

The Theme of Nostalgia and a Quest for Identity in the poems of Agha Shahid Ali

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Abstract:

Indian diasporic literature has raised different issues and aspects of immigrants' lives. Many Indian diasporic writers writing in English and other languages too have depicted certain community, region and culture related conflicts in the new lands of relocation revealing the array of Indian culture in their literary works. Their major concern has always been dislocation, identity crisis, nostalgia for home, marginalization, racial hatred, cultural and gender hatred, conflicts, generation differences, emergence of new patterns of life with cross-cultural interaction and disintegration of family units of Indian diaspora leading to anguish, traumas and dilemmas suffered by the members of such families, mostly by the children of these unhappy and broken homes. The migrants are in constant emotional and mental conflict between the memory of homeland and the freedom and attractiveness of the new land. There are numerous diasporic writers who have expressed the same feelings and experiences through their literary works. Agha Shahid, a Kashmiri American Muslim is one of them who is best known as a poet in the United States and identified himself as an American poet writing in English. This paper aims to present how Agha Shahid Ali depicted the sense of loss, the memory of 'home' and the pain of being alienated to a new land and culture through his poetry.

Keywords: Agha Shahid Ali, Diaspora, Nostalgia, Quest, Identity, Home, Exile

Introduction

The word 'Diaspora' comes from the Greek word *diapero* which means 'to disperse' or 'to scatter about.' It refers to the displacement of people from their 'original' homeland to the places across the globe. The term 'diaspora', originally used for the Jewish exilic from their homeland, is now applied as a "metaphoric designation" for expatriates, refugees, exiles and immigrants. The Indian diaspora, one of the most "vibrant and dynamic," is the largest in the world, with 18 million people from the country living outside their homeland in 2020, the UN has said. Diasporic or expatriate writing deals with native culture, language and identities. In literature diasporic writers are those who always struggle to capture, synchronize and affirm the trauma resulted

from the forced migration. They attempt to find out the relation and contrast between their homeland and the territory which they dispersed into. The sense of loss, the memory of 'home' and the pain of being alienated to a new land and culture haunt them. Thus they attempt to assimilate with the new culture of a new land. In simple words diaspora literature is the works that are written by authors who live outside their native land. 'Diaspora' means living away from one's own country or migration from one country to another which is completely applicable to Agha Shahid Ali.

Agha Shahid Ali as a Diasporic Writer:

Agha Shahid Ali was born in Kashmir to a prosperous and highly educated Muslim family in 1949. He completed his graduation from the University of Kashmir, an M. A in English from the University of Delhi and went to the United States of America to pursue his doctorate in English. He obtained his doctoral degree from Pennsylvania State University in 1984 and an MFA from the University of Arizona in 1985. Ali had an active academic career. He is the recipient of numerous honors and awards, including Guggenheim and Ingram-Merrill fellowships. In 1987 he began teaching at Hamilton College in New York, and later moved to the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, where he served as the director of the MFA creative writing program. He also taught at the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College and was a visiting professor at Princeton University and in the Graduate Creative Writing Program at New York University. He held teaching positions at nine universities and colleges in India and the United States

Ali was born in a culturally and linguistically dynamic family wherein he was exposed to Urdu, Persian and English poetry and literature and therefore learned to appreciate the same. The impact of these languages was so inevitable and massive that he called Urdu his mother tongue and English his first language. Agha was the son of two educators who travelled within India and abroad. Ali was the beneficiary of a diverse cultural heritage that included Muslim, Hindu and Western traditions. His parents Agha Ashraf Ali and Sufia Nomani had partially

migrated to Delhi from Kashmir and later to USA and remained there until his death in 2001 from brain cancer. He spent only his childhood in Kashmir as after completing his graduation he had to leave Kashmir for higher studies. When he moved to the USA, his brother Agha Iqbal was already there and their sister joined them later. But their parents continued to live in Kashmir. He came across different cultures directly or indirectly such as Hindu cultures from his birth land India, Islamic culture from his religion Islam and Christian culture from his diasporic land USA. Agha Shahid Ali's life and work were similarly affected by his state of being in "exile" as it is always an undesired state for every human being even though he was self-exiled; he had diasporic consciousness about his motherland. He considered himself a "triple exile" from Kashmir, India and United States. During his stay in America, he was constantly haunted by the memories of his motherland so he visited his motherland Kashmir frequently in order to be with his parents, friends and relatives. This very feeling of loss, memory of 'home' and the pain of being alienated to a new land and culture is beautifully expressed through his poetry.

Avtar Brah writes that the term diaspora embodies a notion of centre, a locus, a home from which the diaspora occurs. In fact, at the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of journey which essentially is about settling down, about putting roots elsewhere. (Brah, 2006) Agha Shahid Ali chose to be in exile in order to peruse his career. He wrote his first poem at the age of 12 and was very excited about his poetry. Even when he was in India, he used to send his poems to various international journals without being ashamed of rejections. Most of his poems are marked by the sense of sorrow and that of loss. Nobody likes to live away from their homeland and from their loved ones. Thus being a member of the diasporic group of people the suffering and pain of 'unhomeliness' obsessed him and impelled him to create 'imaginary homeland' in his imaginations and express his thoughts and feelings in the form of his poetry.

People go to various places for different reasons, but eventually they return to their own homes where they find happiness and comfort. In his collection of poetry, *The Veiled Suit*, the poet depicts his passion for his homeland and tells the story of the devastated land in a unique way. Kashmir becomes the imaginary homeland recreated by the poet in exile. Ali's poetry is often distinguished by anguish and the sense of loss. But this anguish and unfulfilled desire to return to his homeland is recompensed to some extent through the medium of poetry which creates a relation between his homeland

and 'trans-national world' i.e. local and the global. His feeling is so intense when he sees Sarajevo, Srinagar and Alexandria on the same plain:

Say farewell, say farewell to the city
 O Sarajevo! O Srinagar!
 The Alexandria that is for ever leaving
 (The Veiled Suite. 230)

Nostalgia is a significant aspect of diaspora. Like all the other diasporic writers, the poet wants to go back to his homeland but his return is quite impossible due to several reasons. As a result the poet accepts the foreign land of his present stay as his new home that fills the mind with the feeling of loss and deprivation. The poem *Postcard from Kashmir* reflects intense feelings and sentiments of the poet who is far from home. The poem is also about the gradual fading of home memories over the time. Agha Shahid remembers his past experiences in Kashmir and expresses a sense of loss, isolation, longing and recollection in this poem. The postcard that comes from 'home' transfers the poet's imagination to that far distant territory that he has abandoned, but is trying his best to keep his charm and aroma by his imagination. It is the nostalgia for which an exile has to contend and the emotion is so difficult to understand that he feels utterly out of balance. He is physically elsewhere, yet intellectually and emotionally he is always at his heart's 'house.' The attachment to Kashmir-his homeland is summed up in the poem, *Postcard from Kashmir*. The poet says,

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox
 My home a neat four by sin inches
 The pangs of separation from home are rendered thus
 This is home.
 And this is the closest
 I'll ever be to home.... (Postcard from Kashmir 1)

In *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, the poet expresses his frustration that the home, he describes throughout the poem, can never be seen again. The imagery he uses in his poetry indicates his loss; time and remembrance make his home insubstantial. Ali uses a significant picture to reflect his dissatisfaction that the distance between past and present is unbridgeable.

The 'physical spacing' or alienation is often necessary to produce a sense of homelessness and nostalgia. Such poets develop an intense feeling of association towards their homeland. Ali often wrote about the sense of longing for his homeland as well as his lasting feeling of isolation after he moved to the States. These feelings can be seen in his poem *Stationery*, a short piece about an ownerless

landscape and his vague wish that it would say something back to him.

The world is full of paper.
Write to me.
I flipped through their visions,
Left my number in their sleep,
But no one called back. (Stationery, 1)

Loneliness and anxiety is the price of exile which is expressed through several poignant poems. A Call records the speaker's isolation and emptiness as well as his childlike fear that he will be supplanted in the affections of his parents by the cold moon of Kashmir.

Ali's latest book *A Nostalgist's Map of America* manifests the evidences of the poet's diasporic consciousness. It depicts how language fails to take the measure of suffering and is powerless, even false, before the death of a friend dying of AIDS. The book weaves into integrated stories from diverse historical, political and cultural contexts.

Conclusion:

In short, it is clear from the above discussion that Ali felt diasporic consciousness throughout his life about his homeland Kashmir which he expressed in his actual life as well as through his literary work. His "triple exile" from Kashmir, India and United States exposed him to the different cultures. This multiculturalism and multilingualism has shaped his life and instill in him National consciousness. Thus his poems recorded the feeling of loss, the memory of 'home' and the pain of being alienated to a new land and culture through his poetry.

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