

Language Games: The Study of English-Urdu Hybridization in the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali

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Abstract:

Agha Shahid Ali, a Kashmiri-American poet celebrates his regional affiliation and cultural plurality through the fusion of English-Urdu words in his poems. His verses galore different linguistic and cultural traditions to make reader recognize the emerging hybrid forms of the standard language. The present paper aims to analyse the functional use of words and phrases from Urdu and Hindi language in his poems. It studies the poet's method of linguistic hybridization to present the distinctness of different cultures and language. Ali's poetry raises a plethora of images drawing sites of connection between different places and linguistic circles. This paper examines the play of languages and reflections of different worlds in the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali.

Keywords: Cultural plurality, Regional affiliation, Linguistic Hybridization, English-Urdu-Hindi words,

Agha Shahid Ali's tri-cultural belonging has nurtured his poetic expression with a set of regional, linguistic, historical and aesthetic components. His poetry demands the need to apprehend the set of these linguistic, cultural and aesthetic components registered by the poet from different languages and cultures. The poet uses words and phrases from different languages to develop his poetic subjects and theme. Therefore, it is intriguing and captivating to unfold the meanings of referential words and phrases used by the poet.

Ali's poems are in a close assortment of Urdu-English words embodying and underscoring both linguistic and cultural movements. The poet undergoes this process of transition to help himself establish nexus between his indigenous community and the standard canon at the same time. It is to bridge the gap between motherland and the fatherland. The poet's use of places such as 'Purana Qila', 'Daryaganj', or his reference to 'Harijan Villages' (in "I Dream It is Afternoon When I return to Delhi") or about 'Nanga Parbat' (in "Survivor"); 'Dast-e-Saba' and 'Zindan- Nama' (works by Faiz) about 'Ghalib', 'Mir', 'Faiz' or the 'Malhar notes' develop the archive of his cultural past and highlights the retrieval of the loss so that a close sense of affiliation is drawn with the home and the community.

It is a voluntary mode of emphasizing the restoration of home and community in different geographical and cultural space. The cultural displacement as embraced and entertained by Agha Shahid Ali in carrying the hybrid tone of his poems (by putting in function the sub-continental form of English), is to heighten the literary and aesthetic potential of his own language. He is commemorating the unrecognized linguistic and cultural dwellings which were prevalent in the world much before the normative form of globally accepted language came to existence.

It is a key element of Ali's verses that he introduces words from his native language without any translation. Ali, in this manner composes a localized version of English language such that the normative standard of English language is blended with native flavours. Recollecting his grandfather's memory, Ali shares:

“In a dim-lit shop he smoked hashish,
Reciting verses of Sufi-mystics”. (36)

The grandfather's habit of smoking is intricate with the technique of words that figure in a language system pertaining to his indigenous zone. Memory travels to time past with the idea of revealing personal history in inter-lingual method of poetic narration. It creates a cultural context that objectifies a postcolonial instinct of writing that could be implemented to set an alternative form of reading and understanding poetry. On an impersonal perspective, it could be implemented Ali plays with language system and words to focus on multi-lingual shades of Indian English poetry. As marked by Emilia Iancu in her article 'Hybridization, Heteroglossia and the English language in Postcolonial literature' on the process of sub-continental English formation, and cultural identity, “what began in postcolonial writing as the creolisation of the English – language has become a process of mass literary transplantation, desegregation and cross-fertilisation a process that is changing the nature of what was once called English-literature or, more accurately literature in English at its very heart”.(174 -175).

The poetic artifice of incepting words and terminology from a native speech community is even more region-oriented rather than format-oriented. The poet therefore tries to offer a more comparative framework for examining a region's cultural and political concerns. It is a manner of resistance towards the regular form of composing poetry and stressing significance on the discourse of poetry that transmits a sensibility towards the unobserved speech community, and its cultural realm.

The poet's language is the language of desire focusing on memory carved out of cultural plurality. It delves deep to account for the way by which language is set with poetic subject to cross the national boundaries and to enter in a sub-system of dialectical relationship pertaining to a regional space. Therefore, the new language express and uphold historical, thematic, and stylistic gestures belonging to that community. In the verses of Agha Shahid Ali, we generally tend to observe a set of contesting cultures articulating their own set of community norms and alternatively shaping varying ideological concepts before the readers. Ali, in his poem “In the Mountains” from the book *The Half Inch Himalayas* introduces to his readers about the varying names of the God in Arabic culture and mentions about ‘God's

ninety-nine Names in Arabic'. Ali charts these examples in his verses to set and establish a cultural space that focuses on the plurality of English language. In this new space or the emerging canon that makes use of the practice of writing in sub-continental form of English, there undergoes a constant tension between the dominant language and the emerging one. The by-product of the dominant language and the resistant language leads to a linguistic cross-fertilisation or hybridization of the standard form of language with the unidentified one.

This case of hybridisation of English language is time and again discussed by various scholars of Indian English literature based on their study of Indian English poetry. Anjum Hasan also draws apposition in same context in the article "Going Nowhere Always" and writes "My point through these examples is to emphasize the discontinuous, criss-crossing and overlapping nature of the Anglophone poetry scene. Further, there are different languages clashing creatively in each poet's heart and mind. Agha Shahid Ali, for example, drew on North Indian Urdu tradition while living in US".

Shahid Ali's use of different languages, endeavors these possibilities in his poems, in a high-serious tone. There is a difference in the syntax, tone and diction of the words and their placements creating the effective radiance of local subjects. Shahid Ali brings such instances of words and idioms from the native tone to create statement of gestures and experiences of home. The poet is resistant towards the standard form of language, profoundly stating the tales and tones of one's nation state, with the usage of local words. The historical phase of Indian freedom struggle is illumined in Shahid's poetic language in his poem "I Dream It Is Afternoon When I Return to Delhi" as the poet talks about the places creating a series of pictures before the audience. He mentions about "Harijan Villages" or the "Prisoners Blinded in a Bihar Jail".

Owing its roots to Kashmir, the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali is molded with tribal culture, their language, songs, the Sufi approach, the Kashmiri music and art, the Persian saints and so forth. The art and its nurturance in the state of Kashmir are effective of a transcendence born out of Sufi-mystical approach. Comprised of Sufi-vision, Ali's poetry is sacred and it is an expression to indulge in oneness with the God as found in songs and singers of the region.

Ali's poems are set to echo the loss of a complex language system that possesses immense body of work and insightful meditations about a culture. He has tried to develop a nexus between Urdu- a language which seems to be at discomfort with its own current usage and English- a language that has successfully tried to manifest itself on a global platform- linguistically, culturally and politically. In writing poems that constitute of the intricacies of these two culturally driven linguistic circles, Ali tries to produce the hybrid panorama. The local language is generally seen as a site of pity rather than a site of beauty in comparison to the standard form of language in function. The poet tries to relocate the attitude of readers in acknowledging the role of a regional language.

Ali brings before the reader a linguistic break, a cultural void of the languages that come from margins and tries to relocate these marginalized sub-systems of language by making references from the lives of his grandparents, mother, father or any other situations. For instance, experiences of poet's father, grandfather and great-grandfather is distinctly jointed in each of these lines, from the poem "Cracked Portraits" as he writes: "the needles grazing

Malika Pukhraj's songs"(35); "he smoked hashish, reciting verses of Sufi mystics"(36); "but loses me as he turns to Gandhi"(37).

Almost every poem blossoms with the local effect in some reference or the other. The game of language is stirred by the poet stretching the readers' imagination. The stress on vernacular dilutes the monotonous style which are non-existent in the texts. The oral stories of Urdu literary culture, the Arabian tradition and narratives from history discursively operate for old and current inter-textual disciplines.

Shahid's poetry surpasses the features of simple poetry, in sharing cross-cultural emotions and experiences. His lived differences in ethnicity, geography, his witnessing of political upheavals and dark history brings a bricolage of intercultural poetic expressions. As he writes:

"They ask me to tell them what Shahid means

Listen-It means "The Beloved" in Persian, "Witness" in Arabic". (226)

The stress on different linguistic centers is emphasized in the poet's name himself. Shahid Ali's verse is determined both from his domestic and international experiences. The memory and reference keep forming the emotions which take the reader to understand the inter-relation and differences of one language in function with the other. The references from many worlds in a single poem function as a hybridized and codified language where each pulp of reference reaches to its own discursive set of concepts. This poetry is not homogenous to allow reader move smoothly in one stratified domain.

It is an array of multiple linguistic conceptions that evolve the narrative of one set of language speakers with the other different set of language speakers. Ali's poetry has developed a concern for selection and combination of words to understand the role of the units of language. Again, and again the poet lays stress on the functions of the units of language in any set of discourse. Each word connotes to the social and religious frame of context. The discursive nature of poetic text is thence emphasized as it depends on social and cultural units of language used by the poet to render the line of thought. These cross-cultural appropriations from local global patterns poeticized by Agha Shahid Ali bring polyvalent nature to his poetry.

Exemplary of some such bricolage are the treatment of the story of Abraham and Issac in 'The Koran' and 'the Old Testament'; the use of the phrase 'Blackwater' or 'Kalapani' which refers to treacherous state of exile; the cult of tying Green threads; the Persian mystic Al-Hallaj; the patron saint of Kashmir 'Sheikh Noor-ud-Din'; the Sufi interpretation of God-Satan myth; the Bhajans from myths of Radha-Krishna and many more.

- "daughter Zainab wanders in thirst.
The Prophet's blood is streams on Karbala's Sand". (265)
- "dark god. Dark Krishna you are all I have/
do not hide yourself merely to break my heart" (266)
- "The women break into/
there is no god but..." (269)

- “But whom the news has reached in the Valley of Death” (272)
- “My father is – in Persian reciting Hafiz of Shiraz, that ‘Nothing in this world is without terrible barriers/ Except love, but only when it begins”. (276)
- “This is death? This fire of separation?
This is survival?” (286)
- “and for love’s first story:/ God and Satan – Iblis, first monotheist” (289)

Such citations express Ali’s interplay suggestive of discourses that move reader to extra-poetic notions. “In the drive for reinvention at a time when generic boundaries and hierarchies were increasingly unstable, when incipient globalization was relatively aesthetic and spiritual paradigms, when poetry had grown increasingly specialized and its cultural prestige was imperiled, poets drew- strength by hybridizing the verse with the formal and linguistic possibilities of the novel, journalism, song, religious discourse, the visual arts and commerce, science, and so forth”. (10)

In his book, *The Half-Inch Himalayas* we see the speaker is sharing Urdu phrases in communicating about the news of home being far away from the home itself. Ali brings the waving notion of ‘Hindutva’ in his poem ‘A Butcher’; relates from United States the couplet of Ghalib with the Butcher in Kashmir. The linguistic community that the poet shares with the Butcher transgresses the political upheavals faced by the Butcher and the national boundaries resisting the poet. Writes Agha Shahid Ali,

“I smile and quote

a Ghalib line; he completes

the couplet, smiles,

quotes a Mir line. I complete

the couplet.” (47-48)

The Butcher and the poet share a set of implicit expectation in order to complete the couplet pertaining to the famous singers of their linguistic circle. It is a very natural manner of expression that could be perceived by any passing reader. Famous verses and songs nowhere restrict to boundaries of caste, class and region. It is supportive of integral sentiment shared and acknowledged by group of people belonging to linguistic circles. The interactions between the two speakers address to the common framework of linguistic and cultural conventions.

The legacy of language is shared, explored and celebrated by the poet in his mentioning of the emotions where he carries the idea that using language, the land was always deeply remembered. Language appeared as the poet’s medium of association. It turned out to be the expression of his regional affiliation. A single verse written by Ali is simultaneously literary, historical, wavering post modernity, stemming global-local visions. The picture of cross-culture (Hindu- Islam- Christian), art (Poetry, Form and Music) and heritage (Ghazal) result in mutation of Shahid’s poetics. There is indulgence and divulgence in Shahid Ali’s hybrid verse. It indulges in the fathoms of each noted myth, unacknowledged form and divulges in

creation of recognizing poetry much ahead of canonical and aesthetic representations. It is heterogeneous with everyday speeches, regional, codes, utterances and in the responses to those utterances. Ali's poetry notably indulges in other forms of writing such as letters, memoirs, a radio program, historical facts and so forth. In this respect, Majumdar maintains, "...Ali re-stiches the discourse of 'otherness' by cutting down the repressive walls of monolithic, static national identity. In this way, he admits a rich embroidery of cultural contexts from the tales and legends of Habba Khatun to the tale of Noah's Ark, from Muharram in Srinagar to the Norwegian hostage Hans Christian Ostro's cruel killing by Kashmiri militants. Besides plurality of readings, these polyphonic dimensions of his texts investigate the contemporaneity of the ever-wandering nomad's mixed allegiance throughout the world". (Majumdar, 182).

The reader in Ali's poems moves with the character which could be – the characterization of a language, a neighbor, a myth, lines from English or Urdu poet, a newspaper headline or an incident. With each and any of these characters is the story attached to it that the poet narrates to the reader. Whether it is 'Purana Quila' or 'Amherest', the poet's univocal progression of story is read and related with the others. Thus, the reader often witnesses a character and a plot creating a psychological impact that holds the reader for the successive events. Therefore, every poem could be read and analyzed in a heterogeneous polyglot space of multicultural layering.

Thus, Ali raises awareness for cultural belongingness in the form of breaks and divergence in which he delves in and out, in his art of writing poetry. In doing this he is concerned with every aspect of Urdu language- its cultural past and its functional present. The poet's objective in his hybridization of English- Urdu words in his poems brings two-fold perspective. One, that it is an introduction to the foreign reader, by the poet about the richness and vivacity of a culturally driven language system, relevant since pre-modern era. In doing this, the poet celebrates cultural plurality. Secondly, that such imprint of English-Urdu combination as recorded by Agha Shahid Ali questions the Indian reader to ask and reason by themselves the breaks and voids faced by many such languages of Indian region, and instigate the role of reader to bridge the same. Therefore the poetic artifice of Agha Shahid Ali emphasizes the role and the play of different languages and culture to create a new space of self expression.

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Author's Bio-note:

I am doing my research in English Literature from Department of English, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi. My research topic is Cultural Contours in the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali. My areas of interest include Indian English Literature, Eco-criticism and cultural studies. I love to explore new approaches towards poetry.