

# ECHOES OF KASHMIR IN THE POETRY OF AGHA SHAHID ALI

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**Abstract :** Kashmir is known as paradise on earth. It has been the subject of poetry for ages. The romantic description of Kashmir has captivated many authors as well as poets. Over a period of time, Kashmir has covered a terrible journey from the exquisite acreage to the territory of war and violence. Correspondingly literature has also followed the way and the focus was shifted from mystic, spiritual and romantic poetry to present day poetry. Many contemporary poets started writing on Kashmir realistically. Agha Shahid Ali is one such poet. Born and brought up in Srinagar, Kashmir Agha Shahid Ali is actually the heir of three cultures-Muslim, Hindu and western. Reading Ali's poetry under through the lens of Kashmir is intriguing to understand the poet's traditional and cultural affiliations to his native land. The oeuvre of Ali is fraught with allusions of Kashmir. Being from Kashmiri genealogy many of Ali's poems are the manifestation of the excruciating confrontation of individual experience about his distant homeland Kashmir. Present assignment is an attempt to examine and understand the echoes of Kashmir in the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali.

**Index Terms - Kashmir, Poetry, Agha Shahid Ali, Violence, Nostalgia.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Bewitched by the scenic as well as the divine beauty of Kashmir, known as paradise on earth, a lot has been written on it in different languages of the world. For poetry, Kashmir has always remained a popular subject. But its treatment in poetry has undergone a sea change due to social, political and religious tussle in the valley. Recently, year 1947 has played havoc in the lives of people of Kashmir where the residents either became Hindus, i.e. Kashmiri pundits or Muslims instead of Kashmiris [6]. Kashmir has covered a terrible journey from the exquisite acreage to the territory of war and violence. Correspondingly literature has also followed the way and the focus was shifted from mystic, spiritual and romantic poetry to present day poetry. Many contemporary poets started writing on Kashmir realistically. Agha Shahid Ali is one such poet. The present paper is an attempt to examine and understand the echoes of Kashmir in the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali.

## II. THE POET AND HIS ATTACHMENT TO KASHMIR

Agha Shahid Ali was born in Delhi and brought up in Srinagar, Kashmir. Thereafter he moved to the US. He was educated initially at the University of Kashmir and then to Hindu College, University of Delhi. After completing his Ph.D from Pennsylvania State University, he moved to the University of Arizona for the degree of M.F.A. Ali, being a Kashmiri Muslim, is also best acknowledged in the U.S. and called himself an American poet who is writing in English. Ali considered English as his first language and Urdu to be his mother tongue. Ali is actually the heir of three cultures, i.e. Muslim, Hindu and western which has been quite conspicuous throughout his poetry [4]. His multi-cultural belonging laid an ultimate effect on his poetic enterprise. The struggle between India and Pakistan for Kashmir has led to the disturbance on social, political and religious spheres which get reflected in the poetry of Ali. It is intriguing to understand the poet's traditional and cultural affiliations to his native land while reading Ali's poetry under this frame of reference. War and violence are simultaneous frames through which Ali's verses circulate. There has been the lack of communication from Kashmir which Ali tries to overcome through his poetic voice. Being an émigré, he reciprocates his love for Kashmir in his poetry [5]. The oeuvre of Ali is fraught with allusions of Kashmir. The poetry of Agha Shahid Ali represents his love for Kashmir and its immortal beauty. It also deals with the impact of victimization of people due to political as well as social disquietude. Being from Kashmiri genealogy many of Ali's poems are the manifestation of the excruciating confrontation of individual experience about his distant homeland Kashmir.

## III. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF POETRY

Ali has mentioned the name of his beloved homeland "Kashmir" for a total of ninety-four times in his collected volume of poems in general and in his anthologies *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987) and *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997) in particular. He does not mention Kashmir in between these two volumes and then *The Country Without a Post Office* erupts with a recitation of Kashmir that bypasses signification where in one of the poems "The Blessed Word: A Prologue," he uses the word "Kashmir" as if he is chanting a mantra to invoke some god:

Let me cry out in that void, say it as I can. I write on that void:  
Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir, Cashmir, Cashmire,  
Kashmere, Cachemire, Cushman, Cachmiere, Cašmir. Or Cauchemar  
in a sea of stories? Or: Kacmir, Kaschemir, Kasmere, Kachmire,  
Kasmir. Kerseymere? Ali, 2009, p. 171

The poet finds eighteen different ways to spell Kashmir which signifies his inclination and experience of Kashmir. Like a sage continuously telling the beads and chanting some holy words in the memory of his god, Ali forces us to recognize the actual difference between what Kashmir was and what it has become.

In his poetry, Agha Shahid Ali is canvassing a paradise that has been almost lost literally as well as metaphorically. This reminds of the paradise in Milton's *Paradise Lost* which represents the fall of man from heaven to earth. But here the Paradise is Kashmir which also exhibit the fall of man as the motherland of the poet is witnessing the agony of war and claims of ownership

between India and Pakistan. This notion is conspicuous in many poems of Ali. In the poem "Farewell" there is reference to Paradise twice. At one place Kashmir is shown in a tattered state by the atrocities as the "guardian... of the Gates of Paradise" is missing [1]. In another poem "I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight", Ali alludes to the guardian "Rizwan" which literally has been taken from an Arabic word meaning the gate keeper of paradise. In the poem "Farewell" it seems as if he knows that the guardian has already gone to a place unknown and he puts forth a question: "[w]ho is the guardian tonight of the Gates of Paradise?" [1] In another poem "I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight" the character of Rizwan is presented just like a shadow which is, while roaming in the streets of Srinagar, searching for his own body: "a shadow chased by searchlights is running/away to find its body" and this death actually refers to the crumbling of Kashmir symbolically [1]. Agha Shahid Ali echoes the longstanding literary representations of Kashmir as paradise on earth in the final lines of the poem "The Last Saffron". He refers to a couplet by Jehangir, the Mughal emperor regarding Kashmir being a blissful, Edenic garden, "If there is a paradise on earth, / It is this, it is this, it is this" [1]. In the light of the present condition of Kashmir where the valley is fraught with blood-drenched images, these words seem hollow. The context in which Ali is writing of a Kashmir torn apart by interreligious violence, the references to Kashmir as a paradise seems ironic.

Ali has, in a way, used two images, i.e. saffron and paisley as hallmark of Kashmir as earthly paradise [2]. In his notes, he mentions that the best saffron comes from Kashmir. Saffron actually is a spice produced by pounding flower petals to make an orange paste that is more valuable by its weight than is gold. This echoes in his poem "Farewell" with the images "who weighs the / hairs on the jeweler's balance?" and "[h]ave you soaked saffron to pour on them" [1]. Saffron is pertinent to Hindu religion as holy men wear robes of this colour but this image of saffron in itself conveys the pathos of Kashmir where the people are crushed like petals of flowers. The word 'saffron' echoes in his poem titled "The Last Saffron" also. In this poem images of "saffron sun setting" indicates towards his wish as well as obsession to die on the soil of his motherland and, thereby, expressing his unfulfilled love for the valley of Kashmir [1]. Paisley, a printed detailed pattern of curved shapes on cloth, is generally correlated with Kashmir particularly as the region's highly-prized shawls tend to be adorned with this print. It is cloth covered with an ornamental design using the *buta*, a teardrop shaped motif with a curved upper end. The unique and artistic images of paisley keep manifesting themselves in many poems indicating Ali's longing for the handcraft and culture of Kashmir. In the poem "Farewell" there is a reference of paisley where he asks a question "O Weaver whose seams perfectly vanished" [1]. Also in the poem "The Last Saffron" he mentions that he will be content with a bouquet of flowers as "[t]here's a ban on wreaths!" [1] Identical images of paisley appear in the poem "The Country without a Post Office" written in the backdrop of the incident that occurred in 1990, when Kashmir rebelled against Indian rule, resulting in hundreds of gruesome and violent deaths, fires, and rapes. Because of political turmoil gripping the land for seven months, there was no mail delivered in Kashmir and people were unable to get stamps for letters and receive or send letters and they "brought cash, a currency of paisleys/to buy the new stamps" [1]. Due to the closure of the post offices, no person was available "Who will deliver / parchment cut in paisleys, my news to prisons?" [1] Ali is trying to juxtapose two tragedies one of the Hindus in exile and other of the Muslims under oppression. There was a lot of hue and cry in the valley as the houses of people of Kashmir were burnt and the doors of the empty houses of Hindus, Muslims "hang wreaths" [1]. These two images of saffron and paisley reinforce the sense of Kashmir being the worldly paradise and the use of these two words as worlds in the poetry of Ali echoes his love, passion and compassion for Kashmir and its people. In the essay "The Greatest Sorrow: Times of Joy Recalled in Wretchedness," Amitav Ghosh feels the pain of the loss of paradise felt by people of the valley and uprooted migrants. Ghosh, further, argues that Agha Shahid Ali is one of the writers who, with great dexterity, uses the motif of the lost utopia, i.e. Kashmir [3].

Agha Shahid Ali cannot be considered as a political poet but some of his poems can be read or approached from historic and political sense. One such example is the poem "A History of Paisley" which is explicitly based on the myth of two Hindu deities Lord Shiva and his wife Parvati. In this poem, Lord Shiva carves river Jehlum in the shape of paisley when he reconciled with his wife Parvati after a quarrel [1]. Implicitly the poem is foregrounding the violence in Kashmir in the backdrop of the myth. The people drenched in blood, while escaping through the streets, leave their footprint in the shape of paisleys which appear like carpet at dusk in backdrop of dim light. It is suggestive of the dreadfulness of Mughal wreath which is being reinvented by the soldiers of the army. But people turn blind eye to the atrocities and do not "hear bullets drowning out the bells of her anklets" [1].

Agha Shahid Ali not only presents Kashmir in his poems but also trying to raise voice for it along with resisting the atrocities against Kashmiri people. In the poem "I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight", Kashmir appears in the very title which seems to have become the paragon of resistance in his poetry through the image of shadow of a boy "is running away to find its body" in the "curfewed night". There is no body but shadow which turns into nothing inside interrogation centre where we can only hear a cry "I know nothing". Ali, here, tries to provide us with some glimpse of interrogations Kashmiri boys underwent. Further the shadow of the boy witnesses more atrocities when his ghost visits the place where a prisoner is being tortured by dripping "burning tire" on his back [1]. It seems sometimes that Rizwan is, in a way, extension of the poet himself who never left Kashmir and was killed. He rather represents all the boys of Kashmir who went missing at one point of time or the other, were interrogated and killed.

In Kashmir two communities viz. Hindu and Muslim used to live together peacefully and the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali provide numerous references of the bond between the two communities. Ali's poetry also reflects the deterioration of that bond due to social and political chaos of those times. The poem "Farewell" depicts the way this bond between Hindus and Muslims has been evanesced and the creator of the universe, like the poet, is just witnessing as nothing else can be done. The condition over there is so pathetic that Hindus and Muslims do not embrace each other but "[i]n the lake the arms of temples and mosques are locked / in each other's reflections" which actually indicates the wish of the poet as he cannot make the things as they were before the rise of problem in Kashmir [1]. Towards the end of the poem his wish becomes conspicuous when he says, "If only somehow you could have been mine, / what would not have been possible in the world?" [1]

In early 1990s, militancy was on the rise in Kashmir and as a result not only Muslims but Hindus also suffered. Hindus, popularly known as Kashmiri Pundits, were forced to leave the valley. On one hand they suffered due to militancy and on the other hand the state utterly failed to protect them which made them double sufferers. Many Kashmiris mourned the departure of Kashmiri Pundits. In the poem "Farewell", Ali realistically portrays the horrible exile of Hindus by lamenting the departure of Kashmiri Pundits and reminds them of the sorrow which the poet is feeling for the people who became refugees in the plains. The poem uses the epigraph "They make desolation and call it a peace" from Tacitus through which Ali actually deconstructs the notion of peace fabricated by the authorities in the valley of Kashmir. Thus Ali attempts to portray the tragedy which is being faced by the people of Kashmir, be it Muslims or Hindus. But even in this state of oppression Ali wants to tell the Kashmiri Pundits who become an exile that they are not forgotten by their fellow sufferers. Ali says that "[i]n your absence you polished me into the Enemy" because he couldn't stop them from leaving; therefore, this memory haunts him and a sense of guilt overwhelms him [1].

Memory and History in the context of Kashmir is the constant meditation in the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali as the poem "Postcard from Kashmir" reflects Ali's past, present and the future relationship with his homeland Kashmir. Besides, this relationship and engagement is established via memory. Kashmir's shrinking in the mailbox for Ali is attenuation of Kashmir as an artifice or illustration in the mind which is imagined, created and unreal, but always there to enable the writer to be ever home. The image which Ali received is actually based on some remote blurred memory but on his actual visit to the "imagined community" the reality seems altogether different. Imagined is idyllic, pristine and beautiful, but reality is altogether different. The picture in the mind through the eye of memory is like a child's fearful ghostly image, which is surrealistic, and poet can only express it through the metaphor of "a giant negative, black / and white, still underdeveloped" [1]. Ali is obsessed with a desire to die in Kashmir as in one of the poems he starts, "I will die, in autumn, in Kashmir" [1].

#### IV. CONCLUSION

To conclude, it can be said that the relationship of Agha Shahid Ali with Kashmir is such that it echoes in his poetry as nostalgia but he is, also, resisting against and laments for the occurrences over there. The catastrophe in Kashmir takes the shape of ink through which Ali's poetry is penned. Ali becomes witness to oppression and violence in Kashmir through his poetry and he takes this tragedy of Kashmiris to the universal platform. Ali cannot be put in the category of revolutionary poets like Pablo Neruda whose poems gives courage and pride to the struggling working class rather he is a poet who is writing whatever he sees and feels even from distance. Moreover, speaking at length about Kashmir in his poems does not mean that Ali was a political poet as he does not take sides. He does not prefer one religious community over the other but he can be considered as a political poet in the sense that he utters the truth that should be uttered. Whatever the case may be, while reading most of his poems, it seems that his beloved "Kashmir" becomes the pivot around which he is moving and weaving the strands of his emotions.

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