

THE 'MATING DANCE': LOVE AND EXILE IN IFTI NASIM AND AGHA SHAHID ALI

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Two un-accommodated sons of Islam: Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001) and Ifti Nasim (1946-2011). Both queer, both take exile as a permanent condition to life and art, settling in America owing to cultural and political turmoil in India and Pakistan respectively. Both are religious and cultural minorities. Shahid Ali is a Kashmiri Shia who wrote hybrid ghazals in English. Ifti Nasim is a Pakistani Sufi who gave up writing his celebrated Urdu ghazals and wrote in Panjabi and Black English. Shahid Ali projects India as an interloper in Kashmir, declares himself a Kashmiri-American poet, and celebrates Lahore's beauty and architecture. Ifti Nasim projects Pakistan as a conservative sub-culture that fails to accommodate its minority populace, idealizes surrogacy calling himself a Chicago liberal, and deconstructs Indian mythology in his poems. This article compares their poetry on personal and political levels to argue that Shahid Ali and Ifti Nasim present the imposed cultural and religious boundaries as sexual boundaries and challenge the heterosexist architecture in exile.

From his mother's side, Shahid Ali blends Islam with Hinduism. The playing God in Shahid Ali's poetry is the God who is also a thief. He remembers the *mākhan-chor* Kanhaiya of his mother's *bhajans* in his work. With a desire to become the poet laureate of a free Kashmir, Shahid Ali negotiates his gay identity and mourns the colonization of Kashmir in his volumes of poetry. Kashmir for him is a nation in itself. Writing from the closet, he yearns for sexual and national freedom, returning home every year to see a newly devastated Kashmir. His *Half-Inch Himalayas* (1993) and *The Country Without a Post Office* (2000) took India by storm and they present the political turmoil recollecting the ongoing cultural martyrdom in Kashmir. The exiled gay son of Kashmir—bereft of a free home and homeland—creates a gay nation in textuality. On the other hand, Ifti Nasim invites a permanent social stigma for writing 'open' gay

poetry in conservative Pakistan, in addition to homosexualizing the Urdu ghazal and castigating the very structure of religious doctrines. His Sufi ideal of institutionalizing his lover as god is conceptualized as blasphemy for which he invited an eternal disgrace and received numerous death threats from Islamic stoics. The son of a successful Urdu journalist, who made money through his anti-India journalism, Nasim lost his mother at thirteen. With his father's re-marriage, the children of the old marriage were shifted to the servants' quarters while the new family occupied the main bungalow. Nasim at an early age began to prostitute himself to feed his sisters and to buy himself new clothes for yet another date. This image of Nasim circulated in Pakistan. He realized his sexual preference early in his life, declined an arranged heterosexual marriage imposed upon him, and persuaded his father to sponsor a three-month stay in America and thereby escaped corporal punishment that had once crippled him. Nasim's *Narman* (1994, Urdu) caused havoc in Pakistan, was subsequently banned and was thereafter circulated underground. His *Myrmecophile* (2000), like Lorca's *Poet in New York* (1998), recalls the plight of the homosexual poet in search of a home and homeland in urban Chicago.

There is a close geographical proximity in Shahid Ali's and Ifti Nasim's life and work. They include, but are not limited to, cultural heritage of India and Pakistan in opposition to each other, settling in the American west, advocating sexual, cultural and religious freedom, and most importantly sharing the roots of the Arabic poetic tradition in their writings. In spite of the similarities, the differences are many as well. While Shahid Ali remained in the closet throughout his life and declined to be re-produced in gay anthologies fearing an exposure of his love-life, Nasim celebrated his homosexuality openly and was inducted into the Chicago Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame in 1996. Although there is no historical record that both the poets met physically, yet sharing a common cultural lineage, they converged in the realm of imagination interacting and inverting their political life through artistic expressions. It is in this artistic domain that both the poets meet and diverge. Their lives correspond through the Asian diaspora, and their literary creations, assisting to serve as a hoax, transcend their earthly desire into the celestial. Both Shahid Ali and Ifti Nasim present a language and poetic form—the homoerotic ghazals, free meter, recreation of Arabic poetry, their political take on religious ideologues, the use of free-English that they embraced and mourning militarism in the Indian subcontinent—and create a rhetoric of conceptual sexuality.

How does a poetic / literary form assist in negotiating sexual and religious identities within the projected familial spaces? In what ways does a genre give expression to the gay persona, creating, liberating and transcending it in form and style? In what ways do the memories of home relate and provide a facade through the shifting memories of a culturally, ethnically and sexually exiled minority? On the one hand, delimiting the imposed cultural boundaries, Shahid Ali's and Ifti Nasim's political poems castigate the homophobic architecture of home and advocate a sexual individualism. And on the other, it is ethnic and religious boundaries that are projected as sexual boundaries within which the two poets resist familial limitations suggesting that their performative poetry assists them to plunge into a mystic dance making it a paradigmatic vision for queer resistance, liberation and empowerment.

Shahid Ali wrote poetry from the closet, quoted passages and took most of his epigraphs from acclaimed gay icons such as Gerard Manley Hopkins, Oscar Wilde and James Merrill, but declined to be part of *Yaraana* (1999), India's first anthology on same-sex writing, during his life-time. His most mature collections of poetry *The Country Without a Post Office* and *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2002) have two gay icons, viz., Hopkins and Merrill, as patron saint and poetic muse respectively. From America he dreams to be "at the Ghat of the only world" when "a night of ghazals" comes "to an end" (2002, 97); he dreams he was "the only passenger on Flight 493 to Srinagar" when he realises that "the heart must defend / its wings of terror and even pity" (2000, 16); he dreams of "glass bangles" when "inside the burning house a widow" was "smashing the rivers on her arms" (1992, 28). When someone 'else' asks for "the love of women," Ali composes "Death Row" (2000, 52); when a lover whom he had not seen for twenty years attempts suicide, Shahid Ali concludes "I suspect it was over me" (2002, 70); and in the next page, he publishes his "Suicide Note" marking "I could not simplify myself" (71). Along with a deep personal note, Shahid Ali integrates Kashmiri struggle for independence and alludes to a Kashmir before the invasion of Akbar in 1586 CE that had once shown a high liberal tradition accommodating multiplicity of religious practices and beliefs.

So to understand Shahid Ali's political style, one has to see the integrated system of life in Kashmir and his political activism in America, and isolate the meaning of the surface to understand his cultural and political resistance. A.K. Mehrotra while introducing Shahid Ali in his seminal anthology *Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (1992) claimed:

Though Ali has made exile his permanent condition, it is not what he writes about. Exile offers him unconfined and unpeopled space into which, one at a time, he introduces human figures. The eccentric and occasionally violent men of the family stand aloof from its women, who have the sensitivity of the well-born and from whom Ali inherits his own. Just as exile provides each memory with its own space, absence gives high definition to what is absent, be it landscape, lover, or self (Mehrotra, rpt. 2005: 139).

Several ideas 'mate' in Shahid Ali in his dream vision, and present a composite picture of home, family and nation. Political atrocities, freedom struggle of Kashmir and his self-imposed exile flip through the writing as if on a theatre screen and unless the reader is a 'witness,' for that is the meaning of 'Shahid,' to the series of struggles, she misses Shahid Ali's poetry to a significant degree. Here is how Mehrotra, while highlighting the superficial structure of his rebellion, misunderstands the gay poetic persona and thereby innocently renders a serious disservice to Ali's readers:

Ali's poems seem to be whispered to himself, and to read them is as if to overhear. This is not to suggest that they are remote or in any way indistinct, but to underline the quietness of his voice and the clarity with which he speaks (2005: 139).

The multiplicity of themes and rebellions sung from America are presented in a dream sequence in Shahid Ali and unless we hear the gay persona speaking therein we ignore the poet and the whole meaning of his poetry—be it Kashmir, Islam or internationalization of Kashmiri freedom in exile.

In case of Ifti Nasim the surrogate homeland America empowers him to be an activist from where he leads and wages his struggle against Islamic cultural politics of the Indian subcontinent. For the "Nath' of the Gay Prophet" he would burn the "pages of the *Koran*" to keep the prophet-lover warm (Merchant, 2009: 103). Nasim's struggle starts with his body, the human body, then it transcends, and the struggle completes a full circle in the liberation of the soul. As a saree-clad gay he wrote "only a man can complete a man / only a woman can complete a woman" contradicting the mythology of creation. The whole universe is put to trial: "I am Man / Woman / I am complete within myself / O divided ones / Do not try to tear me apart / Heal thyself" (102). When the liberation movement in America is violently suppressed, the gay bar is raided and the last call of police is given, he writes, "But we survived we shall survive / Look at your history" (2002, 44) and in the celebration of his gayness does

he celebrate his body: “Genitals have a mind of their own / They like what they like” (115). Without having an accommodating home or homeland, Chicago is idealised, within the secure boundaries of which he deconstructs India’s celebrated myth of ideal heterosexual love and questions “How come thousands of prophets came down / But not one of them was gay—how odd—how unnatural” (111). It is not that the homophobic world has ignored him in totality. It could not. Nasim makes the homophobic world uncomfortable so much so that Khushwant Singh, who himself presented his homosexual encounters of childhood at the fag end of his life, wrote: “The poems are good but explicitly homosexual: I will refrain from quoting them. Perhaps the acknowledgement will suffice” (2002, 20). The liberal circle thus sidelined Nasim’s poetry to a significant extent. Owing to the homophobic-critic circle’s restraints from institutionalizing his poetry, Nasim recited his ghazals in *mushairas* and came to limelight.

The body is the epicentre of politics, culture and ideology, and through the body Ifti Nasim writes his public poetry. The morale, the religious and the normal illuminate the real self of the other. It is the artist’s significance, the value of the artist that shares the values of freedom, in multiple social agitations, that questions himself, as in “Bootlegger’s” where Nasim presents the poetics of a mating dance. Nasim is searching his destiny “Under the blinking neon lights” (2002, 25), searching in every party a partner to justify his state of being. In locating his soul-mate, Nasim writes: “Is this a mating dance or Saturday night fever?” that defines this state of being:

If against all the laws of nature,
The society, evolution and procreation
He comes and asks me for a dance
Will I accept his request?
My own enquiring and analytical mind wants to know (26)

A queer intimacy is an obligatory point of reference and it is an over-exposed one. The dedication page makes it clear—“all the people I slept with” (11)—which in certain way radically differs from the perceived cultural values. In presenting these existential questions Nasim performs in a theatre of conflict—between reason and instinct, and morality and religiosity—that breaks the normalized boundaries of cultures and nations.

In Shahid Ali, the personal battle becomes a religious battle. As a Shia, he perceives the battle of Karbala as a righteous battle against Yazid’s accession to power and supports the army of God, led by Hassan. In addition, he equates the massacre at Karbala with the

struggle for Kashmiri freedom. Karbala is “a history of the house of sorrow;” so is Kashmir with its ongoing political catastrophe (2002, 23). The religious battle is equated with the political battle of Kashmir which in turn becomes a personal battle for the poet and the poetic persona. The political scuffle of Kashmir gets equated with the uprising against Yazid in the mythic battle of Karbala, a struggle of cultural significance against political atrocities. And further, the massacre of civilians in Kashmir is blended with the massacre at Karbala and the grief of Shahid Ali’s mother becomes the grief of Zainab. In *Rooms Are Never Finished* Shahid Ali includes a prologue that presents the death of his mother in Amherst because of brain cancer. Ali and his family bring her dead body to Kashmir for burial because she had longed for home “throughout her illness” (2002, 15); they bring her dead body to a “home at war” (15). Kashmir, the homeland, becomes a central metaphor. In this collection of poems, the political turmoil is blended with the mother’s death, and the execution of the Prophet’s grandsons. The personal battle has its genesis in religious predictions. Jesus, while passing through the plain of Karbala, answers his disciples after seeing a herd of gazelles crowding together and weeping:

“At this sight the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) will one day be killed.” And Jesus wept. *Oh, that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain...* And Jesus wept. (Ali, 2002: 23, original emphasis)

The prophecy comes true. In the year A.H. 61 / A.D. 680 the army of God marches and the Shia Princes—Hassan and Hussain—are slain in the most cruel manner. Every man is killed. Women and children, without water, suffer the most and are taken as prisoners. Zainab, Hussain’s sister, moves from Karbala to Kufa, from Kufa to Damascus, pleading the world, to mourn the massacre:

*Syria hear me
Over Hussain’s mansion what night has fallen
I alone am left to tell my brother’s story
On my brother’s body what dawn has risen
Weep for my brother
World, weep for Hussain* (2002, 28, original emphasis).

So the story of atrocities multiplies in Shahid Ali’s mature collection of poems *Rooms are Never Finished*: religious atrocity meted out to Zainab’s family, political massacre that devastated Kashmir, and personal atrocity inflicted upon the gay son who instead of

participating in revolution composes the story of cruelty in verses. Shahid Ali is left behind in the path of revolutionary sacrifices to tell the world the suffering of his culture:

One *majlis* stays—Summer 1992—when for two years Death has turned every day in Kashmir into some family’s Karbala. We celebrated *Ashura* with relatives, in the afternoon—because of night curfew. That evening, at home, my mother was suddenly in tears. I was puzzled, then very moved: Since she was a girl she had felt Zainab’s grief as her own... (2002, 26)

The text uses the mythic figure Zainab to represent Shahid Ali’s mother who yearned for her homeland in exile. Zainab, the central political prisoner at Karbala, had to move from city to city after the death of the Prophet’s grandsons to tell her suffering and so also Shahid Ali’s mother in illness who shuttled from hospital to hospital and from city to city, longing to return to Kashmir to be buried and laid to rest. Shahid Ali introduces, in his mature poetry, reminiscences of his mother’s death to evoke a sense of pity aroused by “mourners” who “beg for water” to project “the martyrs’ thirst” (2002, 25). With the death of Shahid Ali’s mother, the overlapping of themes take a transgressive turn and it has transformed the doubts and refutations that surrounded his work. Such a pity is evoked again when Rizwan, a central character in *The Country Without a Post Office*, breaths his last in the poet’s arms after being shot by the patrolling forces:

“Don’t tell my father I have died,” he says,
and I follow him through blood on the road
and hundreds of pairs of shoes the mourners
left behind, as they ran from the funeral,
victims of the firing... (2000, 11)

It is interesting to note how the religious battle is fused with the political battle of Kashmir’s liberation and in the struggle for freedom does Rizwan, as a dying lover, figure in Shahid Ali. Rizwan here is a martyr—for ‘Shahid’ also means ‘martyr’—and he attains his salvation in Shahid Ali’s arms. Consequently, in Shahid Ali the battle against atrocity in Kashmir becomes the battle against institutionalisation of hetero-sexuality. In presenting the multi-fold versions of cultural catastrophe, Shahid Ali presents a faint voice of sexual liberation in exile.

In Ifti Nasim, the battle against the un-accommodative family becomes the battle against the strict religious strictures of Pakistani society. In personal life Nasim was relocated from the main bungalow

to the servants' quarters after his father married a second time following his first wife's death. Dragged from riches to rags he was left alone to fend for himself. He could not even look up at his elder brother as a surrogate parent and hence childhood happiness was denied to him by his family. Taking the responsibility of his younger siblings he took up odd jobs, even to the extent of prostituting himself, to support his younger sisters. Nasim memorialises the traumatising experiences of his childhood which haunted him even in exile. Bereft of parental care, Nasim rejects the supremacy of kinship and castigates the architecture of Islamic heteronormative society. Suggestive of his psychological repudiation is his mental agony upon separation. The desire for reconciliation is envisioned through a recreation of the verbal battle with the senior authority of the family and hence Nasim recreates a semantic relationship establishing a close-knit home.

The loss of hope within the family system strengthens Nasim's desire for a self that would have its own sexual preference and yet would be accommodated within Islam. So the macho man that he was supposed to become was no longer found in the Kathak dancer and an alternative religious belief came upon the adolescent. "It started when he was 16," writes Cara Joseph, "at a protest against martial law" (2002, 16). An alternative to law and religion came with a heavy price: "He was standing at the lectern, reading a politically charged poem. Suddenly the auditorium doors flew open, and a soldier shot him in the leg. Someone had pulled him out of the way before he caught another bullet" (16). Nasim, infected by the wound, was bed-ridden for six months in Lyallpur (now Faisalabad) and this militarism ruined his promising career in Kathak. This was followed by his adventures in finding bread for himself. Nasim on the one hand had to face his homophobic elder brother who was growing intelligent enough to exploit his earnings and on the other hand he had to struggle against the homosexual advances of his uncle. In the Poem "Death of Cain" and "An Orphan whose Father is Alive" Nasim in Chicago reminiscences his agonised childhood and attempts to reconcile with his elder brother and uncle—his exploiter and molester—like a nihilist forgiving them without distinction but not before telling the whole world the story of their physical and sexual exploitation and presenting the familial boundaries as ethno-sexual boundaries. The poems present the subtlety with which the hetero-normative world masks its homosexual urge and erases the existence of the object of its lust. In the name of Islamic education it is on the home front where children are made open to sexuality.

Hence Nasim migrates to America where he finds a liberation movement accommodating his difference. He is entrusted by legal and lingual power in exile in Chicago that emboldens him to fight for the cause of sexual and ethnic minority. Either in association with the Lesbian-Bisexual-Transgendered South Asian group Sangat / Chicago or with the South-Asian Performing Arts Council of Chicago, Nasim musters courage to come out of the traditional Islamic hetero-normative society of Pakistan. Writing in Urdu, Punjabi and in English the poet-cum-social activist Nasim becomes the first gay Pakistani poet. As an immigrant in the poem of the same name, he rejoices a new lease of life and of his regained childhood in Chicago:

I flew out of my body
 And became a child just born
 Whose umbilical cord is still
 Attached to his mother's womb (67)

An outcast of family and culture Nasim loses his childhood to cultural and sexual politics and is forced to travel miles away only to find consolation in a surrogate land. Sexual liberation makes Nasim the “tall and a proud / citizen” of the “world's biggest country,” but exile is a permanent condition bestowed upon his being: “But my umbilical cord is still / Attached to my mother's womb” (67). Two significant phenomena occur during this period as Nasim crosses the borders of ethnic and religious boundaries. First, he integrates the struggle of the victims of religious and cultural politics and second he shares the alternative mode of religious thoughts to combat and castigate the patriarchal stoics who invent their morality to control people's thoughts and actions.

The poem “Gerontophilia” begins like a Bhupen Khakhar-painting where an elderly naked gay male looks down from his balcony to see a new free gay subculture on the rise, living relatively a freer life than he himself had in his youth. Nasim's motto here is to accommodate the despised and the isolated ageing gay as a surrogate parent within the queer tradition. Years of abandoning the truer self that was kept in hiding is vocalised in the poem. The opening line of the poem “One look at you and I open my orifices,” invites the grey haired elderly on the odyssey of life so that, though wrinkles have put a mark on the body enslaved for ages, he may unravel the mysteries that surrounded his life on whom both times and cultures have been critical (75). The lost stories and dreams are to be bridged, and the secrets of life are to be revealed in real time because times have

now opened up a freer space owing to liberation. This union would liberate the enslaved self, and the knowledge gained of the past by the other would be used to usurp the patriarchal power. The desire to over-power further merges with the desire to find an escort in an elderly wise man. Memorialising of past events is made possible in the company of the old. In yearning for the old, does Nasim desire to inherit an erased past and claims to explore his hopeful future. With the idea that "history has been distorted many many many times" he is all set to investigate the past and identify crept-in cultural diplomacy (75). Letting open the crafts of the cultural guardians that manipulate by silencing the 'witnesses,' the poet assures his escort a blissful life:

Come fill me up with your knowledge of years gone by and
I shall quench your thirst with my fountain of youth.
Let's live forever (2002, 75).

For Nasim, life in exile provides a national identity not merely for the self but to accommodate all selves who are refugees and prodigal children of Islam. In the poem "How to 'Kill' Your Brother with Kindness" Nasim in opposition to his homophobic brother embraces his brother's enemies, viz., his sisters and sister's friends as a means to challenge the heterosexist patriarchal forces. He admires girls and desires to be one (16). In idolation of the feminine or the female figure he restores the wisdom and sacredness of life and love in its heterogeneity. He claims his homophobic brother loses his gender / sexual identity upon dying and it is in this phase of life that Nasim realises his self—a dis-gendered / androgynous self, creating in turn the androgynous God. The experience in identification with the dead is symbolic of wholeness, unity and continuity representative of creating a homo-social Pakistan through de-gendering homophobic kins and *mullahs*. In his mission to combat the patriarchal forces and the religious authorities, Nasim makes a pact with women, thereby merging his queer activism with feminine sensibility. The search for a religious identity ends with the embrace of Sufism that assists in deconstructing the main-stream Islamic society of Pakistan. Through Sufism he retains external conformity with Islam and yet is able to deconstruct it. This is done through literature and in real life in liberal Chicago. So in embracing a subculture of Islam and in composing ghazals and *nazms*, Nasim recreates a culture that accommodates homosexuality.

The Queer self finds its solace in the realm of Sufism and dances the everlasting Sufi dance:

A child lives inside me.
 A boy lives inside me.
 A man lives inside me. / ... /
 A woman lives inside me.
 And I am dancing in circles
 Bringing them all in one (59).

It is the beginning of a sacred journey of the queer in exile. In the constellation of glittering destiny the body, once abandoned and hated, becomes the first site to understand the supreme soul. Ahmad Kamal reminds us in *The Sacred Journey* (1961) that in Paradise angels worship God by circling another Ka'bah while reading His praise. "And for many thousand years," Kamal adds, "men have been circling the terrestrial counterpart in the same manner, performing an identical rite, even when in the long darkness of the Time of ignorance the sacred places were perverted to idol worship" (43). For Nasim it is the sacred Sufi dance of the skeptic believer that circles with the praise of God—be it lover, nation or idealized friendship—that first starts as a mating dance and attains the purity of divinity:

Sometimes I walk around
 Wearing torn clothes
 Bare foot, dishevelled hair
 Waiting for *Him* to come and bathe me.
 Bathe me with *His* light
 Wash me with *His* light
 Wash me down with the water from fountain in Heaven
 And take me to *His* home.
 I am His bride. (2002, 59, original emphasis)

It is in the realm of Sufism that the lover is equated with God and the substance of God is within: in the preparation for the dance, in approaching God while dancing and singing his praise while on movement.

For their personal and political battle, both Shahid Ali and Ifi Nasim present the 'lover' as a blazing metaphor who participates in their rebellion, and in the companionship of the lover there is a semantic progression in both the poets. Presented as a mystic quest, Nasim's portrayal is a radical celebration of same-sex love which he voices with a higher degree of boldness as a gateway into the divine. The poem "A Journey—From Cocoon to Butterfly," as the very title propounds, charts a way towards liberation from captivity. Liberation of the exiled self is in fact the liberation from the conservative nationalistic love for the country / homeland and it gets released into the broader aspect of love for the supreme Being.

Written "For Zulfi" with a tone to motivate, it initiates social activism inciting vigour within a subjugated self that has lost courage to fight back. The lover of the poet has turned into a silent witness of the disservice patriarchy has inflicted upon him for ages. Now left alone in the memory of his lost grandeur snatched away by the heterosexual prophets he has become a dead soul amidst his ruins. The nostalgia for a lost home gets transformed into an intense desire for homoerotic intimacy. The lover has turned weak and helpless and has been in hiding accepting his tragic fate. He has failed to muster courage to put a stop to his suffering and here the poet, playing as an activist and escort, encourages him to rise, "Suffering is not the part of being gay" (45), and offers him an invitation to see his self through the poet's youth. The poem ends with a note of optimism for a physical union alluding to its potential to perceive the almighty, a possibility he sees in their existence: "Let's live forever" (75). The visions of ideal homeland in exile is used in most of Nasim's poems that initiate a mystic dance provoking a homosexual yearning for highest powers of love, both within and beyond heterosexual relationships.

The thirst for home renders an easy image resulting in homoerotic love. Shahid Ali's poem "Survivor," published in *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1993), for example, represents a male counterpart, who becomes the replica of the poet. He resides in the poet's house, practises his signature, answers his mail, and then suddenly becomes the poetic persona. He mirrors the poet's image and then becomes the poet himself.

The mirror gives up
 my face to him
 He calls to my mother in my voice
 She turns
 He is breathless to tell her tales
 in which I was never found. (1992, 38)

This is representation of homosociality par excellence in Shahid Ali. The opening line "Someone lives in my house" (38), moreover, shows a poetic clone who stays with the poet under the same roof. Shahid Ali then sets aside the homosocial theme introducing 'Kashmir' into the poem:

On Radio Kashmir he hears announced
 all search has been abandoned
 for the last year's climbers
 on the Naga Parbat / ... /
 This is his moment. (1992, 38)

Is the represented “someone” a rock-climber, a refugee, or a lover in hiding? Why and how does he resemble the poet? Why does he wear the poet’s clothes? Does he share common characteristics of love and emotion like the poet and is that why both the characters are alike? Such other examples are not rare in Shahid Ali. “Autumn in Srinagar” is a well-crafted and symbolic poem for the lovers to meet, leaving the whole homophobic world to mourn and cry. The poem has five sections: sunset, funeral pyre, waiting for death, a late prayer, and a last image. The first section begins with the following lines: “In our hands / we gather / the remains of shadows / and the sun dies (1992, 6). The next section of this poem represents ‘death’ in the world; the lovers meet however. The poet designs his own tomb. He goes for a late prayer. The poem has a crucial ending passage:

i see
 your form coming for me
 in this season not yours [...]
 in this
 terrible darkness
 i hear
 bangles break [...]
 take me
 far from here
 of my own accord
 on my own understanding
 i have gathered the leaves for winter (7-8)

The gay persona, unable to come out openly, represents itself in a very symbolic poem very early in Shahid Ali’s life. The lover approaches the protagonist leaving his wife behind; the bangles or their legal relationship breaks. For the ‘stealing of the husband-lover,’ the poet has to leave the place as well. Multiple men as friends and lovers figure in these poems—all thirsty for love, desiring to break free from familial bondage. Love for an individual is symbolically representative of the love for a group of individuals similar in identity—sexual, religious and national. It is earlier mentioned that in poems such as “The Blessed Word: A Prologue,” “I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight,” and “A Pastoral,” Shahid Ali brings into the picture lovers on the backdrop of a politically torn Kashmir. He hereby forges the nature of his sexual identity with religious and political elements in his poetry. *The Country Without a Post Office* is a case in point. And finally we are shown that the poet finds the undelivered letters. His love is exposed. “This is an archive. I’ve found

the remains / of his voice, that map of longings with no limit" (2000, 27). The given or portrayed reason for drafting this collection—that owing to political turmoil no mail was delivered for seven months in Kashmir (15)—subsides once we proceed with the title poem. The poet laments the loss of his lover; the political turmoil is the obvious reason behind the loss of the lover. However, love for Rizwan is so central in the poems that the political issue of Kashmir fades:

I read them, letters of lovers, the mad ones,
and mine to him from whom no answer came.
I light lamps, send my answers, Call to Prayer
to deaf worlds across continents. (2000, 28)

The poet becomes sentimental again, and laments: "But there's no sun here. There is no sun here" (28). There is no more faith in religion even—a theme Ali employs even in "Note Autobiographical-1" and "Note Autobiographical-2." The loss of a lover is the loss of the world. Nothing else can save the poet but its 'memory.' There is no more issue of Kashmir's freedom, no more religion, and no faith in Islam either (28). The lamentation goes on for the loss of the lover:

Then be pitiless you whom I could not save—
Send your cries to me, if only in this way:
I've found a prisoner's letter to a lover—
One begins: 'These words may never reach you.'
Another ends: 'The skin dissolves in dew
without your touch.' And I want to answer:
I want to live forever. What else can I say?
It rains as I write this. Mad heart, be brave. (2000, 28)

The poems sequenced in this part of the collection are interrelated. "The Country Without a Post Office" takes us to the realm of ethnic identity against political turmoil, and homoerotic love against the rigid strictures of Islam. The poet takes the theme further in "The Floating Post Office." Though the floating post office has some existence, it is without a place or space. Its existence is 'there' and 'not there' at the same time. It is a space without a real space. Shahid Ali enquires in this poem whether the lover is kept away from him in the floating post office or he is no more there in the world. When the boat is taken away, the postman signals that he is alive. There is a ray of hope that the lovers will be re-united on a future day.

There are poems with overt homoerotic tone, which by and large advocate Shahid Ali's ethnic and sexual discourses. "The Previous Occupant" is such a poem that houses a male counterpart who was living in the apartment that the poet has rented. Significantly,

Mehrotra in order to prove that the “eccentric and occasionally violent men of the family stand aloof from its women” anthologizes this poem in *Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (1992, 139). From the landlady’s account, the poet is assured that the previous occupant had similar taste for poetry like that of the poet himself and read Neruda and Cavafy. The poet gathers information about the occupant and he becomes his lover:

And though he is blinded in some prison,
 though he is dying in some country
 as far as Chile,
 no spray will get inside the mirror
 from where his brown eyes,
 brown, yes, brown,
 stare as if for years he’d been
 searching for me.
 Now that he’s found me,
 my body casts his shadow everywhere.
 He’ll never, never, move out of here. (1992, 147)

The stranger becomes the poet’s lover and though the apartment is to be cleaned, the image of the lover will be there with the poet forever. Shahid Ali writes: “But no detergent will rub his voice from the air / though he has disappeared in some country / as far as Chile” (147). Such other poems presenting a male lover are not rare in Shahid Ali.

The last poem published in *The Country Without a Post Office*, “After the August Wedding in Lahore, Pakistan,” ironically sets the poem after a wedding—a technique of presenting irony in Shahid Ali’s poetry to hide the real subject of the poem. It is a poem that presents a heterosexual marriage of the gay lover and it is about finding and losing strangers at a gathering. “We all—save the couple!—returned to pain,” declares the opening line of the poem (2000, 62). The marriage marks the beginning of an unhappy relationship: “In Lahore the chanteuse crooned ‘Stop the Night’— / the groom’s request—after the banquet” (2000, 62-63). The legal relationship has to exist because of societal pressure. Nowhere else, in any other collection of poems, Shahid Ali becomes so critical about a heterosexual marriage. Earlier we have explored that the “stealing of the lover” is breaking away from the marital relationship. However, in this poem, it is because the societal pressure that the lover has to get married breaking the poet’s heart. Commenting on this poem Merchant writes: “But it should be said that Ali is ironic about the boys...Ali sees the ice in his cocktail glass, the Kashmir glaciers, the

dipping candle, and a delicious boy all melting in the reflection of a mirror in a gay salon. This is irony of a very high order" (2007, 467). The tragedy of facing an unwanted marriage is sung without any further reference to the lover. The poet has to remain in the closet to continue with the existing relationship; he has to perform his duty as a guest attending the marriage and has to bless the couple. The night would pass on. The poet imagines if he could stop the whole proceeding and save his lover from this fatal error; and hence, a woman singer is introduced in the poem to show if such a mock proceeding could stop:

Filled, I emptied my glass,
 lured by a stranger's eyes into their glass.
 There, nothing melted, as in Lahore's night:
 Heat had brought sweat to the lip of my glass
 but sculptures kept iced their aberrant glass.
 To be forgotten my most menacing
 image of the End—expelled from the glass
 of someone's eyes as if no full-length glass
 had held us, safe, from political storms? Pain,
 then, becomes love's thirst—the ultimate pain
 to lose a stranger! (63)

The theme of exile in Shahid Ali is self-imposed; Islam is deconstructed in the central sections of his mature collections of poetry; Kashmiri struggle is blended with his homoerotic love. So performing on the platform of ethnic and religious issues, Shahid Ali centralises the male lover as the dominant subject of the poem who in turn is a central concern in his poems and ghazals. The issues involved—religious and ethnic—are subjects which are introduced to perform the lover's life and it seems the lover is so central in Shahid Ali's poems that there would be hardly any important human or divine character without the presence of the lover.

The only possible way, a coherent way, to understand Ifti Nasim and Shahid Ali is to unite the themes of ethnic, religious and sexual discourses and to see how their operation forces a collective action—an amalgamation of several forms of identity categories cutting across nationality, ethnicity, sexuality and the diaspora. Andrew Harvey in *The Essential Gay Mystics* (1997) rightly reframes the definition of a mystic as "someone who has a direct and naked perception of Godhead, beyond dogma, beyond ideas, beyond any possible formulation in words of any kind" (1). The one to one communion of the mystics with divinity is done through the presence of a male lover who is idealized as divine and hence godly.

Both Shahid Ali and Ifti Nasim reconcile with the loss of a homeland blending cultural and political activism in art. Non-conformist to the core, their method of negotiation although varies, their poetry becomes a battle for a queer homeland. Shahid Ali from the closet chooses to take a mystical path writing implicit homoerotic love poems presenting religious, cultural and political symbols. As opposed to Nasim's urge for openness, Shahid Ali's sacred silence and radiant absence embrace the glorified suffering of reality. Being *Shahid*, metaphorically a witness and a martyr, the poet aspires to witness a mystic vision of reality in his performative dream-poetry. Rejecting sacredness in the separation between body and spirit, Shahid Ali initiates a mystic dance of divine love interconnected with cultural and historical events of loss while deriving ecstasy in queer intimacy through separation and memory. With Sufi mysticism the poet is able to take up the challenge of deconstructing religion and nation. On the other hand, blending activism in art and assisted with the religious and cultural symbols and imagery, Nasim writes a historical testimony of sexual atrocity while re-constructing a homosocial Islamic Pakistan textually. His birth into a projected divine childhood depends upon an inner guidance and consortium of the elderly persona. The poetic persona gives birth to his feminine self. Aware of the carnivorous threats of the patriarchal world, the gorgeous feminine child attains safety in the knowledge of the past that he secures from the aging queer. He is force-fed the blood of masculinity fusing both feminine and masculine energy within. Embracing sacred androgyne the child becomes a poet, and it is in this domain that the poetic persona attains liberty. It is in the world of Sufism that both the exiled gay sons are accommodated and find liberation. They, through their performative poetry, plunge into a mystic dance making it a paradigmatic vision for queer resistance, liberation and empowerment.

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