

Depiction of Exile and memory in Agha Shahid Ali's poetry

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ABSTRACT

Agha Shahid Ali was a Kashmiri-American poet, he grew up in Kashmir, the son of a distinguished and highly educated family in Srinagar. Though a Kashmiri Muslim Ali is best known in the U.S and identified himself as an American poet writing in English. This paper deals with the theme of exile in Agha Shahid Ali's poetry. He depicted how he exiled from Kashmir and settled in America, after settled in America what Ali was feeling about his mother land called

'Kashmir'. The pain of exile is still visible in his poetry and how he was recalling his home town through his poetry. Ali's poetry is filled with loss and longing. In the course of his poems, he loses his faith, home, lovers, country and even his memories.

Keywords: Pain of Exile, Love, Memory, Emotions, Sentiments, sadness.

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Exile is a catastrophic curve of life when we are forced to leave the home and everything associated with homeland. You are not willful to leave your homeland but sometimes the faces of life excruciate much and machinate you to leave. And you can't even resist, because your life is strangulating in the collar of compulsions. After being exiled, you feel annoyed and unwanted everywhere, your memories get impregnated with that painful and tormenting event of exile, which never ever allows you to live calmly, everything seems charmless even the this game of inhale-exhale seems beyond fruit and you reach there where your heart yells:

Maut Ka Zehar Hai Fizaon Main,

Ab Kahaan Jaakay Saans Li jaaye

“Whole atmosphere has turned cannibally poisonous,

Tougher to find a nook to inhale anymore”.

Ali thus follows a particularly complex (and physically impossible) trajectory in his journey toward the English ghazal, approaching its hybrid, in-between territory simultaneously from “West” and “East.” The opening salvo of *Ravishing DisUnities* might best be read as an argument for an irreducibly mixed cultural and aesthetic practice. The idea of “return” still matters, since “return” is what refrains do and since the composition of ghazals involves so many other kinds of return for Ali. The desire to return still matters, even if it is not wholly fulfilled, even if the speaker knows from that start that it cannot be fulfilled. Ali's poetry is regularly marked by an intense desire to return, and in interviews. Ali admits that he “ache[s] for Kashmir”

(Benvenuto266) and seeks in his poetry to recapture “the ecstatic mode in the traditions he grew up with” (Benvenuto 265). The doubleness of his poetry stems from a conflict between two equally real and equally powerful and independent forces.

The pain of exile is consistently visible in the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali, while going through his English ghazals the readers can just grab the diagnosis to analyse the level of his intense itching. His one of the Ghazal poems is *By Exiles* whose all the couplets contains the immense pain of loss and there is voluminous realization of pain regarding homeland. There are visualizations of Kashmir Valley, which is the homeland of Ali, whose memories are hammering his existence alongside haunting him while being far from the valley as Shahid yells:

Crucified Mansoor was alone with the Alone:

God’s loneliness---just His----compiled by exiles.

By the Hudson lies Kashmir, brought from Palestine---

It shawls the piano, Bach beguiled by exiles.

(*Ishmael*, 28-29)

Like all the ghazals *I Call Me Ishmael Tonight* this poem bears a dedication—in the case, “For Edward Said,” and, as David Caplan notes, it owes a significant verbal and thematic debt to the following passage from Said’s essay:

The Mind of winter: Reflections on Life in Exile”: “The most poignant of exile’s fates is to be exiled by exiles.

(*Caplan*,55)

Clearly, the only thing that returns in Ali’s ghazal is the fact of exile, loss and displacement. To define oneself as an ‘exile’ is to situate oneself in relation to a home where one is *not* and a *not-home*, where one is ---one’s location becomes the place of a double absence a compound *not-here-not there*. Let us read a couplet of Ali, where he defines the state of being not-here, not-there:

Will you, beloved stranger, witness *Shahid*----

Two destinies at last reconciled by exiles?

(*Ishmael 28-29*)

In this regard, the operation of refrain 'by exiles' from one stanza to another might tend to heighten the sense of loss and displacement, not simply because the repetition can create a sort of cumulative intensification, because the refrain itself seems to be continually displaced or 'exiled' from one stanza to another; it has so many homes that it is never quite 'at home'. The refrains also take another charge, they might seem to return like a traumatic memory of irrecoverable loss; they might exert a melancholic pull towards the past that disrupts the movement into the new territories.

There are immense highlights of pain and torture in the heart of poet; he beautifully described his pathetic state while being far from his homeland. He is wandering in the world of memories, his heart is imperialized by nostalgia and he is in deep urgency of return back to his home where from he had been exiled but he is unable to fulfill his dream. There are tremendous paradoxes in his mind, his heart is ailing which can only be healed by the therapeutic return to his homeland but his life deeply unfortunate, his sooth and satisfaction is also exiled from his nostalgic heart, he says:

They ask me to tell them what *Shahid* means: Listen, listen:

It means "The Beloved I Persian, "Witness" in Arabic.

(*Ishmael 24-25*)

The couplet exhibits diasporic feeling of Agha Shahid Ali. Being away from Kashmir, he has escaped violence and realized the plight of religions in Kashmir and like Ishmael, who after being marooned in Arabia, became the founder of islam. The doubleness is further complicated by the fact that Ali gives his name's 'meaning'----a word he must mean ironically----only by translating it into English. Here the questions of cultural translation come into play, "Beloved" has a very particular significance within the ghazal tradition. Infact, Ali takes a certain liberty with that tradition in identifying *himself* as the *Beloved*: it is never the beloved, but only the lover who speaks in a ghazal. How much this cultural context is captured by *Shahid's* English *meaning*?

The poet is in deep sighs while reminding his beloved *Kashmir* valley, he is thinking and caring for it in many ways although he is far from it. He is crying for it upon its predicament, when it was in chaos and confusion, a time when the valley was clenched in the political wrath. When the bloodshed was fusing the valley with the horror of destruction his plea and sadistic voices towards his valley *Kashmir* which calls his beloved he cries about her:

Her heart must be ash where her body lies burned.

What hope lets your hands rake the cold in real time?

(Ishmael 32-33)

Agha Shahid Ali was very much eager often to return back to home because his existence was fully liked with his homeland. Almost his maximum poetry when read, contains the grief and sorrow due the poet's separation from his home. His poetry is the witness of his sufferings, cries, and his immense mourning upon the painful separation of his homeland. His maximum lost rusted in waiting's for to return his home but his waiting's never met their fruits.

Ali was also called as the *Poet-stranger*, behind this the reason may be that he was feeling better after settled in America with good social stature and literary as well. There was not any satisfaction in his heart. He is not happy there, that is why his pen is so stubborn to write about his homeland, his memories about his home, and his pain of being isolated from Kashmir. Perhaps, he might have been feeling himself as a stranger even with himself because he was homeless, hence he was called as *poet-stranger*. It was somehow very true, when one is far from his home since years, his pain and quest to go back catches the geometrical pace. More the desire of *go back to home* increase, more you feel yourself as stranger in other lands.

Ali wrote much his poetry in self-exile, and not while living in the subaltern zone. What has tried is to rewrite the sense of self-Kashmir. Without being obnoxious and strange, his poetry clothes the Kashmiri-self afresh in English language. He seems to having a perfect sense of a historian. The way he is able to describe Srinagar of 1990's clearly reflects the feel of subaltern denizens of the valley:

Srinagar was under curfew/ the identity pass may not have helped in the crackdown. Son after son—never to return from the night of torture---was taken away.

The tone and tenor of his poetry is engrossed with a sense of debunking the claims of civility of the major stakeholders of the region. The denigrated Kashmiri identity Maligned in the biased narratives figures substantially broad and clear in Ali. But in no way it can be the equivalent of the subaltern voice.

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

God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael Tonight.

(Ali, Country 40)

Ali seems to be not happy with the narratives that are loaded and controlled by the discursive pressures. Ali's homeland is befogged by bogus ideologies that prevent the subaltern denizens from speaking their true selves. Ali tries to put forth the subaltern voice in the landscape of his poetry, and this novelty emerges the chaos of Kashmir:

Srinagar hunches like a wild cat: lonely sentries, wretched in bunkers at city's bridges far from their homes in the plains, licensed to kill.

Ali laments over the social chaos of Kashmir valley particularly upon the catastrophic episodes of 1990's, he weeps for the bloodshed and the massacre of innocents. In *Rooms Are Never Finished* Ali presents Kashmir as: Karbala, the sacred site of battle and the martyrdom in Islamic tradition, in order to underscore the loss of uncountable innocent lives in the quest for nationalist self-determination.

Kashmir remains an imaginary homeland for Ali. He wrote hi barricaded home, the loss, the ghastly violence, and the brutal killings in his homeland. There are personal strains and touches to his poems where he allude to the marginalized voice, which suffers silently, and trembles his way back to the fire that seethes in his heart. His subtle but strong voice is that of resistance of expression which alludes to the metaphor of his homeland's continual conflicting strife that has bloodied its soil:

I hid my pain even from myself;

I revealed my pain only to myself.

(Ali, Farewell)

Ali explored in his poetry how readily expatriation could come to feel like exile. But in his collected poems, *The Veiled Suite* made clear what he worked hard to do. It is an exile that nourishes passion for the homeland. The poet tells the story of his tormented land in a way that only a poet can through a breath taking use of language. Kashmir becomes the imaginary homeland recreated by the poet in exile. The attachment to Kashmir-the homeland is poignantly summed up in the poem, '*Postcard from Kashmir*'. The country of mind, cherished in exile is ironically reduced to news from home. In *Postcard from Kashmir* Agha Shahid Ali suggests that memory and artifice transform the very past he pursues; He explores his destitute of being unable to embrace his homeland again. The wound of exile in the poet's heart has made him so restless and has been arising the tempests of trauma and grief. The pain of exile from the valley has made his whole life very traumatic and ill, he reveals his state of loss and unbelonging by saying that:

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.

(postcard)

Agha Shahid Ali's poetic forms and subjects both reflect his exile and contribute to it. Ali's poetry is filled with loss and longing. In the course of his poems, he loses his faith, home, lovers, country and even his memories. Ali's loss of home his home land due to catastrophic exile pressures him to choseghazal through which he can transmit his pain and nostalgia in the hearts of his readers. Infact, ghazal was the concrete option for to do so. Because the name of the ghazal stems from the cry of *gazelle*he concerned. The origin pervades the subject of the ghazal, with sadness, grief, fear, and love for the vanishing world being the main subjects of the ghazal.

Aga Shahid Ali's feeling of exile intensified as he left his home and internal strife destroyed his home land. All of Ali's feelings of exile stem from his decision to leave his home. He left to pursue other cultures, without ever solidifying his own. When he reached the United States, his identity crumbled, and he spent the rest of his life trying to pick up the pieces. Internal conflict is the expected norm of anyone living in Kashmir; its history is one of conflicting ideologies and cultures.

Ali's love to his homeland was to such a height, where everything was looking futile except his homeland. He was all time the sharp lover of his homeland Kashmir. He was often praising the mesmerizing beauty of Kashmir Valley. In one of his poem, *The Last Safran*, Ali regards Kashmir as singularly worthy of being called a paradise. The poet quotes the famous of king Jahangir, paying tribute to the beauty of Kashmir;

If there is paradise on the earth

It is this, it is this, it is this

(Ali 15)

In the poem these words imply the permanent estrangement of the poet from Kashmir not only due to political tumult or destruction but also due to his impending death. In the poem *Farewell* the poet imagines himself as an exquisite ghost who is being rowed through paradise on the river of hell.

Conclusion:

Agha Shahid Ali was truly a poet who even in America invoked the welfare and bliss for his homeland, although he was exiled from there. His memories are enough for him by which he has composed the voluminous verses about. His homeland is an immortal bride of beauty which is constantly smiling with progress, in the world of his memories. His pen has not only the literary attachment with his homeland, Kashmir valley but the emotional and sentimental bonding which gets the release in the form of his poems.

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