



# The Remains of Agha Shahid Ali's Voice: An Analysis of Manan Kapoor's *A Map of Longings*

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## Abstract

Agha Shahid Ali is one of those poets who transcends set categories and norms finding unique self-expression in his poetry and his life. This transcending of boundaries has been an intimate part of his biography and he has shifted constantly in geographical, temporal, and linguistic spaces with a yearning for peace and belonging. This not only imparts him an inimitable position among contemporary poets but also offers to him a very novel perspective towards generally the world and specifically the Indian subcontinent. The normative of poetics and theoretical frameworks are unable to contain and define his poetic oeuvre which is made of extremely personal anecdotes and an unsurpassable empathy for human suffering. The paper tries to explore his complex construction as a poet by mainly analyzing his biography written by Manan Kapoor. The book is called *A Map of Longings: The Life and Works of Agha Shahid Ali*. It was published in 2021 by Penguin Random House and is hailed as the first definitive biography of Agha Shahid Ali.

Key Words: American Poetry, Memory, Life Writings, Kashmir, Indian English Poetry.

This is an archive;

I have found the remains of his voice.

A map of longings.

With no limit.

- Agha Shahid Ali.

## Introduction

Poets of great skill and sensibility are irreducible in the sense that they cannot be tied down to singular labels, ideas, trends, and cultures. They always offer a multiplicity of meanings and layers of consciously curated life experiences through their poems, constantly renewing themselves with evolving contexts, always inviting new readings, birthing and assimilating within them new and old cultures together. Not only does it make the task of interpreting the poems difficult, but it also complicates the journey to a substantial understanding of the life of a poet. In this sense, Agha Shahid Ali is a difficult poet to interpret and just his shift from one geographical location to another is enough to add layers to his personality. His poetry is filled with the breaking of categories and mixing of various forms, voicing human suffering and experience through extreme analogies and new metaphors involving within the poems, alluding to poems and texts that are written in different languages and portray different and incomparable philosophies and ideas. There are several other dimensions to his poetry and he is one of those rare poets of recent times whose very being is closely entwined with his practice. Any attempt to write about his life and poetry must factor in these various dimensions and at the same time be very aware of the various traditions of poetry that find a novel expression in his poetic oeuvre. Manan Kapoor's biography of Agha Shahid Ali is called *A Map of Longings: The Life and Works of Agha Shahid Ali* and resonate with a deep love towards the poet. Is the biography capable enough to capture the various facets of Ali's life? Has it been able to coherently show the traces of various linguistic and poetic traditions in Ali's poems? Has it been able to challenge the often-done misreading of Agha Shahid Ali in academic and non-academic circles? Without answering these questions, a true estimate of the poet and his biography cannot be made.

### A Brief Overview of Major Influences and Ali's Style

In his introduction to the book, Manan Kapoor begins by telling his first encounters with the poet and brings T.S. Eliot and Mirza Ghalib together in the very first paragraph hinting at the presence of more than one culture in the poems of Agha Shahid Ali. The introduction also partly paraphrases Daniel Hall's 'Foreword' to *the Veiled Suite*, the volume of collected poems of Agha Shahid Ali, to give a brief and concise description of Ali's background and the defining features of his poetry:

Agha Shahid Ali, was by his own count, the beneficiary of three cultures – Muslim, Hindu, and, for lack of a more precise rubric, Western... His later work in particular employs an unfashionable lavishness of diction and emotion, owing in equal measure, perhaps, to this extraordinary cultural inheritance, and an extraordinary generosity of spirit. (Agha and Hall *Foreword* 15)

Kapoor then offers a sneak peek into the most conspicuous and important aspect of Ali's poetry:

In his poems, there is not only the presence of these cultures (Hindu, Muslim, and Western) and traditions but also several allusions to the works of other writers and poets. Much like Eliot had done in some of his poems, Shahid weaved into his work the words of other poets, such as Osip Mandelstam, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Emily Dickinson, John Milton, Rainer Maria Rilke, Paul Celan, Yannis Ritsos, Octavio Paz and C.P. Cavafy. (Kapoor xi)

Ali's use of allusions is a sheer reflection and can become a good starting point for beginning to understand him as a poet. It is his love for other poets that ultimately leads to his own making as a poet and at the same time is a reflection of his politics and his worldview. Among all such names, two names stand out – T.S. Eliot and Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Manan traces this affinity and influence of both poets. For Ali's engagement with Eliot, he writes:

The American poet remained a massive influence on Shahid and his poetry. His presence in Shahid's verse is palpable in *Bone Structure* and *In Memory of Begum Akhtar*, especially in the poem 'Cremation', which Shahid wrote after his friend Vidur Wazir's mother's death, as well as in 'Introducing' where he turns Eliot's 'mixing memory and desire' to 'mixing blood with mud', 'memory with memory'...

(Kapoor 39)

Memory was to play a vital role in the further development and investigations of Shahid's journey. Eliot and his use of allusions remained a masterclass for him and if any further probing into his poetics has to be done, these will always remain the entry points. Manan Kapoor, opening with this point, structures the entire biography by taking a cue from the master poet himself and chronologically telling the story of Ali's life by naming the chapters by borrowing and alluding to Ali's phrases, sentences, and titles. 'The Season of Plains', 'Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere', 'In Exodus, I Love You More, etc. to name a few. One of the poets that Manan Kapoor has quoted in his introduction was going to find prominence in his later poetry – Faiz Ahmed Faiz.

## Family Background

Kapoor begins by tracing Ali's birth and his ancestry through his mother and father. Sufia, Ali's mother was going to be a lasting impression on Ali's poetics and a significant part of the longing that Ali felt for Kashmir. Manan Kapoor briefly delves into the historical background wherever necessary to provide the much-needed background to the reader. He also connects the personal history of the poet with the history of the subcontinent involving various events like the partition of India, the emergency, the violence in Kashmir, etc. This imparts the much necessary historical sense to the poet for whom everything was political and necessary.

As mentioned earlier, coming from a sophisticated and learned family, Ali was exposed to both the popular and the high culture of the day, becoming acquainted at a very early age with the likes of Shakespeare, Ghalib, Keats, and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, listening to the Beatles and Chopin and reciting Milton and Mir at the same time.

### Ali's Sense of History

Ali had an acute sense of history, as he would display in one of his famous poems by framing a sentence like 'my memory comes in the way of your history'. A phrase like 'the Official account of history' was so bothersome to him that it would eventually lead him to work on a dichotomy between memory and history. This sense sanctions an engagement with the history and poetic tradition of his Homeland and in turn allows him to present before the reader a nuanced version of the history of Kashmir, favouring the masses instead of the operating hegemonies in the valley. This historical sense is not unidirectional and has to do with his learning of Marxism, a philosophy that must have fascinated him growing up in an intellectual environment. In a poem called 'Cracked Portraits' where he traces the various generation of his family, Ali shows his affinity with Marx and Lenin, with a subtlety that is otherwise rarely present in the entire corpus of Indian English Poetry:

He brings me closer to myself  
as he quotes Lenin's love of Beethoven,  
but loses me as he turns to Gandhi. (Ali 37)

## Choice of Language

This sense of history is so deeply embedded in Shahid's making that both the form and content of his poetry are read through these lenses. His vocal support to the sufferers all over the planet to the language that he chooses to write in is seen as a result of these historical factors. His use of various complex forms like canzones and villanelles also showcases his expertise and fondness for the language. Manan Kapoor, also, rightly quotes from one of his interviews:

The historical forces in my case are that I come from Kashmir and I'm a product of Hindu, Muslim, and Western influences. I write in English- and I have always written in English. It could have been otherwise, too. My parents, my interest in music, my interest in poetry, Indian classical music, Western classical music, and Western popular music, all these things since my childhood have informed my being. The thing that makes them historically interesting is that the combination is unusual. Because one can say that of anybody- a combination of forces has shaped each one of us. What makes it particularly interesting, I suppose is that I do it all in English, so I am able to do certain things in English for the first time. (qtd in Kapoor 22-23)

This is an honest overview of one's own poetic process and language of choice. The role of history in his politics is also detailed in the later sections of the book about which a discussion is made later.

## Delhi University, Akhtari, and Urdu Poetry

Any discussion of Ali's life is incomplete without mentioning Begum Akhtar. Theirs' was a relationship that like other constituents of Ali's life transcended all the labels and reductions. Shahid stayed in Delhi for a substantial period of time, first as a student at Delhi University and then as a faculty member of the university trying to understand and unravel the complex and rigid demands and patterns of Indian Academics. Manan Kapoor rightly quotes from one of Ali's profiles published in *First City*:

The most marked memories from his days at Delhi University are his attempts at having to justify the studying and teaching of English Literature. (qtd in Kapoor 65)

In such circumstances, Begum Akhtar was more than a relief. Kapoor also briefly discusses the biographical details of Begum Akhtar, her persona as a singer and as an eminent personality of her times, the immortality of her voice, and the passion of the people for her concerts. Whenever such concerts were organized in

Delhi, Ali attended them with his friend Saleem Kidwai. The very exposure to an artist of such stature would have influenced Shahid a lot, both in terms of inculcating a sense of musicality that went beyond Eliot and is the very core of classical Urdu poetry. It must have highly affected his idea of love and peace that find a central place in his imagination of the ideal. There is a certain poetic sense with which Manan Kapoor closes the chapter called Akhtari, announcing the end of a cycle and curtailing the possibility of any other future for Shahid than to move to America to pursue a doctorate.

### **America, Memory, and Home**

Shahid's arrival in America happens to coincide with an interesting phase in American Academia and also with an eventful phase in American and Indian history. With the hippie movement and the protest against Vietnam in recent memory, there was a rise of certain kinds of culturalisms in academic circles that moved away from grand narratives and preferred individual stories/narratives, bringing to the center, among other things, identity. It is again very interesting to note that any such engagement with such terms and the 'turn' in Shahid's case have always aligned with his demands for structural changes. There are several instances of rejection of such labels but one finds a prominent place in Manan Kapoor's biography. While Manan Kapoor writes about it in a different context and concerning Shahid's sexual orientation, a more inclusive and political interpretation of such rejections or at least slippages remains open. Is it deliberately done or is this an opportunity missed to bring out the modernist side of Ali's poetic construction? However, this is what Manan Kapoor writes:

While Shahid had no qualms about his sexual orientation, and there was no anxiety surrounding it, he never wrote about it, for he didn't think it was in line with his poetic pursuits. "It doesn't interest me as a poet, except when it inadvertently appears in my poetry, the way god may appear, or love may appear, or childhood may appear, or anything. (Kapoor 70)

That a conscious poet like him who was eventually going to publish a collection like *A Country Without A Post Office*, would have considered his poetic process to be separate from his politics is an unthinkable argument. His poet and his person are different, is another argument that is unsellable and a very liberal interpretation of a very political poet. That, pretty much in vain with classical Urdu poetry, he would have suggested instead of stating his politics is a much more convincing thought. Unlike his one master T.S. Eliot

and more like the other one, namely Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Ali showcases a firm stand against the hegemony that subjugates and violates personal rights.

Nevertheless, among other things that America offered, it made the yearning for home in Shahid's life, a constant, elevating the idea of home to the status of a muse, an unattainable beloved, the loss of it being 'the true subject' as he were to write in a famous essay on Faiz Ahmed Faiz. The move to America made exile a permanent state, something that Ali dealt with in a very dialectical fashion always explaining the contradictions inherent in his condition and always ailing for the people suffering in Kashmir. For instance:

I've tied a knot  
with green thread at Shah Hamdan, to be  
untied only when the atrocities  
are stunned by your jeweled return... (Ali 180)

To access home and reconcile with what he had lost, Ali has at least one tool – Memory. The centrality of memory in his poetry is established many times- through allusions, translations, and his personal and anecdotal memories of Kashmir. Memory also becomes at Ali's hand a tool to form a connection between the personal and the collective -his becoming theirs and theirs becoming his! The chapter in Kapoor's work where the use of memory is discussed in detail for the first time is brilliantly named after one of Ali's most popular phrases, 'In Exodus, I Love You More'. Here, it should again be stressed that 'Love' for Ali is a loaded term with a dialectical and political tone.

### **Faiz And Poetry of Witness or Resistance**

Remembering in itself is a political act. Faiz Ahmed Faiz taught Ali to turn his longing into an act of resistance against the atrocities committed on the collective in various places around the world. Faiz's poetry is Marxist and always becomes an agency for the downtrodden. The personal in his poetry always leads towards a yearning for the emancipation of the collective. Ali's deliberations are also guided toward the same goal. His poetry acknowledges, registers, and remembers the crimes of the powerful against his people and therefore becomes a witness, and a comrade in people's suffering. This is perhaps the most

humane aspect of Ali's poetry, one that resonates with the very core of humanness. Manan Kapoor has discussed this at various places and has compared Ali with Darwish, Celan, Neruda, etc.

## Translations and Ghazals

A very significant facet of Ali's poetic process and his general oeuvre is his involvement in translation. Driven by the need to bring home to a new set of audience, the legacy that he carried as a poet from the Indian subcontinent and deeply dissatisfied by the general perception and reading of some of the great canonical names of Urdu poetry, he set out to translate the classics of Urdu poetry - especially Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Manan Kapoor offers a meticulous insight into the difficulties that Ali would have faced:

From his initial attempts, Shahid had realized that there was no way in which the Urdu, especially Faiz's Urdu, could be replicated in the English language. Reading the translations of various Urdu and Persian poets in English, he had become aware that his task as a translation was to carry out a literal translation but to domesticate Faiz in English. (Kapoor 88)

Not only did Ali capably finish this task, but he also encouraged several translators of various ethnicities and backgrounds to translate various poets into English.

A part of Ali's legacy was also the various poetic forms that he had learned from the classical Urdu masters, namely the form of ghazal. He was aware that poets in the West (even Lorca) had tried their hands at the complex form (in their respective languages) that had become popular in Persian and had Arabic roots. An extremely difficult form, ghazals in Urdu and Persian are written with strict metrical rules. Manan Kapoor has written in detail about Ali's inhibitions and efforts to bring the form to a larger audience in English and he discusses *Ravishing Disunities* in detail:

By the mid-'90s, Shahid tried to create a larger understanding of the ghazal form through an anthology, later published as *Ravishing Disunities*. He asked various poets, including Marilyn Hacker, John Hollander and others, to contribute to it... While Shahid uses mannerisms of American Poetry and culture and makes references to various poets such as Emily Dickinson, Oscar Wilde, James Merrill and W.H. Auden, he also stays true to the form's essence or its ghazal-ness... In Shahid's ghazals, there is desire for the beloved and the pain of separation, there is fatalism and there is hope, there is God, and there is separation from God. (Kapoor 121-22)



The desire for the beloved, the pain of separation, hope, etc. remained Ali's principal themes for making poetry and required an engagement with an unperishable pain and a sense of perennial longing.

### **Use of various Resources in writing the Biography**

The biography not only uses anecdotes from various sources, but it also tries to investigate Ali's making as a poet through letters and interviews - some of these being available in the public domain, some thoroughly researched and laboriously excavated through personal documents. The one thing that immediately imparts significance to the biography is the list of the firsts concerning the use of archived information on Agha Shahid Ali. For instance, in the fourth chapter of the book, Kapoor quotes from one of the letters to Agha Shahid Ali. This letter is a part of Special Collections at Hamilton College, Burke Library, Clinton New York. The letter was written by Sufia Agha on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1979. Manan Kapoor quotes:

Sufia had written: 'Your ambition at nine of becoming a poet and appearing to understand and appreciate Greek and Russian Literature – all have given you a very rich experience of life. (qtd in Kapoor 29)

The book's biggest contribution is perhaps providing an inexhaustible bibliography of Agha Shahid Ali. From personal archives and interviews to public archives in the US and Kashmir, Kapoor has meticulously collected a rich reservoir of texts on Agha Shahid Ali.

### **Conclusion**

Almost everything available on Agha Shahid Ali in any form including all the areas and suggestions that his poetry invokes to date finds a place in Kapoor's work. Ali's mother, her significance in his life, other family members, and friends like Irfan Hasan find space in the pages of the book at appropriate places. His idea of nationality, affiliation with certain poets, the various traditions of which he at once becomes a part, his adherence to intertextuality, his humour and the personal anecdotes that he, himself had circulated so many times, are for the first time, available at one place. Ali was constantly guided by his incessant looking at what can be turned into poetry. Manan Kapoor portrays a deep understanding of Ali's nature and his

approach to what Ali embodied – a poet whose work is laced with a longing for an ideal world where there is love and peace.

Ali's life, though short, was fulfilling and he touched multitudes with his poetry – a rare feat achieved by a serious and mature poet in the current age. No work can fully grasp in totality, the layered corpus of work that he has left behind. Yet if an attempt was going to be made, it required love (Ali would have insisted) and Manan Kapoor opens the door to the possibility of multiple readings with his right suggestions. His work generates curiosity and captures a life of celebrations tinged with melancholy and establishes Shahid as an inexhaustible poet– the kind that is not there anymore.

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