Caplan suggests that "Ali often quotes his own poetry to illustrate 'the real thing,' the 'authentic' ghazal, and its requisite formal features."<sup>46</sup> In fact, the ghazal Shahid quotes at length in multiple essays to illustrate the possibilities of the original ghazal in English is not his own but John Hollander's, and he quotes himself chiefly to underscore his prior carelessness with certain elements of the form. It is simply too difficult to sustain the suggestions of Shahid's cultural possessiveness vis-à-vis the ghazal. His primary fidelity is to a constant finessing of form in order to arrive at ever-sharper expressions, and in *Country* this expression is centrally and decisively that of the political reality of Kashmir. Deploying multiple literary inheritances, voices, and cultures, none in the service of any other but each held in tension, Shahid creates a sense of deliberate discomfiture, a jaggedness through which the crisis makes itself perceptible.

Perhaps the contention by Caplan that is hardest to square with Shahid's poetry is that "Ali uses the ghazal form to smooth over other uncomfortable facts."<sup>47</sup> Basing his reading on a single ghazal of Shahid's addressed to Edward Said (which, I would argue, is not as harmonious as Caplan reads it), Caplan seems

<sup>42</sup> Ali, *Ravishing Disunities*, 1.

<sup>43</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry in a Global Age* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 219.

<sup>44</sup> Aamir Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 194.

<sup>45</sup> Shahid Ali, "The Ghazal in America," 123.

<sup>46</sup> Caplan, "In That Thicket of Bitter Roots," 55.

<sup>47</sup> Caplan, "In That Thicket of Bitter Roots," 57–58.

to ignore that within the seeming harmony of Shahid's increasingly stringent use of the formal elements of the ghazal including the *qafia*, *radif*, and *matla*, the poet embeds the disarray of entire worlds. One ghazal in *Country*, for example, charts a connective path from the bloodshed in Kashmir to other displaced peoples of the world, invoking at one point the Palestinian Nakba: "Where there were homes in Deir Yassein, you'll see dense forests— / That village was razed. There's no sign of Arabic."<sup>48</sup> In another, he takes as his point of departure a poem by Laurence Hope, the pseudonym of Violet Nicholson, a nineteenth-century English poet, one he characterizes as "utterly sentimental."<sup>49</sup> Within a few couplets, he completely transforms the mood of the romantic original, interspersed with broken phrases from another lyric by Emily Dickinson, into a powerful exploration of the inter-communal bloodshed in Kashmir and his own loss of faith:

Those "Fabrics of Cashmere—" "to make Me beautiful—" "Trinket"—to gem—"Me to adorn—How—tell"— tonight?

I beg for haven: Prisons, let open your gates—  
A refugee from Belief seeks a cell tonight.<sup>50</sup>

In other words, the poems reflect his assertion that the formal rigors of the ghazal are not necessarily an obstacle to political truths and might on occasion be a means to give them renewed shape. Through the smoothness of the ghazal form and its deliberate archaisms, Shahid uncovers something disorienting and jagged, tectonic shifts of order captured in the final couplet: "And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee— / God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight." Usually, the place where the poet's flourish of announcing his identity resides in a ghazal, the final couplet becomes here a mode of effacement. Ramazani points out the "modernist mode of mythical syncretism" at work in this couplet, where "Ali commingles Job ("only am escaped [alone] to tell thee"), *Moby-Dick* ("Call me Ishmael" and the Job quotation), and Islamic tradition (Ishmael as ur-ancestor)."<sup>51</sup> I wonder if the shift from "Shahid" into this intermingling of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity is not also an affective fracturing, the solidity of his identity shifting into the disorientation of "a refugee from Belief." In fact, building on Newman's observation that form became harbor and house for Shahid, it is worth noting the extent to which disorientation is the bedrock of that relationship: if it is a harbor, it is one that memorializes wreckage; if it is a house, it traffics in prison cells and refugees. The ghazal thus becomes a multiply figured instantiation of Shahid's poetics of rupture. With his sally into the contemporary poetic discourse, Shahid manages to disrupt the ahistorical understanding of the ghazal in the West, and through his own ghazals simultaneously establishes that an understanding of origins does not need to translate into a reified performance of cultural purism. In fact, if his poetry is any evidence, it can become the very ground for an interpretive explosion: just as the origins of the ghazal in oral exchange becomes in Shahid's iteration a shattered

<sup>48</sup> Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite*, 226.

<sup>49</sup> Shahid Ali, "The Ghazal in America," 145.

<sup>50</sup> Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite*, 193.

<sup>51</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 105.

conversation between Kashmir and Deir Yassein, and between himself and God, Job, and Ishmael.

### III. Epilogue

Having begun with Rashid Nazki's pronouncements on poetry, I feel compelled to return to his story in concluding this discussion. As Basharat Peer (the author of *Curfewed Night*, the memoir from which Nazki's previous comment is excerpted) continues describing his encounter with Nazki, we learn that "[Nazki] had not written much since 1990. [Peer] did not have to ask him why. 'I lost half my family in a grenade blast and stopped writing after that ... I was in a coma of sorts for the next eight years. I did not write a single poem. Every time I picked up a pen, my fingers trembled.'"<sup>52</sup> Coming on the heels of Nazki's observation about political poetry, his experience serves as a sharp reminder that the reality of a political cataclysm and the craft of poetry (especially when attended by the demanding expectations that Nazki displays toward poetic composition) are rarely compatible. A besieged community shares the recognition of what the constant threat—and frequent actualization—of violence does to a creative capacity, as we note in Peer's comment about not having to ask why Nazki's usually prolific pen had been laid aside for so long.

I am reminded of a section from Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, couched as an ironic diary entry by Tilo, the protagonist:

NOTHING

I would like to write one of those sophisticated stories in which even though nothing much happens there's lots to write about. That can't be done in Kashmir. It's not sophisticated, what happens here. There's too much blood for good literature.

Q1: Why is it not sophisticated?

Q2: What is the acceptable amount of blood for good literature?

Blasé as it might sound, the excerpt succeeds in orienting us toward the question of when the intrusion of "blood" actively starts interfering with literary composition. Being in "a coma," to return to Nazki's words, is a powerful characterization of what he must have experienced in the wake of his personal tragedy as a thoroughgoing impairment of his capacity for articulation. Considering his example, we realize how inhibiting even self-imposed expectations of "good literature" can be, how potent the imprint of blood, and how crippling the combination of the two—such that for close to a decade after the experience of bereavement, a creative mind might be rendered comatose.

Shahid might have been famously fussy about aesthetics within his own poetry. At the same time, he was intensely attuned to what the riptide of grief

<sup>52</sup> Peer, *Curfewed Night*, 191.

does to articulation itself, let alone its aesthetic finessing. In fact, Shahid himself experienced a period of writer's block after his mother's death from cancer. It ended with the composition of "Lenox Hill," a canzone of towering stature where Shahid cried out, "For compared to my grief for you, what are those of Kashmir, / and what (I close the ledger) are the griefs of the universe / when I remember you—beyond all accounting—O my mother?"<sup>53</sup> Had he not been certain of having created an understanding of Kashmir's griefs (and his own grief for Kashmir) between himself and his readers, how else would we have comprehended the depths of this new bereavement—the death of his mother—that has eclipsed all else?

It would be easy to fall into the trap of suggesting that Shahid's distance from Kashmir was an artistic privilege that allowed him to continue composing through the valley's political turmoil, an argument I am singularly uninterested in making. What I do want to underscore is Shahid self-consciously and repeatedly drawing attention to his own distance across the poems in *Country* and the political effect of his efforts. "Call[ing] on us from the other side of a situation of extremity," Shahid's poetry inflects a wider set of questions about utterance under duress.<sup>54</sup> Whether it be in demonstrating the futility of his poetic project ("O Kashmir, Armenia once vanished. Words are nothing, / just rumors—like roses—to embellish a slaughter"), or the recurrent images of waste (wasted words, wasted ink, missives that never reach the ones to whom they were addressed), or even the graphic images of brutalized Kashmiri bodies that are emptied of "song" ("The boys of Kashmir / break so quickly, we make their bodies sing, / on the rack, till no song is left to sing") while he muses "Of what shall I not sing, and sing?": Shahid persistently moves among his positions as witness, exile, and bard of a besieged land. In exhorting his "mad heart [to] be brave" as he invites his unheard Kashmiri collective to "write to" him, Shahid refracts—through the lens of his own distance and his avowed poetic responsibility—the themes of here and there, of peace and disquiet, autonomy and occupation. Shahid's work in *Country* is a far cry from resurrecting the old quarrel between poetry and politics. In acknowledging the monumental effort that writing crisis demands through his poetics of rupture, Shahid prompts us to go beyond simply poetics itself and to read crisis in all its manifestations as the rupturing of a world: be it in the comatose silence of a formerly prolific poet or in his own tortured outpouring.

The work of a younger generation of Kashmiri artists—such as Uzma Falak, Omair Bhat, Suhail Naqshbandi, and Malik Sajad, to name a few—is marked by formal experimentation as well, but perhaps not by as self-consciously "literary" a corpus of forms or kinds of innovation as Shahid's. Unlike Agha Shahid Ali, there has been no prelapsarian Kashmir for these artists and the occupation has been the only frame of reference. Therefore, they mine this very occupation for their poetics and their work more generally, artistically reproducing approximations

<sup>53</sup> Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite*, 249.

<sup>54</sup> Forché, *Against Forgetting*, 31.

of their reality through varied use of the occupation's own machinery.<sup>55</sup> Shahid used everything at his disposal to craft the poetics of rupture at the heart of *The Country Without a Post Office*: blending testimony, confession, allusions, journalism, text, and para-text, and in significant ways, so do these artists. What their work demands of us in response—particularly as readers looking from the outside in—is to remain responsive to how a decades-long crisis inflects the parameters of poetry. An encounter with Agha Shahid Ali's poetry, therefore, should at the very least unsettle our presumptions about what we are willing to demand and recognize as poetry from a besieged people.

**Author biography.** Upasana is a postdoctoral Humanities Teaching Fellow at the University of Chicago. She received her PhD from the Department of English at the University of Chicago, and master and bachelor of arts from Jadavpur University. Her research interests include postcolonial literature and theory, war literature, graphic narratives, and gender studies.

---

<sup>55</sup> See Uzma Falak, "The Last Call: Audio Postcards from Kashmir," *Warscapes*, July 6, 2018, <http://www.warscapes.com/poetry/last-call-audio-postcards-kashmir>; Uzma Falak, "The Smallest Unit of Time in Kashmir Is a Siege," *Adi Magazine*, summer 2020, <https://adimagazine.com/articles/the-smallest-unit-of-time/>; Omair Bhat and Suhail Naqshbandi, "Growing Tulips: A Poem by Omair Bhat (in Dialogue with Artwork by Suhail Naqshbandi)" *Inverse Journal*, April 19, 2019, [https://www.inversejournal.com/2019/04/19/growing-tulips-a-poem-by-omair-bhat-in-dialogue-with-artwork-by-suhail-naqshbandi/?fbclid=IwAR3ti\\_sH1xTHxy-Z2pBkYbfeN1v-khbtoSirCpLmUwfpZ\\_c7w\\_00kyOZtU](https://www.inversejournal.com/2019/04/19/growing-tulips-a-poem-by-omair-bhat-in-dialogue-with-artwork-by-suhail-naqshbandi/?fbclid=IwAR3ti_sH1xTHxy-Z2pBkYbfeN1v-khbtoSirCpLmUwfpZ_c7w_00kyOZtU); Malik Sajad, "A Wedding Under Curfew," *New York Times*, November 9, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/09/opinion/kashmir-curfew.html/>.

**Cite this article:** Dutta, Upasana. 2023. "A Refugee from Belief: Agha Shahid Ali's Poetics of Rupture." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 10, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2022.24>