

Echoes of Home: Agha Shahid Ali's Poetic Odyssey through Exile and Identity

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Abstract:

Agha Shahid Ali's Poetic Odyssey through Exile and Identity" delves into the profound literary journey of Agha Shahid Ali, a Kashmiri poet who intricately weaves his experiences of exile, identity, and the search for home into his poetic tapestry. Born in New Delhi, Ali's educational journey took him from Kashmir to America, a trajectory marked by a thirst for knowledge and a sense of displacement. This research paper delves into how his poetry, characterized by its evocative language and cultural imagery, resonates with readers as it navigates themes of nostalgia, loss, and the intricate complexities of a diasporic existence.

The paper investigates how Ali's poems act as vessels for his personal narrative and shared experiences of the diaspora. It explores how his lyrical voice bridges the landscapes of his native Kashmir and adopted America, as he grapples with the emotional turmoil of immigration, estrangement, and mortality. Ali's exploration of his Kashmiri identity amid his new surroundings illustrates how the past intertwines with the present, fostering a dialogue between memory and experience.

Through a close analysis of select poems, the study unravels Ali's intricate use of language and poetic forms such as the Ghazal, a traditional Urdu form he popularized in American poetry. It probes how Ali's verses resonate with emotions of longing, both for a lost homeland and for the abstract notion of 'home' itself. The paper also sheds light on Ali's unique literary approach, which amalgamates free verse and formal structures, imbuing his work with a distinctive rhythm and emotional depth.

In essence, "Agha Shahid Ali's Poetic Odyssey through Exile and Identity" explores how Ali's poems transcend the limitations of geography and culture, offering readers a universal lens through which to view the intricate interplay of memory, identity, and the human experience of displacement. His poems serve as a testament to the enduring power of literature to bridge the gap between personal narratives and shared emotions, inviting readers to embark on their own poetic odyssey through the intricate terrain of exile and self-discovery.

Keywords: Kashmir, Exile, Home, Poetry, rootlessness, Ghazal, displacement, self-discovery.

Aga Shahid Ali was a Kashmiri poet born in New Delhi, India on 4th February, 1949. He got his education from the different institution of Kashmir after that he moved to Delhi for his further education but the thirst of knowledge remained unquenched then he shifted to the educationally green lands of America where he spent the rest of his life while teaching and researching. He died in Amherst, Massachusetts in December 8, 2001.

We can't shove the fact that a man is bound to shake his self on the tunes of his past. We cannot rove without our past whether it is in beautiful attire or threatening, we have to face it. The writer of any Diaspora cannot yank his past experiences, memories or anything else from his writings. From A.K Ramanujan to Kiran Desia, all are sharing the same thing, that they can't survive without their past. The expatriate writers also write about their present ruptured identity, scathing and nebulous dislocation etc, Salman Rushdie very aptly says, "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)

Agha Shahid Ali wrote poetry in both free verse and traditional forms, experimenting with verse forms such as the sestina and canzone. He is credited with introducing and popularizing the Ghazal form in American poetry. Ali's poetry is autobiographical with allusions to exile and his identity as a Kashmiri. His work melds the landscapes of Kashmir and America, along with the conflicted emotions of exile, immigration and in his later works, loss, illness and mortality. His voice is lyrical, reflective and at the same time elegant, enhanced by the repetition of words, half rhymes and culturally specific imagery. As one navigates the complex terrain of his poems, they get a sense of Ali's intricacy in language and thought, his ability to take emotions and frame them into focus, giving his poems an embroidered ornateness.

Aga Shahid Ali's oeuvre is the complete picture of dominant themes of the Diaspora. To quote, a famous modern critic, Bruce King would be appropriate here, "Aga Shahid Ali's poetry swirls around insecurity and obsession[with]... memory, death, history, nostalgia for the past he never knew, dreams, Hindu ceremonies, friendship and self-consciousness about being a poet". (78) This is a fact that Aga Shahid Ali's poetry smells of exile but in true sense he was not exiled from his homeland which he confesses in an interview by Eric Gamalinda, he says:... a number of things, I suppose. It can be seen politically, emotionally, culturally. There are definite historical moments of exile; we can think of Ovid and many other people who've been exiled, right down to this century. Writers particularly interest me in that context. Of course, I'm not

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an exile technically, because I haven't been kicked out of any place, but temperamentally I would say I'm an exile, because it has an emotional resonance, the term exile does. The ability to inhabit several circumstances and several historical and national backgrounds simultaneously makes up the exilic temperament a lot, especially of this past century and this continuing new century. (Eric Gamalinda)

This is evident from the very first volume of Agha Shahid Ali's poetry where he states: "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 This is home. And this is the closest/ I'll ever be to home". (29). The mentioned lines are from the poem titled "Postcard from Kashmir". The title of the poem clearly shows that letter is addressed to an exiled man. The body of the letter lets the cat out of the bag in its very first line, "Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox"(The Veiled Suite 29). The speaker is denationalized and finds himself without an identity. He undergoes what Talgedin calls an attempt to link an old home that is no longer home to a new home that never feels quite like home speaking of another of Ali's poems in *Reversing the Sentence of Impossible Nostalgia*. The narrator, an exile Kashmiri, experiences three torments; the regret of ever having left his home, the rejection of feeling like an outsider, and the struggle of coming to terms with the changes that would have inevitably occurred in his absence. This inward battle is shown as he looks at a postcard photograph of Kashmir. The narrator is harshly awakened to the reality of his displacement from home as he sees that all that is left of his Kashmiri heritage is a four by six inch photograph, which is now only a depiction of what used to be. In a related context, Ian Buruma, in an article entitled, "Real Wounds, Unreal Wounds: The Romance of Exile", argues:

Exile as a metaphor did not begin with the Jewish Diaspora. The first story of exile in our tradition is the story of Adam and Eve. No matter how we interpret the story of their expulsion from the Garden of Eden — original sin or not — we may be certain of one thing: There is no way back to paradise. After that fatal bite of the apple, the return to pure innocence was cut off forever. The exile of Adam and Eve is the mark of maturity, the consequence of growing up. An adult can only recall the state of childlike innocence in his imagination; and from this kind of exile a great deal of literature has emerged. (Buruma) Exile is a powerful theme in *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, which opens with an epigraph from Virginia Woolf's line about exile, which reveals the fact that Ali was a man who lived boldly in the American land, but his mind and imagination where left in Kashmir, his motherland. This collection also includes the widely anthologized poems, "Postcard from Kashmir", "Snowmen" and "The Dacca Gauzes". In "Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz", Ali writes, ". . . Your lines were measured/ so carefully to become in our veins// the blood of prisoners. In the free verse/ of another language I imprisoned// each line—but I touched my own exile"(Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz). In "A Darkly Defense of Dead White Males", Ali states, multiple exile, "I celebrate myself. Emigre and expatriate describe me better...But as an exile in my own country I use the word for its poetic resonance, for its metaphoric power—I must use the site for the privilege of self-reflection" (148). Strictly speaking, Ali is not an exile because he moved voluntarily. However, as a postcolonial subject, a native of a disputed and unstable territory (Kashmir), and an immigrant, he has experienced enough loss and displacement to be able to lament after and have a desire for home. In his poem titled "Ghazal" through which the reader easily senses the speaker's agony and pain while he is repeating the word —exile| many times: "In Jerusalem a dead phone's dialed by exiles/You learn your strange fate: you were exiled by exiles. One opens the heart to list unborn galaxies/Don't shut that folder when Earth is filled by exiles". (*The Veiled Suite: The Collected poems*. 297) The repetition of the word 'exile' suggests the agony of the speaker in a way that puts him into a mood of loss and disintegration. The speaker then says: By the Hudson lies Kashmir, brought Palestine- It shawls the piano, Bach beguiled by exiles/ Tell me who's tonight the physician of sick pearls? /Only you as you sit, Desert Child, by exile/ (297)

His poetry collection, *The Country without a Post Office* (1997), was widely praised as a poignant and nostalgic evocation of his lost homeland. With the prevalence of war and homelessness in the post-cold war era, and the increasing displacement of people in our time, Agha Shahid Ali's voice represents that of all exiles. A haunting volume, it established his reputation as a poet. In focusing on the tragedy of his homeland, he was able to create a persona that has great resonance in our time. Shanta Acharya in his essay "American Poetry Today: The contribution of poets from the Indian sub-continent", gives the reference of Carol Muske-Duke that he says about the poetry of Shahid "What is timeless in these poems is the power of grief – sheer cliffs and drops of despair that he masters and spins into verse with astonishing technical virtuosity". (web). In one of his poems, "Lenox Hill", he feels nostalgic about his mother:As you sit here by me, you're just like my mother,| she tells me. I imagine her: a bride in Kashmir, she's watching, at the Regal, her first film, with Father. If only I could gather you in my arms, Mother, I'd save you – now my daughter – from God. The universe opens its ledger. I write: How helpless was God's mother! (*The Veiled Suite: The Collected poems* 248)

The poem ends with these lines: For compared to my grief for you, what are those of Kashmir, and what (I close the ledger) are the grief's of the universe/ when I remember you – beyond all accounting – O my mother? (*The Veiled Suite: The Collected poems* 249)

In the poem, "Summers of Translation" he strikingly weaves words and images that draw upon Faiz Ahmed Faiz, bhajans (Hindu devotional singing) harking back to Krishna and Radha, Begum Akhtar, Muharram, Zainab, Karbala, black and white Hindi films and their haunting songs, and of course his Mother! Through his poetry he achieves a felicitous co-existence of disparate traditions that has torn people, cities, and countries apart. To that extent his poems are political, taking a stand on how things could be – if human beings were not blinded by their own limited beliefs. And, that was no dream; whole generations of post-independent Indians were brought up in such a visionary milieu. Thus, he was not being overtly political when the cultural backdrop of his upbringing is taken into account. It can be said that he is the celebrator of his willed exile because he has not left any Diaspora theme unshaken. He is the celebrator of nostalgia, rootlessness, hyphenated identity, cultural dislocation and other Diaspora gems. Writing about an interview she had with Ali in his

home in Massachusetts in the late 1990's, Christine Benvenuto comments, "although much of Ali's writing concerns displacement, longing and loss, in conversation he was a self-described happy man who expressed impatience with the notion of exile in the lilting Anglo-Indian accent he said Americans love" (The Massachusetts Review.). He said: You constantly meet people who are immigrants and who say, oh, I feel like I've lost my culture and I've lost my roots, and I say, please don't feel so fussy about it. The airplanes work. I mean, if you have a certain kind of income, whether you live in Bombay and fly to Kashmir, or you live in New York and fly to Kashmir, for a certain group it really makes no difference (The Massachusetts Review.).

Aga Shahid Ali we can say like other diasporic writers does feel the grave identity crisis, rootlessness, cultural dislocation and other sickness of the exile. His poetry is the nest of nostalgia and the other sickness of the exile. The collection of poems *The Country without a Post Office* is charged with emotions of loss, and pain that articulate the poet's exilic detachment from the imbroglio that has engulfed Kashmir. In relation to such a position Jasbir Jain has termed Agha Shahid Ali as a man of hyphenated identity, "being at once a Kashmiri-American-Kashmiri who is concerned more with the Kashmiri he has become after his migration to America". (Jain82). In Agha Shahid Ali's poems the desire to recover the historical-cultural identity is not due to any racial or cultural alienation faced by the poet in America but rather by an exilic detachment forced upon him by the tumultuous condition of his homeland. Agha Shahid Ali has journeyed from Kashmir to America yet when he sees the rain in Amherst he is reminded of the rain in Kashmir. Within the safe confines of America through dreams and visions the broken images of his imaginary homeland haunt him. However, one might observe that Agha Shahid Ali was not exactly banished from Kashmir and he can physically return back at his will. To such an observation the poet would reply saying that though he is not technically exiled yet he is "temperamentally exiled" (Poets and writers Magazine) from Kashmir. Agha Shahid Ali's self-identification as a temperamentally exiled being mildly offends Bruce King's classifying the poet as a representative of the new internationalism. The term is further illustrated by Vijay Mishra who explains it as a 'new diaspora of late capitalism' that can access their homeland anytime due to the availability of advanced technology unlike the 'old diaspora of classic capitalism' to whom the home was purely an imaginary construct (Mishra 26). It must be noted here that though Agha Shahid Ali's poems arrived at a time when the whole world was celebrating the opportunities of e-mails yet he was a poet who could not even post a letter to his home in Kashmir. For the post offices in Kashmir were shut down due to the rise in insurgency making Kashmir a reality only within his imagination which remained oblivious to desperate voices of his friends who died leaving letters that never reached him.

In *The Country without a Post Office* Agha Shahid Ali introduces three Ghazals. The concluding lines of one such Ghazal explain the psychology that informs his works, "they ask me to tell them what Shahid means/ Listen: It means The Beloved' in Persian, witness' in Arabic. (*The Country Without a Post Office* 64). The lines also depict how the poet has been left as a distant witness to the turmoil raging in his homeland; but distance has not reduced him to a silent spectator. As another Ghazal explains Agha Shahid Ali retrieves a whole new world view from the fragmented world he has left behind: And I Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee/ God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight/. (26). A Research scholar, Mir Liyakat Nazir, in his article, "Kashmir: I write on that void" very rightly says: Brought up in the trilingual and tri-cultural environment, Agha Shahid Ali remains Kashmiri to the core of his heart and dedicated his poetic voice in singing the sordid tales of his homeland in the foreign shores. His poetry is like a canvas on which he draws an imaginary of Kashmir albeit bruised, besieged but its mesmerizing landscape and unique culture remains an eternal alter ego for him. The most noticeable point about Ali's poetry is his hyphenated identity as Ali used to call himself Kashmiri-American- Kashmiri Poet. In his magnum opus work *The Country Without A Post office* Ali opens up in the prologue with these lines: Let me cry out in that void.../I write on that void: Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir, Cashmir.....? / (36). Amitav Gosh in "The Ghat of the Only World: Agha Shahid Ali in Brooklyn" remarks, "for Ali Kashmir became a vortex of images circling around a single point of stillness: the idea of death. In this figuring of his homeland, he himself became one of the images that were spinning around the dark point of stillness—both Shahid and Shaheed, witness and martyr—his destiny inextricably linked with Kashmir's, each prefigured by the other". (The Ghat of the Only World). Agha Shahid Ali achieved the heights of name and fame in a very short period of time. His poems compel a reader to put him into the category of two great political or war poets, Walcott of the Caribbean and the Mahmoud Darwish of the Palestine, whose poetry is brimming with political pains and tones. Every letter of his poetry smells of Kashmir. He wrote about the political conflict of Kashmir, exodus of pandits, beauty of Kashmir, culture and what not but unfortunately, he has been ignored by his homeland and this statement has been also shouldered by a well-read professor and a scholar on Agha Shahid, Nishat Zaidi, "Ali was not just another Indian diaspora poet writing in English. He was a poet who introduced an entirely new idiom in Indian poetry in English, something that the critics of Indian Poetry in English have not yet fully appreciated" (Another Chronicle of Loss and Love).

In conclusion, Agha Shahid Ali's poetic journey serves as a poignant testament to the enduring power of literature in capturing the complexities of exile, identity, and the quest for a sense of belonging. Through his evocative verses, Ali weaves a rich tapestry of emotions, memories, and cultural imagery that resonates deeply with readers across boundaries. His poetry becomes a bridge connecting his Kashmiri heritage with the landscapes of America, creating a shared space where diverse experiences of displacement and yearning find common ground. Ali's unique approach to language and poetic forms, particularly his revival of the Ghazal in American poetry, adds to the beauty and resonance of his work. His masterful use of repetition, rhythm, and imagery creates an immersive experience, allowing readers to traverse the emotional landscapes of exile and nostalgia alongside him. His poems are a testament to the universality of the human experience. While his verses are steeped in his personal journey, they transcend the specific circumstances of his life,

inviting readers from various backgrounds to reflect on their own sense of home, belonging, and displacement. His poetry becomes a mirror that reflects the complexities of the human heart, making it possible for readers to connect with emotions that are both deeply personal and universally shared. In a world marked by mobility, migration, and shifting identities, Agha Shahid Ali poetic legacy endures as a powerful exploration of the intricate threads that bind individuals to their past, present, and future. Through his words, he invites us to embark on a poetic odyssey of our own, a journey that navigates the terrain of exile, memory, and the continuous search for a place that we can call home.

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