Vol: 2: Issue: 5 :2026

ISSN3107-6505

International Journal of English Literature and Literary Theories

International Peer Reviewed and Refereed English Journal

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LITERATURE AND LITERARY THEORIES (IJELLT)

ISSN: 3107-6505

Vol.:2: Issue: 5: 2026.

(International Peer Reviewed and refereed English Journal)

International Journal of English Literature and Literary Theories (IJELLT) is a peer-reviewed, open access academic journal dedicated to promoting research and scholarship in the fields of English language, literature, and literary theories. Published monthly, IJELLT provides a platform for academicians, scholars, educators, and researchers to present their original work to a global audience. The journal upholds the highest standards of editorial integrity and academic excellence through a rigorous double-blind peer-review process. We welcome a wide range of submissions from theoretical and critical analyses to practical research, creative writing, and pedagogical studies related to English literature and language.

IJELLT
ISSN:3107-6505
Volume: 2 Issue: 5 Year:2026

Witness in Agha Shahid Ali's Call Me Ishmael Tonight

Shaik N Khajarasool, Research Scholar, Department of English, University College of Arts and Commerce, Adikavi Nannaya University, Rajamahendravaram, Andhra Pradesh, India.

Prof. D. Jyothirmai, Department of English, University College of Arts and Commerce, Adikavi Nannaya University, Rajamahendravaram, Andhra Pradesh, India.

Abstract: This paper explores the poetics of witness in Agha Shahid Ali's final, posthumous collection, Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals (2003). Moving away from broader readings of passive diasporic nostalgia, this study utilizes Carolyn Forché's framework of the "poetry of witness" to examine how Ali records the socio-political trauma, state-sanctioned violence, and systematic erasure of his native Kashmir from his site of American exile. By focusing on the collection's rigorous adaptation of the traditional Urdu-Persian ghazal form into English, the paper demonstrates how the structural features of the genre—specifically its autonomous couplets (sher) and repeating refrains (radif)—function as a historical register for collective suffering. The study argues that Ali's verse transcends simple lyrical lamentation; instead, his final work uses the strict, unyielding architecture of the English ghazal as a formal resistance against state-manufactured narratives, turning the poetic page into an enduring space of cultural memory, political accountability, and transnational testimony.

Keywords: Agha Shahid Ali, Call Me Ishmael Tonight, Poetry of Witness, Kashmir, English Ghazal, Collective Memory, Political Trauma, Formal Resistance.

Introduction

To enter the poetic landscape of Agha Shahid Ali's final, posthumous collection, Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals (2003), is to encounter an unyielding artistic monument dedicated to the act of remembering. Born in New Delhi, raised in the politically volatile Kashmir Valley, and educated in both India and the United States, Ali's personal trajectory epitomizes the complex, often fracturing realities of the late twentieth-century transnational intellectual. While his earlier volumes wrestled with the immediate shock of displacement and the sudden escalation of armed conflict in Kashmir during the 1990s, Call Me Ishmael Tonight stands as his definitive aesthetic and ideological statement. In this final text, completed shortly before his tragic death from a brain tumor, Ali discards loose free-verse structures in favor of a singular, highly restrictive canvas: the traditional Urdu-Persian ghazal adapted strictly into English poetic conventions.

While existing scholarship on Ali frequently groups his work under the generalized banners of postcolonial exile, emotional hybridity, and diasporic longing, this paper isolates a critical, singular dimension of his final anthology: the poetics of witness. Rather than treating the strict structural constraints of the ghazal as mere aesthetic play or formal ornamentation, this study argues that Ali uses form itself as a tool of political and historical testimony. By compelling the English language to accommodate the traditional metrical and repetitive constraints of South Asian verse, Ali stages an act of formal resistance. He turns the ghazal into a site where the silenced trauma of a militarized Kashmir is recorded, preserved, and broadcasted to a global Anglophone audience. Through this formal discipline, Ali ensures that his final work does not merely lament loss, but actively bears witness against historical erasure, political polarization, and state-sanctioned violence.

Theoretical Framework: The Poetry of Witness in Diaspora Space

To fully evaluate how Call Me Ishmael Tonight functions as a historical record, his verse must be situated at the intersection of postcolonial diaspora theory and Carolyn Forché's foundational concept of the "poetry of witness." In her seminal work Against Forgetting, Forché defines the poetry of witness as verse written by individuals who have endured, or closely observed, the conditions of state terror, war, censorship, and systemic oppression. Forché emphasizes that this mode of writing occupies a crucial, distinct middle ground:

"The poem of witness is neither purely subjective lyricism ('the personal') nor objective political rhetoric ('the political'). Instead, it serves as a historical record of trauma written directly onto the human consciousness." (32)

For Ali, looking back at his embattled homeland of Kashmir from his academic exile in America, the poem becomes a necessary repository for truths that are actively suppressed by state media and geopolitical borders. This act of witnessing does not occur in a vacuum; it is mediated through what Avtar Brah conceptualizes as "diaspora space." Brah defines diaspora space as an intersectional, lived terrain where responsibility, memory, and identity are continuously deconstructed and reassembled, effectively blurring the economic and cultural boundaries between the "indigenous" and the "traveler" (181).

Ali's final collection inhabits this space entirely. The speaker in these ghazals is never simply an American academic or a displaced Kashmiri; he is a transcultural observer who forces the political realities of South Asia and North America to collide. By filtering these overlapping geographies through Homi Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space" of hybridity, Ali ensures that the migrant writer does not merely assimilate into the host nation nor safely preserve a frozen, static memory of the homeland (5). Instead, Ali's verse functions as a dynamic bridge where local memories of Kashmiri suffering travel into global Anglophone spheres. This creates what critics term a "formal cosmopolitanism," wherein traditional Eastern poetic structures are deployed within Western literary conventions to register an urgent, collective human crisis.

The Structural Architecture of the Ghazal as Formal Resistance

Before examining the thematic expressions of witness in the text, it is necessary to analyze the mechanics of the form Ali chose to champion. Throughout his career, and most aggressively in his essays and anthologies, Ali argued that the ghazal could not be genuinely translated or adapted into English simply by capturing its "melancholy mood." Instead, it required a strict, uncompromising adherence to its traditional, centuries-old structural rules: autonomous couplets (sher), where each couplet must be structurally, grammatically, and conceptually independent; the matla, or the opening couplet that establishes the rhyme scheme in both lines; the qafia, which is a strict rhyming word that immediately precedes the refrain; the radif, an exact repeating word or phrase that concludes every single couplet after the qafia; and the makhta, the final couplet featuring the poet's pen-name (takhallis).

By masterfully implementing these rigid rules within English verse, Ali performs a profound postcolonial intervention. Historically, the English language has been the vehicle of imperial administration and cultural homogenization across South Asia. By forcing English syntax to bend to the metrical laws of the Urdu-Persian ghazal, Ali subverts this linguistic hegemony. As Matthew Nelson observes, Ali's strict formal constraints represent a "translingual nostalgia" that actively refutes the Western canon's traditional monopoly on modern poetic structures (3). The autonomy of each couplet proves to be the ideal poetic vehicle for capturing the historical fragmentation of a war zone. Because the couplets do not rely on a continuous, linear narrative progression, Ali can leap seamlessly from a cosmic observation to a jarring, localized image of a burning street in Srinagar. The regular, rhythmic return of the radif acts as an emotional anchor. No matter how far the imagery strays into global politics or personal grief, the repeating refrain forces the reader to confront the central trauma over and over again, mimicking the psychological reality of trauma and persistent memory.

Bearing Witness to Geopolitical Trauma "In Real Time"

The political dimension of Ali's poetics of witness achieves its climax in the poem titled simply "Ghazal," where he employs the strict refrain "in real time" to interrogate media consumption, state violence, and historical accountability. Writing against the backdrop of prolonged military occupation and human rights crises in Kashmir, Ali uses the autonomous couplet to strip away the sanitizing lens of modern news reporting:

I'll do what I must if I'm bold in real time.
A refugee, I'll be paroled in real time. (24)

The matla immediately establishes the stakes of the poem: the vulnerability of the displaced individual caught within administrative systems ("paroled"). As the poem progresses, Ali demonstrates how global art and local suffering are deeply intertwined, referencing contemporary socio-political critiques:

Each syllable sucked under waves of our earth—
The funeral love comes to hold in real time!
They left him alive so that he could be lonely—
The god of small things is not consoled in real time. (24)

By explicitly invoking Arundhati Roy's contemporary novel The God of Small Things, Ali positions his poetry within a larger tradition of South Asian dissident literature. He suggests that when confronted with immediate, state-sanctioned horrors, art cannot offer easy comfort or sentimental consolation; it must instead document the devastation without blinking.

The poem reaches its structural and political zenith in a couplet that directly challenges how political vocabulary is manufactured by dominant state powers:

And who is the terrorist, who the victim?

We'll know if the country is polled in real time. (25)

Here, Ali uses the radif to deliver a sharp, ironic critique of modern democratic theater and media bias. By linking the absolute moral categories of "terrorist" and "victim" to a volatile, manufactured public poll, he reveals how historical truth is often weaponized by those who control information networks. Ameena Kazi Ansari highlights that the ghazal structure is uniquely suited for this specific type of witness because it allows the poet to launch sharp, aphoristic critiques within a single, self-contained unit of verse (61). The poem does not offer a comfortable resolution; instead, the inescapable return of the refrain "in real time" demands that the reader acknowledge the ongoing, unceasing nature of the violence.

The Intertwining of Maternal Death and National Ruin

In Call Me Ishmael Tonight, the act of witnessing state violence is frequently mapped onto, and intensified by, the intimate experience of personal bereavement. Ali's final poems were written under a dual shadow: the ongoing socio-political devastation of his Kashmiri homeland and his own impending mortality due to a terminal brain tumor, following the death of his mother. In his verse, these two losses merge into a single, unified landscape of mourning where the suffering of the maternal figure becomes indistinguishable from the violation of the motherland.

This intersection is vividly realized through the architectural bounds of the ghazal, where domestic grief is elevated into a historical record. Ali uses a stark, confrontational vocabulary to weave memories of hospital corridors with images of military siege:

By the Hudson lies Srinagar, hung from a thread?

Or is it the Jamuna, its waters bled red? (18)

The geographical blurring in this couplet—placing the Kashmiri capital of Srinagar adjacent to the Hudson River of his New York exile—demonstrates how the diaspora space operates within his consciousness. The exile is unable to experience his immediate American surroundings without superimposing the wounds of his homeland over them. The image of waters "bled red" serves as a direct testament to the physical violence inflicted upon South Asian landscapes.

By choosing the ghazal form to catalog these losses, Ali ensures that his personal grief escapes the realm of private confession and enters the realm of public witness. As Mohammad Ayub Jajja notes, this blending of the elegiac mode with postcolonial critique demonstrates how personal displacement expands infinitely when subjected to strict formal discipline (89). The poem becomes a ledger of accountability, preserving the names, places, and cultural practices of a community under threat of physical and administrative erasure.

Conclusion

Agha Shahid Ali's Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals offers a profound and sophisticated blueprint for the postcolonial poetry of witness. His work conclusively demonstrates that the experience of exile does not have to result in the passive fracturing of cultural identity. Instead, it can serve as a catalyst for a revolutionary formal practice. Over the course of his final collection, Ali successfully subverts the monolingual, linear expectations of Western Anglophone poetry by introducing the rigid, cyclical, and polyphonic structures of the traditional Urdu ghazal.

By doing so, Ali did not merely write about historical trauma; he built that trauma directly into the technical bones of his verse. The English ghazal, in his hands, becomes a vital instrument of cultural preservation and political translation. It forces the language of the former colonizer to carry the specific rhythms, collective sorrows, and historical memories of the global South. Ultimately, Ali's final collection transforms the poetic page into an unyielding, borderless homeland. Within the precise geometry of his couplets, the memory of Kashmiri suffering is rescued from the margins of geopolitical indifference, ensuring that the voices of the witness

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