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Homelessness and Despair: A Diasporic Reading of Agha Shahid Ali's poetry

Dr Shabeer Ahmad Shah
Assistant Professor
Department of English
The Royal Group of Colleges



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Abstract: Virtuosity of being homeless is an ironical question, which tends to give birth to a much larger question of homelessness and its despair which sometimes acts as a painter of agony and pain on the blood shaded canvas, on the life of diaspora's in all the corners of the world who faced it at its first hand sight and had become the citizens of no place, a traveller of no destiny and an endless desperate caravan, seeking shelter with their feared faces, confused expressions without any impression of resolution. Diaspora is a dispersion of people not only from their homes and homeland, but it is also dispersion from one's life in which diasporas grew up and had lived a life of beautiful once from the world which was their own world. Diaspora writers, irrespective of geographical, social or linguistic backgrounds, often try to anew the past images of homelessness and despair. Agha Shahid Ali, a Kashmiri-American poet has shown the lack of order and prevalence of chaos in his writings. He tranquilized his poetry with nostalgia of past, agony, pain and obsession with memory, death, history, family, ancestors and his diasporic longing for his motherland and then his shift from diasporic longings to pain about his native sufferers which Shahid adhered in painting out his annoyance about it in his deep confluence of his poetry. This paper aims to analyse the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali, and would be an attempt to discover how Agha Shahid Ali gives a voice to his exilic feeling of anxiety to his homelessness.

Keywords: Diaspora, Homelessness, Past Images, Memory, Linguistic.

Introduction

The word diaspora had its origin from Greek language, particularly meant for Jews community. The scattered Jews community falls under the domain of diaspora studies, which is also known to us as migration studies. Diaspora, in simple words, can be defined as dispersal or migration of a people. The word migration has its various connotations and the phenomenon of migration is not a new to us but, it is prevalent in the system ever since the human civilization began to exist on earth. Migration has its various causes like self-imposed migration, religious persecution, govt. imposed migration, migration for better opportunities in developed countries etc. Migration study is one of the crucial factors in social science research. The migration study has left no corner of research and became a vital discipline in literature also. Good number of writers migrated in various countries for various reasons are crucial aspects for better scrutiny in the field of research. It would be worthy to mention that nostalgia is an inevitable theme in their works. Writers like Salman Rushdie, Arvind Adiga,

Baharti Mukherji, Jhumpa Lihari are not among exceptions. Either this way or that way Indianess is found in their works. This Indianness and the identity crisis of Indians residing in advanced countries have often rendered them a recognisable 'Other'. Such dispersal results in feelings of desire, separation, nostalgia, and a deep inclination towards the homeland. Diasporic literature faithfully represents the lived experiences of migrant communities, capturing their emotional, cultural, and psychological struggles. Consequently, themes such as alienation, schizophrenia, time lag, estrangement, racism, nostalgia, identity crisis, and migration emerge as central concerns of diasporic writing. Majority of the writers write about their own experiences, the problems that they have to face while settling on the new land. Diasporic writers are frequently preoccupied with nostalgic themes as they seek to relocate themselves in new societies. They write about their missing homeland and at the same time adopt and negotiate with the cultural space of host land. They often idealize the concept of home by personify it as a beloved, celebrate its beauty, resist when pursued and irretrievably lost when searched. In this way, home becomes, unreachable and exists more strongly in the mind and imagination than in the actual world. It becomes the central axis of the diasporic writer's creative mind with no other options or substitutes available. As a result, home is transformed from a geographical location into an imagined and symbolic construct, what Avtar Brah describes as "a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination" (Brah 188).

Aga Shahid Ali, the well-known Kashmiri American Poet was born on Feb, 04 1949 in Delhi. As an ambassador of Kashmir's pain, suffering and beauty which Shahid staged in front of the world through his poetry. Agha Shahid Ali has grown up in Kashmir and had his schooling from Burn Hall to Delhi University and went to America for higher studies and latter stayed there for the rest of his life. Being a pivotal figure in the modern renaissance of English writing Shahid not only discussed the problems of his day about his native land but represented them through a series of pictures painted in the canvas of his poems with a keen sense of feeling indifferently. Shahid was a representative of human pain, who feels the pain of anyone and had felt it deeply for his suffered civilization of Kashmir. His sheer attention and deep rooted affirmation about his native land is therefore widely reflected in his poems.

Discussion

The theme of homelessness and despair is recurrently employed in the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali. Homelessness is viewed both as a frustration and loss in life. For some it is grief-stricken and for others it is a harsh reality of life. This study explores Agha Shahid Ali's perspective on nostalgia about homelessness and despair by evaluating some of his select poems. Agha an ambassador of pain and nostalgia who keeps himself alive in the atmosphere of America while being as a Kashmiri-American poet and citizen and still felt himself as an alien in the country where he has attained his citizenship as a citizen. The factorial analyses of his poems are portraying the portrayal of diasporic vision which he faced at his first hand sight when he shifted from Kashmir to America. The moment when Shahid stepped in on the foreign land, the social ties and social roles

he had enjoyed in his motherland had lost and he was alone to face the hardships which he has portrayed in his beautiful collection of poems. The perception of Diaspora aroused in his poems as a representation of homelessness, and marginalization which shows insignificant treatment of the group of people and cultural despondency shows loss of hope and courage among Kashmir as civilization and feeling of dejection which Agha Shahid Ali neatly reflected in his contemporary ethics of his poetry. In his poetry Agha Shahid Ali blends the landscapes of Kashmir and America along with the emotions of exile, loss, illness and morality. Homelessness and despair is the central theme in many of his poems. In the poem, "Postcard from Kashmir" Agha Shahid Ali says:

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 the closest
I'll ever be to home. (Ali 29)

In this poem, Ali portrays the feeling of nostalgia, exile and loss of identity. He visits his homeland through memories and pictures. This style of writing creates and recreates the space for homeland through words and images. The homeland 'Kashmir' is reached through imagination where Ali discusses its socio-cultural spaces. In the poem, Agha Shahid is at a distance and links Kashmir from United States. There is regret and the struggle to hold balance with geographic and psychological change. The Kashmiri heritage of the speaker awakens him to understand the complexities of displacement. This poem, as Ramazani notes, "suggests that memory and artifice transform the very past he pursues" (602). He further says that "The postcolonial poem, like a postcard, risks miniaturizing, idealizing and ultimately displacing the remembered native landscape" (603). Kashmir now approaches to him, in the mail box as a postcard. He could experience the love and distance for his homeland which is now subjected to war due to political reasons. The present condition of Kashmir is gloomy which is in indirect contrast with the picture of Kashmir on the postcard. The image of Kashmir on the postcard is serene and beautiful as it was once known as 'Paradise on Earth'. The poet longs for that mesmerizing beauty of his homeland which Kashmir does not hold any more. He emphasizes this contrast and says:

When I return,
The colors won't be so brilliant,
The Jhelum's waters so clean,
So ultramarine. My love
So overexposed.

And my memory will be a little
Out of focus, in it
A giant negative, black
And white, still undeveloped. (Ali 29)

Syed Humayoun's observation draws a significant parallel between Agha Shahid Ali's idea of home and Salman Rushdie's metaphor of photograph. He says "Ali's concept of home is similar to that of Salman Rushdie, who talks about a black and white photograph hanging on the wall which was taken before his birth in 1946" (Syed 57). He further says that, "The photograph created a mental image of home in his mind and when he visited the house, the black and white memory in his mind was startled to see the colourful reality" (ibid). Thus, the concept of home for Agha Shahid Ali is marked by displacement, temporal distance, and emotional longing. Home becomes not a physical space but a constructed memory, constantly reshaped by nostalgia and time. This tension between memory and reality underscores the diasporic condition, where identity is suspended between the past and the present, the homeland and the host land.

"The feeling of homelessness" while being homed in America he felt himself as un-homed, as nowhere and as dispersed. The uproot of his own self from his own nation causes a pain and agony which surmises his poems as themes and that theme displays a portrait of diaspora in itself. Not only that which he felt while being in America as a Kashmiri-American but he altogether remained confined with his homeland and with the interpretation of conditions he understood, through the feelings only when he was hearing about his own place. As such the confined example of that feeling is a "*country without post office*" in which he ascribed and described the virtuality of his people which has suffered the desperation of subjugation, whose land has also suffered the subjugation on its path as a free land but they were not free at all. In this way the portrayal of the poem "a country without a post office" has created a vision of the diasporic feeling being within one's own nation but having been deprived from the rights, from the freeness, from that beautiful land which has ultimately turned into a land of gloom and pale. This most phenomenal work, "the country without a post office" was originally published as "*Kashmir without a Post office*" in the Graham house review. Agha Shahid Ali revised it, doubled its length changed its name when he included it in the collection, *The Country without a post Office* in 1997. The title of the poem derives from an incident that occurred in 1990, when Kashmir rebelled against Indian rule, resulting in hundreds of gruesome and violent deaths, fires, and mass rapes. The poem shows how very ordinary and basic facility in Kashmir became defunct during 1990's when post offices were closed for seven months.

In this poem "The Country without a Post Office" Agha Shahid Ali imaginatively reconstructs the exile of Kashmiri Pandits and places it in dialogue with the lived suffering of Muslims who remain in the Valley. By depicting a landscape

where: “each house buried or empty. / Empty because so many fled, ran away, / And became refugees there, in the plains” (Ali 202).),

Ali evokes the trauma of displacement and loss that defines the Pandit exodus. He attempts to envision how the exiled community might remember and imagine their abandoned homes—an act of empathetic imagination made possible by his own first-hand experience of exile. This shared condition of displacement enables Ali to articulate the psychological weight of longing. At the same time, Ali consciously introduces a distinction between “they” and “us” marking the separation between the exiled Pandits and the Muslims who remain behind. Ali juxtaposes two parallel yet interconnected tragedies: the enforced exile of the Pandits and the sustained oppression of the Muslim population within Kashmir. Ultimately, the poem is driven by a profound desire for return—not as a fleeting hope but as a permanent, peaceful, and achievable restoration. Even within its elegiac tone, the poem resonates with an agonized yet persistent longing for homecoming and reconciliation.

Ali’s agony of Kashmir deals with his engagement with Kashmir in diaspora: though being away from home, Ali considered himself to be the melange of multiple cultures which has affected his identity and alienated him from Kashmir. But he liked to be called as Kashmiri-American poet. This is quite well reflected in his poetry while being away from home, he banks on his memories which in exile seems to be only comfort to remunerate the loss. But with the rise of violence in Kashmir Ali’s vision shifts from diasporic longing to the pain of fellow sufferers in Kashmir. This shift in his vision presents both at first marginalisation through his diasporic longing as well as through the discomfort of his native people, on the other hand dejection of courage among Kashmir, which has overtaken its place in Shahid’s poems as elegies on Kashmir.

“The Last Saffron” is one of Agha Shahid Ali’s poems in which song is intricately intertwined with historical suffering. In this poem, Ali recalls the sweetness of memory alongside the brutal realities of contemporary Kashmir, while simultaneously expressing an intense longing to die in his homeland. The poem opens with the striking declaration, “I will die, in autumn, in Kashmir/ and the shadowed of each vein/ will almost be news” (Ali 181), a line that foregrounds both inevitability and desire. Published in 1997, the poem anticipates Ali’s later articulation of this wish in a conversation with Amitav Ghosh, thereby underscoring the sincerity and persistence of his attachment to Kashmir.

Ali’s desire to die in Kashmir reflects his profound emotional and cultural bond with the land. Structurally, the poem is divided into three parts. The first section captures the poet’s yearning to return and the ecstatic anticipation of homecoming. His references to familiar landmarks such as the Zero Taxi Stand and Grindlays Bank affirm his deep-rooted connection to Srinagar, the city of his birth. In Part III, the poet envisions his own death as an event yet to occur in Kashmir: “Yes, I remember it, / the day I will die” (182), thereby aligning his personal fate with the deaths of the young boys mourned earlier in the poem. This juxtaposition reinforces the continuity between individual loss and communal suffering.

The poem concludes with the celebrated couplet attributed to the Mughal emperor Jahangir; “If there is heaven on earth / it is this, it is this, it is this” (183). While the couplet evokes an idyllic, almost paradisiacal vision of Kashmir’s past, it is weighed down by the knowledge of present devastation. Thus, Ali’s invocation of history becomes both an elegy for a lost paradise and a lament for a homeland scarred by violence and exile.

In the collection “*The Half-Inch Himalayas*”, Ali depicts his ancestors and ancestral objects as decaying or in the process of being destroyed. The images of the bangles, Dacca gauzes and his parents’ home create the sense of loss of something that cannot be regained in the poems. Similarly “Cracked Portraits” and “Snowmen” acknowledge and transcend their ancestral legacies. The poet constantly drives the readers deeply into the notion of history and memory of his homeland and his ancestry. His historical past is revealed while exploring the complexity of the difference between the portraits and the reality of his ancestors’ lives. However Ali approaches the tinted reality presented to him through the unassailable issues of identity crisis which allow him to confront the glaring realities of colonialism in India.

The poem “The Half-Inch Himalayas” was the first book of Ali to be published in America. In this book he returns to his past and felt diasporic conscious about his motherland, his personal memories are of Kashmiri recollection places and spaces as imaginary maps for border crossings. In the “*A Nostalgist’s Map of America*” Ali takes us on a trip from corner to corner of America and other counties through imaginary conversations between banish and inhabitant. He focused on themes of homesickness, miserable, worldwide poetics and condition of banish, which relate with the gloomy nostalgia of Kashmir.

Conclusion

Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry profoundly reflects the pain of exile, displacement and emotional fragmentation that characterize the diasporic experience. Through poems such as, “Postcard from Kashmir”, “The Country without a Post Office”, “The Last Saffron”, “Cracked Portraits”, “Snowmen” and “The Half-Inch Himalayas”, Ali presents Kashmir not merely as a geographical space but as a lost homeland preserved through memory, nostalgia and grief. His poetic voice becomes the voice of a displaced individual who remains emotionally attached to his homeland despite physical separation. The recurring images of ruined landscapes, broken homes, silence, fire and blurred memories reveal the psychological trauma caused by violence, migration and political unrest.

Moreover, Ali’s poetry demonstrates how homelessness in diaspora is not only physical loss but also emotional and cultural loss. The speaker in the poems constantly struggles between memory and reality, belonging and alienation, hope and despair. The loss of identity and the impossibility of return intensify the sense of isolation reflected in his verses. By transforming personal pain into collective experience, Ali universalizes the suffering of all displaced communities across the world. His poetry ultimately becomes a testimony of human endurance, preserving the memory of a fractured homeland while mourning the destruction of peace, culture and belonging.



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Thus Agha Shahid Ali has endowed his homeland Kashmir with extravagant beauty paralleled with his mournful experience of exile. Each poem by Ali is extremely personal and also a reflection on the universal exile experience. His poetry is autobiographical with allusions to exile and identity as a Kashmiri. The experiences figure out in his poetry in the form of cultural references because every human society has its own specific culture or socio-cultural system. Agha Shahid Ali explores his world of cultural experiences that find expression through his symbolic and complicated imagery that results in the creation of magnificent pictures coloured with multi-cultural experiences in his poetry.

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