



Anxieties of Exile and Reconciliation of a Lost Home in the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali

Aneeqa

Research Scholar
Amity School of Liberal Arts
Amity University Haryana

Dr H K Jha

Professor
Amity School of Liberal Arts
Amity University Haryana

Abstract

This study delves into the select works of Agha Shahid Ali, a major Kashmiri poet, who had migrated to United States in the 1980s and had established himself as an important poet of self-exile. This research explores the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali in the context of Indian diaspora and upholds Ali's poetry extending beyond the mundane concept of exile towards a more pragmatic approach of homecoming through memory, nostalgia and reconciliation. The study analyses some of Shahid Ali's important poems and explores the themes of memory, loss, recovery and recollections of his homeland in Kashmir. This study critically examines Ali's literary contributions as an exilic poet, revolving around the idea of home with an emphasis on his feelings of longing in an alien land for his homeland where his inner self belongs. The study attempts to relate Agha Shahid Ali's trauma and restlessness with Edward Said's saying that exile is "*an unhealable rift between the self and a native place, between the self and its true home.*" (Said, 173)

Keywords: diaspora, exile, identity, memory, home, transition, reconciliation

INTRODUCTION

Agha Shahid Ali, the great Kashmiri- American poet had to leave his homeland Kashmir during the initial years of turmoil which had started in the 1990s. The bond Shahid Ali shared with his roots and the subsequent leaving and maintaining of distance from his native land had a deep-rooted impact upon Shahid's psyche and mode of writing. As such his memories were coming from the emotions and profundity associated with his homeland. Even after carving a distinct identity and home for himself while being in America, the memories of his early days while living in the vale of Kashmir remained with him. While living in America, rather than

blending in with the American environment and mannerisms, Shahid kept his Kashmiri Indianness intact which is what gave a distinctive vocation to his poetic genius. In terms of a political stance, Shahid wasn't banished or exiled by some nation state, rather being in exile was Shahid's conscious choice. His position was that of an immigrant and he always remained conscious of this fact. Exile and immigration for Shahid had dimensions that existed beyond physicality and were more rooted in the psyche. For him distance created psychological consequences that were all pushing and all shaping for him. In one of his interviews, Shahid Ali had mentioned that "what he meant by the word exile was an entirely new kind of geography, an entirely new kind of sensibility that became available to his collection of poetry." (Agha Shahid Ali: The Lost Interview by Stacey Chase for The Cafe Review Spring 2011.8.).

ANALYSIS

This exilic element in Shahid's poetry is mostly evident in his collection of poems under the title "The Half-Inch Himalayas". The title of the collection makes evident a sense of distance running through the poems. The poems in this collection such as "The Country Without a Post Office", "Farewell", "Half-inch Himalayas", "Snowman" etc. are instrumental in exploring how the poet keeps visiting the shadows of the past. "Postcard from Kashmir", the opening poem of the anthology has been given the status of the epigraph of the collection. The poem highlights the perspective further when considered in terms of the evocation with which the poet addresses the tranquil flow of the river Jhelum and the manner in which he nostalgically keeps looking at the eminence of the range of the Himalayan belt that surround the entire landscape of Kashmir.

*Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,
My home a neat four by six inches.
I always loved neatness.
Now I hold the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.*
(Agha Shahid Ali, *Postcard from Kashmir.*)
(Ali 29)

Shahid always loved the concept of a tidy home, but when the conflict escalated in Kashmir, this notion turned distraught, and it troubled him to see such a sorry state of affairs. Perhaps this was the reason, he never returned to his homeland. He couldn't reconcile to see the mess created by the multiple conflicts of politics, displacement of people due to war, ethnic conflict, etc. Shahid's poetic collection titled poetry "The Country Without a Post Office" was transformed into an iconic compilation both because of its political subject matter and the style in which it was written. It is through such poems, through the repetition of words, phrases and ideas that Shahid was able to shed light on the suffering of the Kashmiri people.

The situation in Kashmir went beyond worse in 1990s and Shahid had been able to spend three consecutive summers in Kashmir before that. As things started to deteriorate there, so did the meaning of 'Kashmir' for him and by the time he was back in Amherst, the word 'Kashmir' had already turned to 'cauchemar' a French word for nightmare (The Blessed Word: A Prologue). The passage of time transformed the meaning of word Kashmir for Shahid, changing its dimension from being a metaphor for home to now being a metaphor for a lost homeland. The ongoing violence affected Shahid Ali deeply and he was distressed with what Kashmir had

turned into. Being an intellectual and a sensitive poet, Shahid was intrigued by political matters and admitted that his poetry was deeply influenced by them. Shahid tried articulating it by writing poems about the incidents of injustice regarding the ongoing struggle of Kashmiri people and the politics in play. Broadly Shahid can be categorized as belonging to the poets of injustice like Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Maya Angelou but Shahid in particular was a poet of witness bearing testimony to the violence and suffering his homeland and its people were going through.

While living in America, Shahid had categorically classified his identity as a hyphenated one, a Kashmiri-American poet writing in English and considered himself as a "Triple Exile-from Kashmir, Delhi, and America, (Agha Shahid Ali: The Lost Interview by Stacey Chase for The Cafe Review, Spring 2011.8.), physically and culturally denationalised from his native land, socially owing to his complex personality." Ali's self-exile contradicts the common assumption that a voluntary departure from one's homeland can only bring contentment. Rather his poetry depicts his self split into the witness, the sufferer, and the singer of the collective suffering of his native people back in Kashmir. Some of the lines which resonate the poet's suffering and loss of identity can be noticed in the following lines of his poetry

*I close my eyes. It doesn't leave me,
The cold moon of Kashmir
which breaks into my house"*
(Agha Shahid Ali, *A Call*)
(Ali 76)

*If home is found on both sides of the globe,
home is of course here and always a missed land*
(Agha Shahid Ali, *Land*) (Ali 347)

Growing up amidst Chinar in his beloved Kashmir, Shahid had spent his childhood and part of his adolescence with a number of Kashmiri Pandits. Consequently, he developed friendship with many Kashmiri Pandits. His heart bleeds to see the forceful evacuation of Kashmiri Pandits from the beautiful land of Chinar. The exile of Kashmiri Pandits had a massive impact on Shahid's psyche. Shahid's ideology which he had inherited from his ancestors was inclusive in all aspects. His sense of community was not restricted to Kashmiri Muslims only, it was in many ways, the epitome of the idea of Kashmiriyat (Kashmiri brotherhood). Shahid wrote much of his poetry in elegiac form addressing the suffering of Kashmiri people including Kashmiri pandits. This can be sensed in his poem "Farewell" which can be read as a lament from Kashmiri Muslims to Kashmiri Pandits. His childhood memories of Kashmir where he had lived along with his Pandit friends keep haunting him even when the Kashmiri Pandits had left the beautiful valley and were forced to live at Jammu and other places. The following lines from his poem "Farewell" reflect the agony and deep concern for the fellow Pandits who were forced to live a miserable life in the exile away from their homeland. Somehow Shahid experiences similar pain in the exile of the Kashmiri Pandits, away from the green shades of the chinar. In a way the poem represents all the Kashmiris, and very painfully laments the exile of Pandits as well as his own exile.

*In your absence you polished me into the Enemy.
Your history gets in the way of my memory.*
(Agha Shahid Ali, *Farewell*)

(Ali 175)

*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.
(Agha Shahid Ali, The Country Without a Post Office)
(Ali 202-206)*

The idea of brotherhood, inclusiveness and a sense of togetherness irrespective of religious belief can be seen abounding in these lines and the rest of the poetry written by Agha Shahid Ali. Ali's poetry is a rendition of a motherland existing beyond the confines of religious and cultural boundaries, where the temples and mosques, depicting the Hindu and the Muslims respectively are intricately woven together. Moreover, Kashmiri polity is inherently mixed with a sense of forgiveness and fraternity. Yet, the past and present political conditions and conflict in the area act as a form of hinderance towards reconciliation and peace between the two communities connected through historical legacies. However, in the recent past the history and memory of both the communities has led to the development of a destructive whirlpool conveying a hopelessness regarding reconciliation.

Nonetheless, Shahid has a strong belief that both Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits have existed side by side since decades and share an identity interweaved with spans of both joyous sustenance and painful history. The Kashmiri pandit community held a superior position in Kashmir in the past. But the ongoing political dynamics and social chaos of the present scenario has forced them to evacuate their homeland. However, Shahid Ali is hopeful for a peaceful and acceptable solution to this religious conundrum since both the communities still share a common attribute, the word "Kashmiri". Both the communities have shared a common geographical location. Shahid grabs the opportunity of reconciliation by highlighting the Kashmiri Muslim-Hindu brotherhood in one of his couplets. The rose petals here act as an image of reconciliation between the people belonging to two different sects of Islam and Hinduism.

*At the temples and the mosques,
rose petals lay all night perfuming the stunned water.
(Agha Shahid Ali, water)
(Ali 350)*

The inclusion of religious hybridity in Agha Shahid Ali's poetics was not to eliminate the discordance between the Hindu community and the Muslim community in Kashmir. Rather it aimed to persuade the people belonging to each community to love and accept each other as neighbours and inheritors of the same valley where they have been growing under the shade of chinars.

The modern society is the "age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration" (Said, 174) and hence, it is obvious that the literature of exile makes evident the struggles and predicaments of the sufferers of exile. The genre of Shahid Ali's poetry, generally categorised as the poetry of exile, exists not because there were external forces at play to make him leave his homeland but because despite his conscious choice of physical separation from the actual struggle taking place back in his beloved Kashmir, his emotional devotion for his

homeland bled such words of pain out of him. The sense of compatriotism and a shared feeling of pain and loss for his native people and a troubled homeland kept growing in Ali's poetry even though he was in a "self-identified exile". Agha Shahid Ali's attempt to recover lost cultural and historical identity is not a consequence of any kind of social or racial alienation the poet had to face while being in America but is a conscious attempt on his part imposed upon himself due to unfavourable conditions back in his homeland. The reason Agha Shahid Ali viewed his history and present in this particular way is because he was an amalgamation of multiple cultures, literary backgrounds, etc. In a conversation with Amitav Ghosh, Shahid had claimed that he could be the national poet of Kashmir but would not like to be the nationalist poet (The Ghat of the Only World, Amitav Ghosh). Being an 'émigré', the emotional attachment Shahid Ali felt for his beloved homeland can be better understood by taking into account the particular perception of Edward Said defining exile as "an unhealable rift between the self and a native place, between the self and its true home: Its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (Said 1984).

Shahid Ali was not only a Kashmiri, Indian or an American poet, he was a poet of humanity. His concerns were human and cosmic. Shahid's poems lay bare a hidden concern for the pain and sufferings of the common people which surpasses the narrow boundary of state and religion.

REFERENCES

Primary Sources

1. Ali, Agha Shahid. "Agha Shahid Ali, Land." *The Veiled Suite*. Penguin Random House, 2009. 347. Print.
2. Kapoor, Manan. *A Map of Longings: Life and Works of Agha Shahid Ali*. India, Penguin Random House India Private Limited, 2021.

Secondary Sources

1. Ahmad, Rafiq. "Orientalist Imaginaries of Travels in Kashmir: Western Representations of the Place and People." *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 9.3 (2011): 167–182. Web.
2. Dar, Bilquis. (2014). Agha Shahid Ali as a Diasporic poet. *International Journal of English and Literature*. 5. 64-66. 10.5897/IJEL2013.0433.
3. Ghosh, Amitav. "The Ghat of the Only World." <https://www.outlookindia.com/>, 1 Jan. 1970, www.outlookindia.com/website/story/the-ghat-of-the-only-world/216239.
4. Khalid, Mian. "Hybrid Identity in the Poetic Form of Agha Shahid Ali's Ghazal." *Digital Repository at the University of Maryland (DRUM)*. N.p., 28 Feb. 2014. Web.
5. Kbenedict. "Agha Shahid Ali Interview." *The Cafe Review*, 2 May 2017, www.thecafereview.com/spring-2011-interview-gha-shahid-ali-the-lost-interview