

Unmasking the Face of Violence: Agha Shahid Ali's The Country Without a Post Office

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Abstract: *This paper primarily focuses upon Agha Shahid Ali's treatment of the subject of violence in his poetry. The very core aspect of his poetry is a sharp critique on violence took place in the valley state Kashmir during 90's. He portrays this in his poetry that man has the very religiosity and spiritualism in the name of religion. For which he proves that the governments have been the cause. This paper explores how Agha Shahid Ali, being the dominant voice of the 20th century in Kashmiri literary scenario has expressed the bitter experience of violence and bloodshed seen by him and his people. Not only his poems show the condition of the valley state, but to some extent reflects Middle East Asia wherein every day in the name of religion and nationality gun shots are being heard.*

Keywords: Religion, Power, Spiritualism, Violence.

1. Introduction

Country Without a Post Office is very significant collections of poetry appeared in recent times in Indian literary scenario. Without mail, no communication is possible- place and people without which remain as an island. But in reality, as John Donne says, no man is an island. In 1990 in Kashmir valley mail was completely blocked supported by the governments. No poem in this collection is a gift of angels of inspiration; instead, they are born amidst hardcore reality which has been enshrined by violence, atrocities, mass rapes, murders and the sound of bullets. These poems are like flowers blossomed out of violent bloodshed.

2. Main Discussion

Violence is the threat to the humanity. The world wherein we live is full of disharmony and violence. This violence seems to be a strange celebration being happened in the name of god and religions; language and nationality and between the nations. Violence and peace have been things of extinct. The poet is one who appeals for the humanity irrespective of religions and nations. In each poem in this collection a deep sense of sorrow, disgust, anguish and the cruel face of violence are apparently expressed. Thousands of Kashmiri pundits in the valley took a heart-wrenching decision of fleeing their homeland to save their lives from militants and terrorists. It was believed to be the most unforgettable exodus of the 20th century.

One of the very important as well as noticeable poems '**Farewell**' mainly deals with how violence has disturbed the very lives of the innocent people. This poem sounds to be a history or report written with striking images in the language of poetry. There is an undercurrent of atrocities, loss, pain, violence running throughout the poem.

The poet writes:

At a certain point I lost track of you.

They make a desolating and call it peace.

When you left even the stones were buried:

The defenceless would have no weapons.

It is believed that forgetting something is not forgotten but remembering. Life disturbed by the chaos and uncertainty cannot completely erase its devastating memories. Man is not merely an entity of body and soul. He is made of emotions, sentiments, love and tending heart.

A life without freedom is of no value; man's ultimate wish is live freely enjoying freedom and peace. But the predicament is that system cannot let him live as he wishes. It unnecessarily interferes in the name of like god, religion, politics, ethics, values and etc. Man is devoid of his personal life.

Without directly expressing, the poet Agha Shahid Ali, pointing at the root cause of the violence, subtly writes of the hidden agenda of politics.

The system and its power misuse the religion and defile the very sanctity of it. The valley has been full of abundant beauty with saffron, apple trees, mountains, ice and ice flakes, mist, rain, streams, but these have all been enshrined by the nightmarish militant attacks, gun shots and bloodshed.

He writes:

My memory is again in the way of your history.

Army convoys all night like desert caravans:

In the smoking oil of dimmed headlights, time dissolved-all

Winter- its crushed fennel.

Individual life has been under surveillance and vigilance of military. Life in the valley is very vulnerable and dangerous between government's military forces and militants' terrorist attacks. Life has no guarantee. At any time, bomb shells have uprooted and destroyed the very houses of the common folks.

He writes:

In this country we step out with doors in our arms.

Life has lost its spontaneity and serenity and has been in hopelessness. No one is there to share pains and sorrows.

He writes:

I hid my pain even from myself; I revealed my pain only to myself.

Normalcy has been gone out of Kashmir and life is very miserable. It has been like merely a territory in the map. Instead of caring and concerning people, government has deployed the military. Since these poems have been an outcome of the 1990 atrocities, bloodshed occurred in the valley, the monstrous and inhuman face of the violence has been grippingly and poignantly expressed in all most all poems in this collection. Originally this collection was titled as **Kashmir Without a Post Office**. But later the poet revised and changed it as it sounds appealing universally. These poems have boldly reacted to the mass rapes, meaningless deaths, and atrocities of both militants and gun shots of military. In the year 1990 there was no postal service to the valley because of political turbulence hitting the state. Militants and the governments (state and central) conflict over control of Kashmir. The poem **Farewell** was written in response to the shameful incidents occurred on the night of 20th January 1990. Kashmiri Pundits left Kashmir after the armed insurgency erupted in the valley. Though the British left India, border dispute between Pakistan and India has not completely been solved. Still there has been gunshots and infiltration common. Frantz Fanon in his '**The Wretched of the Earth**', while writing about the 'concerning violence', has said it correctly that national liberation, national renaissance, the restoration of nationhood to the people, commonwealth; whatever may be the headings used or the new formulas introduced, decolonization is always a violent phenomenon. His poems expect to be studied in light of the postcolonial aura so as to shed focus on the structure of the violence and domination of the power and system. And moreover his poems do not merely represent the violence and the insecurity of the Kashmir valley, but has become the voice of those who are suffered from this kind of suffocation anywhere in the world. If we go back leafing through the pages of the history, bloodshed has been an apparent aspect. If harmony is lost, where is the peace? If peace is lost where is the freedom? If freed is stifled there is natural life which every human being is intended to lead.

He writes in the poems 'A Pastoral'-

Pluck the blood: My words will echo thus

at sunset, by the ivy, but to what purpose?

In the drawer of the cedar stand

.....

Death, atrocities and missing have been common in Kashmir's life. If any one goes out of the state, it is not sure his/her returning. Reflecting all these, his poems have become like a moral conscience, and condemned the cruel nature of the violence. It can be said in Arundhati Roy's words that this Kashmir valley is the most densely militarized zone in the world. If this is the case in what way harmonious and normal life be expected? It is very difficult. Kashmiri people need freedom, not the peace. In her **Listening to Grasshoppers**, Arundhati Roy strikingly observes life in the valley:

'To anybody who cared to ask, or, more importantly, to listen, it was always clear that even in the darkest moments, people in Kashmir had kept the fires burning and that it was not peace alone they yearned for, but freedom too'. So all that Kashmiri people want is liberty. But how is the question mark. The poet's main worry expressed in these poems is that why people of his state cannot lead a life very normally. Very sarcastically he quotes a Sufi line in the poem **The Last Saffron** –

'If there is a paradise on earth,

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

Violence has been haunting day and night and in sleep and awake, is this possible? This sense of anger is expressed in many poems. This is the core element. Hope remains merely as hope. But it should come reality. When Kashmiri pundits leave and some are massacred, a Kashmiri Muslim says in the poem 'Farewell':

I'm everything you lost. You won't forgive.

My memory keeps getting in the way of your history

There is nothing to forgive. You won't forgive me.

I hid my pain even from myself; I revealed my pain only to myself.

The titled poem *The Country Without a Post Office* is a very disturbing poem. It captures the very situation and mood of the valley. What a thousand pages might say has been said in one poem. The images the poet uses are very hitting and subtle having a sharp under current. This poem has been written in four parts, in each poet has tried at his best in capturing the cruelty and violence. It was believed that in 1990, for about seven months there had been no postal service in the valley. Right to live and speech was totally choked. When communication was stopped, life became like an island. Arundhati Roy rightly observes the condition in the valley that the voice that the government of India has tried so hard to silence in Kashmir has massed into a deafening roar. Hundreds of thousands of unarmed people have come out to reclaim their cities, their streets, and mohallas. May be this was the situation and condition when in 1990 Kashmir was struck with political turmoil. This has been powerfully expressed in this poem. The poet was away from home, and now came home back. His homecoming was very devastating. When he came home back, he saw minaret being entombed. If this was the scene in the mosque, in public life was totally lost its rhythm. Because letters were dumped not being delivered to the addressees.

He writes:

His fingerprints cancel blank stamps

in that archive for letters with doomed

addresses, each house buried or empty.

Empty? Because so many fled, ran away,

and became refugees there, in the plains

Muezzin went upstairs and read messages scratched on planets sound to be very evocative. It reminds the village portrayed in John Keats's Ode on a Grecian Urn. There was not a soul in the village; it looked to be desolate. Life in the valley then was completely covered by the military. May be now also condition is being continued.

He writes:

*The soldiers light it, hone the flames,
burn our world to sudden papier-mache*

The very irony is that these letters remain to be delivered may not be read by those whom they were addressed. Because some were missing, some were dead.

In the second part, poet brings out the communal fights and conflict between the innocent public and military and militants during 90's. The violence was spread in the valley, and citizens became refugees. This was very pathetic that their own home was not theirs. Innocents were suspected and unnecessarily caught and put behind bars. It is reminded W.H.Auden's poem The Refugee Blues. Auden writes:

There is no place for us, my dear, yet there is no place for us

Once we had a country and we thought it fair,

Look in the atlas and you will find it there

We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now.

In the second part, the poet Agha Shahid Ali has shown the real face of the terror and violence. It makes us think whether the civilization we have is really civilization. Human beings are the only creatures in this universe who fight themselves in the name of nationality, colour, race, creed and religion and god. Osho says in his wonderful book on Kabir's poems entitled *Ecstasy the Forgotten Language* that no animals go expedition and war on other animals. Only human beings do.

The poet writes in the second part-

We're inside the fire, looking for the dark.

The technique and narration used here is par. It evokes many meanings. One letter lying on the streets says 'I want to be he who pours blood'. Beauty and decadence are the paradox of the Kashmir. It has been brought out here. The poet has perfectly expressed the way in which the valley state was and is treated. There is mentioning of the country's name on the stamps because it was a disputed region fought over by both countries. He writes:

...fingers, at the edge of pain,

are seals all night to cancel the stamps.

Stopping postal service means abandoning people's gathering and daily activities. It has silenced the voices of the valley.

Everything is finished, nothing remains

I must force silence to be mirror

to see his voice again for directions

Fire runs in waves.

In the third part poet seems to be speaking himself with different sides. Pain is the only thing people must feel. Muezzin might also die; it was predicted in this part. So prayer is lost, mosques have become deserts. If spirituality itself is lost, solace is impossible. This poem reaches to the extent of spiritual level. How T.S. Eliot portrayed in his *The Waste Land* saying that the European civilization morally and spiritually corrupted and retrograded, here in the valley also the beautiful life was also spoilt.

In the final section, the poet comes across the letters of the lovers. In his role as muezzin, he likes to cry out:

Dead letters sent

to this world whose end was near

Through new images and idiom, Agha Shahid Ali has tried to show the life in the Kashmir valley. The Separatists, Militants and terrorists do not let the life in Kashmir to be free. And on the other hand government's military forces are always seen carrying guns and rifles. Life is to be on under the shadow of these.

The life's celebration which includes festivals and other rituals is lost. People see only blood and hear gunshots. In the poem *The Floating Post Office*, the poet writes:

And then we saw the boat being rowed

through the fog of death, the sentence

passed on our city. It came close

To reveal smudged black-ink letters

which the postman-he was alive-

gave us, like signs, without a word

War is ugly. War is terrible. War is nightmare. War is graveyard. War is violence. This is how war and violence can be described. The more scientifically man is becoming progressive the less humanity he is having. Science must bring human beings non-violence and harmony, but his heart is corrupt. He is a war mongering. He is obsessed with violence. In the movie 'The Great Dictator', Charlie Chaplin gives a wonderful speech on what human beings as well as governments want to live harmoniously and peacefully. This is very striking and hitting. He has very sarcastically delivered these words. This speech is applicable to anybody who is obsessed with power and violence and condition-

"We all want to help/I'm sorry/But I don't want to be uh an emperor/That is not my business/I don't want to rule or conquer any one/I should like to help everyone if possible/Jew, Gentle, Blackman, White, we all want to help one another/Human beings are like that/We want to live by each other's happiness not by each other's misery/We don't want to hate and despise one another and this world has room for everyone. And this good earth is rich and can provide for everyone. The way of life can be free and beautiful; but we have lost the way. Greed has poisoned men's souls and has barricaded the world with hate has "goose-stepped" us into misery and bloodshed. We have developed speed but we shut ourselves in machinery that gives abundance has left us in want. Our knowledge has made us cynical hard and unkind we think too much and

feel too little more the machinery we need humanity/ more than cleverness we need kindness and gentleness, without these qualities life will be violent and all will be lost."

All most all Agha Shahid's poems are of political under currents having criticized the system and the governments. His very concern is that a citizen in Kashmir must live naturally and harmoniously without out being in the fear. In the poem **Some Vision of the World Cashmere**, Ali writes how violence has feared the people and lost their hope of living:

I put the phone down in Srinagar and run into the sunlight toward her cottage in our garden. Except for her dressing table mirror which Sikander, so long dead, is polishing, the army has occupied her house, made it their dingy office, dust everywhere, on old phones, on damp files, on broken desks. In her drawing room a clerk types. The colonel, dictating, turns around.

The whole atmosphere portrayed here seems to be surrealistic. Personal life of the people has completely shattered, under the shadow of the guns man is to live.

The religion which divides people is just like a political ideology. Political ideology's main concern is to define things for its convenience's sake. It does not worry about the truth and morality. Whatever it says must be its ethics and morality. A religion is something which touches the soul of a man; that soul has no colour, gender, nations, border and communities. These views remind me one of the poems by the mystic Kashmiri poets Lalla. She strikingly criticizes the attitude people have towards religion or god. She rationally says:

God is stone, the temple is stone,

Head to foot, all stoned.

Hey priest-man, what's the object of your worship?

Ger your act together, join mind with life-breath.

At the inner level of Agha Shahid's poems have also the same motif and concern. If she speaks at the spiritual level, he writes in political level directly. But her themes can be traced in his poems. Kashmir has produced a mystic poet like Lalla. But the very disgusting and shameful thing is that odour of spiritualism of poetry has been replaced by blood and violence. Agha Shahid Ali's poems will be like moral conscience and condemn the hidden agendas of the politics and religion and give people a moral energy to face the consequences prevailed in the valley. They try to connect people.

3. Conclusion

This can be concluded saying that his poems have held the mirror to the very reality of the current world obsessed with war. Each country in the world has been facing a unique problem. This problem has not been created by somebody who has come from the alien worlds. Man himself been reason for all this chaos and violence. The modern world is devoid of spiritual strength. He has lost compassion. For the sake of power nations are cut into pieces. This is what happened between India and Pakistan. As long as peace and harmony do establish in the valley so long both countries never be progressive. The Kashmir is known to be its abundant beauty and rich poetry, but the paradox is that the very spiritualism has been lost; everywhere in the valley bloodshed and violence. Agha Shahid Ali's poems are like a poetical report and response showing how an ordinary life has collapsed by power, religion and violence. Love and compassion are the only things which are remedy for all our ego and heartedness. Thich Nhat Hanh says: *To love is not to possess the other person or to consume all their attention and love. To love is to offer the other person joy and a balm for their suffering. This capacity is what we have to learn to cultivate.* One should be free from all the bondages and control. No religion should be enforced on anybody to follow. It must be very personal. Ali's poems have been, in a true sense, poetical voice in India literature with disturbing images ever portrayed in Indian poetry.

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