

Theme of Homesickness in the selected Poems of Agha Shahid Ali

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ABSTRACT

The theme of homesickness is recurrently employed in English literature. Homesickness is common to many people in the world. It is an affliction caused by being away from home. It is dealt in different genres of literature- novel, drama, poetry etc. Homesickness is viewed both as a frustration and loss in life. For some it is grief-stricken and for some it is a harsh reality of life. In this paper my concern is to explore Agha Shahid Ali's perspective on nostalgia about homesickness by evaluating some of his poems. Agha Shahid Ali in his poems pictured the discord between a loving vision of home and its harsh actuality. Ali's poetry is a construction of home. It is a home where he lived his later life through his pen only. This shows his attachment towards his home, which is something far stronger than anything. His poetry deals his engagement with Kashmir in diaspora. It is about how he feels away from home and how he relies on memories to seek home. Ali considered himself to be a varied mixture of multiple cultures which have affected his identity but he still likes to call himself a Kashmiri-American. In his poetry, he blends the landscapes of Kashmir and America along with the emotions of exile (nostalgia about home-sickness) and in his other works loss, illness and morality. Home-Sickness is the central theme in many of his poems. Ali expresses his frustration for loss; his home that he will never see again. In this paper I will be analyzing some of his below mentioned poems to explore the Homesickness as the dominant theme in the selected works of Agha Shahid Ali's selected poems. The poems are: "The Country Without a Post Office", "I Dream I Am the Only Passenger on Flight 423 to Srinagar", "I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight", "The Correspondent", "The Last Saffron", "Tonight", "I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror", "A Pastoral", "Dear Shahid", "Bones", "Another Death", "Pilgrimage to Amarnath", "Autumn in Srinagar", "Painting a Kashmir Landscape", "Legends of Kashmir", "Postcard from Kashmir", "The Dream of Glass Bangles", "Snowmen", "The Seasons of the Plains", "Survivor", "A Call", "I Dream It Is Afternoon When I Return to Delhi", "A Lost Memory of Delhi", "Houses", "Medusa", "The Youngest of the Graeae", "Son et Lumiere at Shalimar Garden", "From Amherst to Kashmir" etc.

1. Introduction

"Diaspora" (from the Greek word for "scattering") refers to the dispersion of a people from their homeland by choice or by compulsion. The term was originally used for displacement of Jews, when they were forced to leave the land after the destruction of the first temple of Solomon; but the term these days has come to refer to the displacement in modern times. Diaspora have a very strong link with the homeland, and they find themselves as an ethno-cultural group linked to a certain part of a "imagined community" which is always in their mind, always beautiful and the best (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* 10). But more than anything else, it is home, a place where one has lived a part of one's life, which becomes a cause of desire and longing. As Kim Butler says that more than ethnicity (religion and phenotype) it is home land an entity that anchors diasporic identity ("Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse" 204). Home thus becomes a centre of focus and it haunts like anything. Yet, it is more of an abstract idea which doesn't have a particular given signifier: it could be a faint image of memories in the mind, a past that will no more return, loss of something that cannot be gained, in short, it is something more than a house which we miss in exile. As David Lim in his *The Infinite Longing for Home: Desire and the Nation in Selected Writings of Ben Okri and K.S. Maniam* puts it "Home'...could be a domestic site of comfort and security... (Or) mythic homeland left

behind... (Or) multilocal, yet it is, paradoxically, never fully ours for all times... (and) Lacan would call "the never-here," since "it is here I search there; (and) it is there when I am here" (13).

Diasporic literature is the literature that deals with experiences of migration and exile, and cultural or geographical displacement. A simple definition of Diaspora literature, then, would be works that are written by authors who live outside their native land. The term identifies a work's distinctive geographic origins. Diasporic writers are often pre-occupied with the elements of nostalgia as they seek to locate themselves in new cultures. They write in relation with the culture of their homeland and at the same time adopt and negotiate with the cultural space of the host land. They idealize home like a beloved who is praised like a beautiful woman. Home becomes focus of writer's imagination and nothing substitutes it; or it becomes, as Avtar Brah would say, "...a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination" (Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* 188). Writers in exile try to rebuild the lost home through their creative energies; and through their engagement with letters and words they try to substitute it with the house of bricks and stones. Joseph Amato notes that "Home is the site of natural epiphanies: the sky and the earth touch in a certain way, horizons are vast or impeded, light has a certain quality of radiance, rain comes in steady

drizzles or downpours" (Rethinking Home: A Case for Writing Local History, 17).

Agha Shahid Ali is one among such writers. He was born in New Delhi, India on February 04, 1949. He was a Kashmiri-American poet of Kashmiri origin, whose poetry depicts feelings of homesickness and nostalgia of his homeland, Kashmir. Nostalgia is a virtual phenomenon in diaspora. The poet like other diasporic writers wants to return to his homeland. But as the return is impossible it simultaneously represents an unbridgeable distance between the poet and his 'original home', and works as a guiding factor behind the immigrant's acceptability of the foreign land and fills the mind with a sense of loss. Rightly does Rushdie opine: ... 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 but the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being 'elsewhere'. (Imaginary Homelands, 12).

Agha Shahid Ali's life and work were similarly affected by his state of being in "exile" even though he was self-exiled but he had diasporic consciousness about his motherland. So he moved from Kashmir to Delhi and from Delhi to Pennsylvania which is also presented by him through his autobiographical poetry. He held teaching positions at nine universities and colleges in India and the United States; but he was haunted by his motherland and this diasporic consciousness is released by him through his frequent visits to Kashmir and also by his expression of feelings and emotions in his poetry with the help of diaspora technique. During his settlement in USA, he continuously visits his motherland Kashmir every summer to be with his parents, friends and relatives. This made him a personally observer to the lack of Socio-economic development in Kashmir. He settled in United States as a professor of English and creative writing. His mother was suffering with brain tumor and she had been operated in 1996 in the Lennox Hospital, but the surgery did not succeed and died in 1997. At that time Agha Ali and his brother Agha Iqbal were teaching at the University of Massachusetts, and their sister Hena was also pursuing her Ph.D from there. So they decided to take her from Amherst to Kashmir for bury. This terrifying journey is reformed in Ali's poem "From Amherst to Kashmir". After his mother's death, he could visit Srinagar only once in August 1999. In the same year, he was appointed Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Utah. He was planning to return to Srinagar in the winter of (2000) but that could not happen as he too was diagnosed with cancer. However, one might observe that Ali was not banished from Kashmir and he could have return at his will but ultimately death failed him to get this opportunity for his return to his beloved home, Kashmir. All experiences in Ali's poems are tinged with loss and nostalgia. Nostalgia "of something missed, a past or future, relationships that will not develop, lives he will not have, histories he cannot share except through an extension of the self through desire and imagining." As in "Postcard from Kashmir", Ali introduces the theme of the volume, exile, memory, loss of home and acceptance that you cannot go home again as you and it has changed:

*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..." (1-6)*

Ali felt so much fed up with his diasporic life that he knows that he was not able to spend his whole life in his motherland and so he wishes to spend that after his death, but unfortunately he was not able to fulfill his wish even after his death. While the descriptions of home which appears inaccessible to him but disturb his perception so much that he, as if in a daydream, says in his poem "A Call":

*I close my eyes. It doesn't leave me,
The cold moon of Kashmir
which breaks into my house*

Ali's love was Kashmir. He loved everything about is home, Kashmir, its natural beauty, its culture and people belonging to any sects or religion. He would never discriminate people on the basis of sects or religion. He was a peace lover. In his poems, he laments the loss of Kashmiri Pandits. As Syed Humayoun in his article explains it like this: During the early 1990's when the militancy began in Kashmir, Hindus popularly known as Kashmiri Pandits were forced to leave their homeland. They were caught between militants who had killed some Hindus and a state that had failed to protect them. Many Kashmiri's mourned the departure of Kashmiri Pandits, and Ali does the same in exile. The poem "Farewell" laments this departure and reminds readers of the poets sorrow for the people "who became refugees in their own country": "At a certain point I lost track of you." The poem starts with the subjective I, as feelings are personal and the whole poem is in the voice of the poet.

In "The Country without a Post Office," however, this I turns into us, where the poet represents all the Kashmiris who lament the exile of Hindus. No matter what was the cause of Agha Shahid Ali's exile but the point is that he understands the real pain of exile from the homeland. In poems Ali wants to tell the Hindus in exile that Muslims have not forgotten them. He mingles memory and history together while sharing his pain with fellow sufferers:

*"Your history gets in the way of my memory
I am everything you lost. You can't forgive me."56*

Ali in many of his poems hopes for the return of Kashmiri Pandits. In "A Pastoral," he feels they will meet again one day:

*"We shall meet again, in Srinagar,
by the gates of the Villa of Peace,*

From the writings of Agha Shahid Ali, I see what haunts him most about his home was the exiled images Kashmiri Pandits; their loss, pain and sufferings. He desires to return his home and live in peace among exiled Kashmiri Pandits and Kashmiri Muslims but he can't because it seems he is fed up by Hindu-Muslim divisions and discriminations. In Amitav Ghosh's "The Ghat of the Only World" Agha Shahid Ali in conversation with Amitav Gosh, Ali says, "I wish this all had not happened. This dividing of the country, the divisions between people-Hindu, Muslim, Muslim, Hindu-you can't imagine how much I hate it. It

makes me sick." Agha Shahid Ali and his Kashmiri fellows share the same grief of lost homeland. He is able to see their pain of loss very vividly because his poetry is dominant with elements of nostalgia about home sickness.

Critics like Lawrence Needham and Jeannie Chiu have discussed Ali's artistic vitality of exilic homesickness on Kashmir. He writes poetry of "compassionate cosmopolitanism," which, fixed in his multi-cultural tradition and foregrounds an ethics of empathy across countrywide and civilizing limitations. Ali's poems of journey in two books, "*A Nostalgist's Map of America*" (1991) and "*Rooms Are Never Finished*" (2001) to examine how he widens distresses about his home to other marginalized cultures. His cosmopolitanism is especially meaningful if read in the context of postwar American travel poetry and enables review of the association between "home" and "foreign," between local issues and universal apprehensions. Comparing the beauty of the place with that of heaven Agha Shahid Ali in the poem, "*The Last Saffron*" considers his motherland Kashmir as exceptionally admirable of being called a "paradise". The poet quotes the famous expressions of King Jahangir, when he makes praise about the magnificence of Kashmir;

"If there is paradise on earth / it is this, it is this, it is this"
(Ali 15).

All of the Ali's collections of poetry deal directly or indirectly with the theme of diasporic consciousness about Kashmir. The main themes of "*Bone Sculpture*" are love, loss, memory, death, cultural dislocation, nostalgia etc. Almost all these themes are related with his diasporic consciousness of Kashmir in one way or another. There are most of the poems which shows his diasporic consciousness in the "*In Memory Of Begum Akther and Other Poems*" Ali's nostalgia for Kashmir is supplemented by his engagement with his life in Delhi, a city one home to the grand Mughals. The poem mourns the death of his favorite singer Begum Akther. In the poem "*A Walk Through the Yellow Pages*" the comedy is mysterious and gloomy touched with an element of the ugly; all this is related with the ominous mode of the poet about his diasporic consciousness about his motherland Kashmir. 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. In this 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 a inhabitant. In this he focused on themes of homesickness, miserable, worldwide poetics and condition of banish, which relate with the gloomy nostalgia of Kashmir. "*The Beloved Witness: Selected Poems*" deals with disturbing and logical conflict in the brain of the poet that makes him agitated. "The Country Without a Post Office" was originally called "*Kashmir Without a Post Office*", it depicts disturbance on the motherland of poet i.e. Kashmir. In the poem "*Rooms Are Never Finished*" he depict his mourn for the death of his mother and with her loss there comes stream of consciousness in his mind about his motherland. His collection of ghazals "*Call Me Ishmael Tonight*"

he had used ghazal as an instrument to express his diasporic consciousness about his mother land Kashmir., In "*The Rebel's Silhouette*": Selected Poems and edited book of ghazals, he translated the works of great Urdu poet and have translated their sense in to English which help him in the exile life. As an editor of "*Ravishing Disunities*": Real Ghazals in English, he described the long history of interest of Western writers with ghazals, as well as offering a brief theoretical reading of the form itself, and through this edit book he wants to preserve and transmit his diasporic culture even in his exile land.

"*The Diaspora: Agha Shahid Ali's Tricultural Nostalgia*" is an essay by Bruce King in which he discusses Ali's exile, his multilingual and multicultural upbringing and how it had a lasting impact on his life and poetry. He has discussed seven of his anthologies and concludes by calling him "increasingly a major poet" with plenty of forms, themes, styles and a distinct tone (274). Bruce king very aptly asserts that Ali used poetry to "recall what has been lost in the process of living." King said, "Loss or nostalgia can occur in his poetry for parts of his American Indian past of Arizona where he for a time lived." According to him, Ali inherits a "tradition of nuanced desire, of fatalism and separation, of imagining, of nostalgia for what cannot be the poet's union with the divine."

Malcolm Woodland in his "*Memory's Homeland: Agha Shahid Ali and the Hybrid Ghalz*" (Volume 31, 2008), explores the problematical place of nostalgia in Ali's text.

Memory is no longer confused, it has a homeland—

Says Shammas: *Territorialize each confusion in a graceful Arabic.* (Ali, "Arabic," *Ishmael*)

Writes Shammas: *Memory, no longer confused, now is a homeland—*

his two languages a Hebrew caress in Arabic. (Ali, "In Arabic," *Ishmael*)

According to Woodland, above mentioned two couplets "embody two stances toward that thematics: one dominated by nostalgia and the desire for return, and one dominated by an anti-nostalgic acknowledgement of cultural hybridity." Woodland closely relates thematic concerns in Ali's poems by using following couplets culled from *Call Me Ishmael*:

At an exhibition of Mughal miniatures, such delicate calligraphy:

Kashmiri paisleys tied into the golden hair of Arabic.
(*Ishmael* 24)

By the Hudson lies Kashmir,
brought from Palestine—
It shawls the piano, Bach beguiled by exiles. (28)

Dying to be cast in saffron plaster—the Brahmin's!—
a soul (they mean the Untouchable's?) in transit shines?
(38)

Hagar, in shards, reflects her shattered Ishmael.
Call her the desert Muslim—or Jew—of water. (46)

Go all the way through *jungle* from *aleph* to *zenith*
to see English, like monkeys, swung beyond English. (68)

Must we always cook with heartless substitutes?
Caraway for cumin *and* cloves? And lime for thyme? (73)

They ask me to tell them what *Shahid* means: Listen, listen:
It means "The Beloved" in Persian, "witness" in Arabic. (81)

Woodland talks about Ali's desire to return to his homeland:

Ali's return to origins, then, stops at a strangely doubled half-way mark, a space where East is Westernized and West Easternized. One could situate the poems' allusiveness in relation to both these modes of hybridity....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" (Benvenuto

266) and seeks in his poetry to recapture "the ecstatic mode in the traditions he grew up with" (Benvenuto 265)."

Joseph Amato has said, drawing on Tolstoy's famous line, "All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way." In a similar fashion Agha Shahid Ali's birth place and his upbringing had a lasting impact on his writing and his experience of diaspora.

2. Conclusion

It is clear from the above analysis and evaluation that, Ali felt homesick throughout his life. His love and care for his homeland which he expressed almost in all his works. Kashmir left such a huge influence on Ali that in a conversation with Amitav Ghosh he disclosed his final wish- "*I would like to go back to Kashmir to die*" (124). His poetry also left a great influence on Kashmir and throughout the world. His poetry is memorized, recited on occasions, discussed and taught in the academic world.

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