



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

Multicultural Politics and Diasporic Consciousness: A Study of Selected Poems of Agha Shahid Ali

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Abstract

A significant body of Indian Writing in English has been formed by the writers of the Indian diaspora, an obvious consequence of colonialism and globalization. In a diaspora, the writer's consciousness is formed and informed by a sense of exile which is always flanked by memory and history of the homeland. In the proposed paper, I would like to take up some selected poems from the Indian diasporic poet Agha Shahid Ali to show how the poet in exile deeps dive into his terrestrial and temporal framework of mind to re-root himself in the host country (America). Diasporic consciousness is simultaneously defined by rooting in one's homeland, then uprooting from homeland and finally re-rooting in host country and culture. Agha Shahid Ali's self-imposed exile from the troubled territory of Kashmir follows this trajectory. In his poems, Ali presents himself as a man obsessed with nostalgic remembrance of things past and as someone continuously hankering after the lost multicultural glory of homeland.

Keywords

Multicultural Politics; Diasporic Consciousness; and Agha Shahid Ali.

As a term 'diaspora' is used to describe "any population which is considered 'deterritorialised' or 'transnational', that is, which has originated in a land other than which it currently resides, and whose social, economic and political networks cross the borders of nation-states or, indeed, span the globe" (Vertovec, 1999). The concept of diaspora can entail three discernible meanings - 'diaspora' *as social form*, 'diaspora' *as type of consciousness*, and 'diaspora' *as mode of cultural production* (Vertovec, 1999). 'Diaspora' as a type of consciousness indicates a state of mind and a sense of identity grounded both in their society of origin and in the host societies. James Clifford suggests that 'Diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope as a defining tension' (Clifford, 1994). Due to the fear of losing the socio-cultural identity in their newly relocated society they make conscious attempt to assert their ethnic identity and simultaneously attempt to assimilate with the new culture of a new territory. Robin Cohen points out, 'identification with a diaspora serves to bridge the gap between the local and the global.' (Cohen, 1996)

If writing of the diaspora is marked by feelings of exile and loss of home, the better writer through imagination will find ways to transcend uprootedness and turn lamentation into a more encompassing vision. Agha Shahid Ali, the Kashmiri American poet (the poet himself prefers this sobriquet) certainly belongs to this 'better writer's' category. This Indian diasporic poet in a number of his poems has dealt in detail with the themes of rooting, uprooting and re-rooting. The poet, while in exile, deeps dive into his terrestrial and temporal framework of mind to re-root himself in the host country (America).

The concept of diaspora shares a close relationship with the concept of multiculturalism. Ali's writing is characterized by his endorsement of multiculturalism. In Ali's poetry, there is syncretism of various cultures and

traditions, which make his identity, like his poetry, pluralistic and transnational. Ali's upbringing in a cosmopolitan household shaped his consciousness and this has its bearings upon his poetry. Ali was influenced by various cultures (Kashmiri, Indian, Islamic and Western) he was exposed to from his early life. Daniel Hall aptly comments: "Agha Shahid Ali was, by his own count, the beneficiary of three cultures- Muslim, Hindu, and for lack of more precise rubric, Western". (Hall 15)

In Ali's home, people discussed about legends from various fields and cultures- Urdu poetry (poets like Ghalib and Faiz, Mir and Hafiz), Western philosophy (philosophers like Aristotle and Plato), Western Culture (poets like Shakespeare and Keats), Islamic culture (legends like Laila-Majnoon, Heer-Ranjha, Karbala) and also Hindu culture (Hindu God like Lord Krishna and His flute). Ali's interview with Christine Benvenuto testifies this rich cultural ambience:

There were three languages- Urdu, Kashmiri and English spoken at home all the time. When I was a kid, I remember telling my parents that I want to build a Hindu temple in my room, they said sure. And then once I said I want to build a Catholic Chapel with pictures of Jesus, and they said sure. (Benvenuto 262)

In his poems, Ali presents himself as a man obsessed with nostalgic remembrance of things past and as someone continuously hankering after the lost multicultural glory of homeland. The poet juxtaposes various kaleidoscopic 'cracked portraits' of the multicultural past with the present sense of 'loss' that haunts the diasporic writer:

Emigrating to another country [...] one's ethnic affiliation with all its attendant responsibilities re-emerges- a ghost that has followed the emigrant and catches up with him after arrival. (Fludernik xxii)

In "The Dacca Gauzes", a poem from *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, the poet ruminates over the lost glory of Indian Crafts. The great crafts of the Indian

past – ‘muslins’- is destroyed by British colonialism and the loss of them becomes metaphor for the greater tragedy that affects the Indian and Kashmiri cultures:

In history we learned: the hands
of weavers were amputated,
the looms of Bengal silenced,
and the cotton shipped raw
by the British to England. (“The Dacca Gauzes” 42-43)

The diasporic poet here is longing for the lost culture and lost glory of his homeland when he writes:

My grandmother just says
how the muslins of today
seem so coarse... (“The Dacca Gauzes” 43)

Agha Shahid Ali’s identity is formed by “the interweaving of many historical strands, and that multiple personalities are reflected in his writing through references to Hindu, Christian, and Muslim myths and imagery” (Chambers, 2011). He not only longs for the immediate past but also the diastane past comprising the childhood memory of his mother. “The Season of the Plains” evokes Ali’s nostalgic vision which is tinged with such imagery- ‘Krishna’s flute’, ‘old records of the Banaras thermo-singers, Siddheshwari and Rasoolan’, ‘Heer and Ranjha and others of legends, their love forbidden’, gathered from the memory of his mother’s childhood in the plains of Lucknow.

The sense of loss, the memory of ‘home’ and the pain of being alienated to a new land and culture always haunt a diasporic poet. Similarly Agha Shahid Ali’s being is haunted by the sense of loss of home and perhaps also a sense of guilt when he writes:

I close my eyes. It doesn’t leave me,
the cold moon of Kashmir which breaks
Into my house

and steals my parents' love

I open my hands:

empty, empty. This cry is foreign. ("A Call" 76)

Ali's poem "In the Mountains" revolves around the dual selves of the poet. The poet lives in America but the "other" of the poet lives in his homeland (Kashmir/India):

Somewhere
without me
my life begins

He who lives it
counts on a cold rosary

God's ninety-nine names in Arabic ("In the Mountains" 79)

The diasporic poet is nostalgic about the physical land of his country along with its culture (/cultures), religion (/religions). So, here comes the reference of 'Allah' and His ninety-nine names in Arabic in Islam religion.

The poem "Farewell" opens with an apostrophe to Kashmir, his homeland which the poet left to pursue his career and thereafter to live in an exiled land.

At a certain point I lost track of you.

They make a desolation and call it peace.

When you left even the stones were buried:

The defenseless would have no weapons. ("Farewell" 175)

The poet narrates the rich cultural 'history' of Kashmir. "Kashmiri culture, remarkable for co-existence of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian and Buddhist religions, is symbolized by the ancient monuments and sites of worship occurring on the lofty summits of the hillocks and is reflected in the waters of the Dal Lake of Srinagar" (Bhatt 203) and in 'Farewell', "he condemns all forms of repression as they are directed towards annihilating the cohesive forces of this cultural fabric that is known for its antiquity, finesse,

skill, sophistication, and uniqueness” (Bhatt 202). Kashmiri Hindu ‘pundits’ and Muslims once coexist happily. But now only memory of the poet ‘getting in the way of [your] history’ can unite them- “In the lake the arms of temples and mosques are locked/in each other’s reflections” (“Farewell” 176).

In another poem namely “After the August Wedding in Lahore, Pakistan”, Kashmir, the paradise on earth, is remembered by the poet (now living in America) as ‘my rare Cashmere’. The poet uses the metaphor of voyage and translation. Deterritorialization shifts its ground from Kashmir to Lahore and from Asia to Amherst: ‘in each new body I would drown Kashmir’. “By drowning his Kashmir in the pool of many losses, the poet pluralizes loss. All specific losses metamorphose into a language of pure loss, ‘thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel’ (Benjamin 260)”(Abidi 34).

“Lennox Hill”, a poem from the collection *Rooms are never Finished* (2002), is full of snaps from memory of the past which ranges from Kashmir, his childhood, his mother’s memories of Kashmir days, Lord Krishna to James Merrill, his beloved friend. In fact, Ali’s mother, James Merrill and Begum Akhtar- these figures appear frequently in Ali’s poems. While mourning the death of his mother, Ali remembered how his mother once helped him to build a temple for Lord Krishna- “and I, one festival, crowned Krishna by you, Kashmir/ listening to my flute.” His mother and motherland becomes synonymous and his poetry becomes the embodied version of his dead mother: “*My mother is my poem*”.

Ali’s poetry makes journey from one culture to another, and from one home to another. He writes about both his old and new home and tries to retrieve the loss of his culture and home through poetry. *A Nostalgist’s Map of America* (1991) is written in the background of American landscape. The poet mourns for the lost culture of native American tribes in the poem “Leaving Sonora”. The poet’s narratives are forgotten histories- histories of a ‘perished

tribe' namely the Hohokam who 'lived here for 1500 years'. The poet is faithful to both the homeland and its cultural history and also to the cultural history of the adopted land (America). The Sonoran desert of America becomes alive in the poetic imagination of Ali when he writes: The desert insists, always: Be faithful, / even to those who no longer exist ("Leaving Sonora" 116).

A later poem, "I see Chile in my Rearview Mirror", brings parallelism between the condition of Kashmir with that of few other countries as he could 'see Argentina and Paraguay under a curfew of glass' and could feel that 'the night in Uruguay is black salt'. The poem expands the sense of being 'forsaken, alone with history', and of being rendered into a 'shadow' to include other alienated peoples, regions, and histories, that keep looking for recognition into the blankness of mirrors. The rhizomic interplay of travelling subjects within and between the nations is suggestive of his distinct identity which is 'both and neither' or 'plural and partial'.

"Snow on the desert", the last poem of the volume *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991), has American South West landscape as its background. The poet drove his sister to Tucson International airport through Sonoran desert and thought about the history of the life and culture of the tribes of the desert- the Papago's way of living- how they extracted syrup from the saguaros (an arborescent cactus species) and transformed that again into wine. Shahid does the exchange of cultures, and values; the transmigration from one culture to another, and from one poetic form (English verse form) to another (Urdu verse form). So the reference of Papagos and Begum Akhtar is found in the same poem:

... And I remembered
another moment that refers
only to itself:
in New Delhi one night

as Begum Akhtar sang, the lights went out. ("Snow on the Desert" 167)

Thus Agha Shahid Ali's poetic narratives successfully negotiate between different cultural footholds. He is as faithful to tradition (as found in his love for the Urdu literary tradition), as to the novelty (as reflected in his creative experimentation while incorporating the Urdu ghazal form in English poetry). In Ali's poetry the imagination links past and present, America and India, Urdu and English, Islamic and American deserts, American cities and former American Indian tribes, modern deserts and prehistoric oceans. Uma Parameswaran in her essay on diaspora and multiculturalism once stated - "...as a member of diaspora I can see that strength lies in the erasure of borders" (Parameswaran xlvi). Likewise Ali's poetry erases borders by moving freely across borders and in the process experiencing and endearing a variety of lands and cultures. In fact, his strength lies in his compassionate cosmopolitanism which erases borders of nations.

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MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

- Basak, Shilpi. "Multicultural Politics and Diasporic Consciousness: A Study of Selected Poems of Agha Shahid Ali." *Literary Quest* 3.6 (February 2018): 30-38. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

- Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.