



Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali: a Search for Identity Through Recreated Home and Nostalgia.

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ABSTRACT

Agha Shahid Ali, the Kashmiri poet, despite being migrated to USA transcends all geographical, national, and cultural boundaries by dint of his sheer poetic brilliance. He articulates his diasporic experience of loss and exile in his poetry and integrates the global and the local. If thinkers like Bhabha and Rushdie celebrate their diasporic position, Ali the eminent Indian poet represents the exploitation done to his culture. In this paper my inclination is to present how Agha Shahid Ali envisions home, asserts his identity which is transnational and fluid and make an honest endeavor to transform 'violent cartographies' to 'the Ghat of the only world'.

KEYWORDS

Diaspora, Home, Nostalgia, Kashmir, Identity. Trans-national.

The word 'Diaspora' derives from the Greek, meaning 'to disperse'. It is the displacement of an individual or a community from their 'original' homeland. In the sphere of literature diasporic writers are those who always struggle to capture, synchronize and vivify the trauma resulted from the forced migration and the condition of 'postcolonial' migrancy. Their honest endeavor is to find out the relation and contrast between their homeland and the territory which they dispersed into. The sense of loss, the memory of 'home' and the pain of being alienated to a new land and culture haunt them. Thus due to the fear of losing the socio-cultural identity in their newly relocated society they make conscious attempt to assert their ethnic identity and simultaneously attempt to assimilate with the new culture of a new territory. In this paper my inclination is to present how Agha Shahid Ali, the Kashmir born poet through his poetry envisions home and asserts an identity which is trans-national, fluid and exclusively his own.

Agha Shahid Ali was born in Kashmir in 1949 in a highly educated and respectable Muslim family. After completing his graduation from Kashmir, he did his post-graduation from Delhi and then went to the United States of America to pursue PhD in English. Being born in a culturally and linguistically vibrant family, Ali learned to appreciate poetry and literature in Urdu, Persian and English. So natural and immense was the impact of these languages upon him that he did consider Urdu his 'mother tongue' and English his 'first language'. But quite interestingly as he started writing only in 'exile', the sense of loss always pervade his literary world.

Guston Bachelard once remarked that 'inhabited space transcends geometrical space'(47) and to Agha Shahid Ali crossing of the border imply the same. Thus being a member of the diasporic community the trauma of 'unhomeliness' haunted him and instigated him to create 'imaginary homeland'. Though his identity is simultaneously articulated between 'home' and 'away', his personal, local and communal experiences invest into his poetry a universal appeal. As a consequence of that the rain in Amherst reminds him of Kashmir and Lahore, and Karakoram ranges transform into Hindu Kush and Arizona. Thus Ali's poetic oeuvre is best reflected when he tries to combine different cultures and conforms to what R. Radhakrishnan has said:

As diasporan citizens doing double duty [...] we have a duty to represent India to ourselves and to the United States as truthfully as we can. (212)

Nostalgia is a virtual phenomenon in diaspora. The poet like other diasporic writers wants to return to his homeland. But as the return is impossible it simultaneously represents an unbridgeable distance between the poet and his 'original home',

and works as a guiding factor behind the immigrant's acceptability of the foreign land and fills the mind with a sense of loss. Rightly does Rushdie opine: ... the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being 'elsewhere'. (12)

Memory often plays an important role in poetic mapping of the poet's identity, and this is very much evident in his poem "Postcard from Kashmir" where he says:

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox

[...]Now I hold

the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.

This is home. And this is the closest

I'll ever be to home.

However the nostalgia does not merely present the essentialized images of Kashmir, but also helps him to appropriate and negotiate with the cultural framework of the land where he migrated to; as a result of which Kashmir sometimes becomes a 'vague and undetermined place'.

Ali's poetry is often marked by grief and the sense of loss. But this grief and unfulfilled desire to return to his home is compensated to some extent through the medium of poetry which creates a relation between his homeland and 'trans-and-extra national world'. So intense was his feeling that he saw Sarajevo, Srinagar and Alexandria on the same plain:

Say farewell, say farewell to the city

O Sarajevo! O Srinagar!

The Alexandria that is for ever leaving. (*The Veiled Suite*. 230)

Ali's commitment to the global and local is clearly visible in his equal treatment of different religion. He was born in a family which was the culmination of different cultures; Ali's interview with Christine Benvenuto comprehends it:

There were three languages- Urdu, Kashmiri and English spoken at home all the time. When I was a kid, I remember telling my parents that I want to build a Hindu temple in my room, they said sure. And then once I said I want to build a Catholic Chapel with pictures of Jesus, and they said sure. It was a wonderful atmosphere full of possibilities of self expres-

sion.(262)

Ali being a diasporic writer always cherished an 'ethno-global vision'. In one hand he held tight his ethnic traditions, and on the other tried to imbibe a culture marked by global resonance. So great was the impact of literary masters like Galib, Fiaz, Neruda, Zafar and Begum Akhtar upon him and so frequently he had changed his locations that these helped him to create a nation of imagination. His writing of Ghazals in English not only expresses his mastery over language but also makes his root culture alive in America- his 'society of relocation'.

In Ali's poetry sense of loss, loneliness, longing are yoked together as a result of his close acquaintance with different cultures which make him the man of multiple existence. Daniel Hall rightly opines:

Agha Shahid Ali was, by his own count, the beneficiary of three cultures- Muslim, Hindu, and for lack of more precise rubric, Western.(Hall.15)

But the images of home which are apparently unreachable haunt his consciousness so much that he, as if in a trance, utters in "A Call":

I close my eyes. It doesn't leave me, The cold moon of Kashmir which breaks Into my house.

Ali was extensively occupied with the culture of Kashmir and as a result of which, as Hena Ahmed opines, 'different cultural experience intersected, overlapped and came together in Shahid's poetry'(35). He spent his childhood in Kashmir. The phrase beloved-Kashmir-mother shows how deeply he was in love with his homeland. Comparing the beauty of the place with that of heaven he wrote in his "The Last Saffron":

If there is paradise on Earth

It is this, it is this, it is this.

Kashmir left such a great influence on Ali that in a conversation with Amitav Ghosh he disclosed his final wish- 'I would like to back to Kashmir to die'(124).

But the poet was honest and thus showed his commitment to tell the truth that Kashmir has changed into a 'black velvet void' and confessed with a heavy heart without hesitation that Kashmir is burning and 'the homes are set ablaze' by 'midnight soldiers'. Realizing the fact that Ali closely perceived how his indigenous culture was exploited we must acknowledge that his poetry is indeed the collective representation of the grief of the whole Kashmir. Yerra Sugarman rightly says:

Shahid's poetry casts its craft and concerns upon histories of loss, injustices, and brutality, particularly those endured by his ravaged Kashmir.(129)

In his poem "Tonight" Ali portrayed quite vividly his homeland Kashmir as a place which is pervaded completely by darkness. To chart his own memories of a far away borderland in the Indian subcontinent while living in America he succinctly asserted:

And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee-

God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight.

In "I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror" the poet equated the condition of Kashmir with that of few other countries as he could 'see Argentina and Paraguay under a curfew of glass' and could feel that 'the night in Uruguay is black salt'. This 'rhyzomic interplay of travelling subjects within and between the nations' as Ashcroft opined, can be further perceived when Ali expressed his identity as 'both and neither' or 'plural and partial' and wrote:

[...] he's brought the sky from Vail,

Colorado, and the Ganges from Varanasi In a clay urn.[...]

He's brought the desert too...

What hasn't he planned? For music Debussy,

Then a song from New Orleans in the Cresecent's

Time nearing Penn Station.(23)

While multiculturalism and multilingualism had formed the texture of his identity, different spaces he lived in assisted him immensely to get acquainted with different cultures. Thus his poems which recorded his feeling of loss, his associations, recollections, memories, visions also constituted his identity. With the help of his poetic creations Agha Shahid Ali created a national consciousness on the international dimension. If his poetry can express the feeling of exile and loss of home, his imagination can transcend uprootedness and can help him to cherish his cosmopolitan attitude. Keya Majumdar pertinently says:

Inventing, investigating and refashioning the self with all its fractured bits is the problem of all diasporic writings, especially poetry. Agha Shahid Ali's poems narrate the saga of the bereavement, longing and pain of a helpless spectator who sees from thousands of miles away his beloved Kashmir, the paradise of earth on fire, eternally besieged, being the innocent scape goat of a political game played on its surroundings, citizens, hopes, dreams.(175)

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