



Home, Exile and Fragmented Identity in the Poems of A.K. Ramanujan and Agha Shahid Ali

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Abstract

The large corpus of the diaspora literature recognizes authors, residing away from their native land. Diaspora literature embodies the themes of exile and alienation, identity loss and nostalgia, hybridity, and rootlessness. As one navigates through the Indian diasporic literature, one can find these traits embedded in the works of A.K. Ramanujan and Agha Shahid Ali. Ramanujan, the trilingual poet, and translator try to find balance between his Western-Indian identity and the notion of home in his works. Agha Shahid sings the songs of displacement and longing, with laments not only for his past but for his ancestors too. With this line of thought, this paper addresses and examines the poems of these two writers to explore the immigrant psyche that juxtaposes two places, two cultures, and two languages. This paper also focuses on how the traumatic sense of home, exile and the notion of the fragmented identity figure out in the poems of A.K. Ramanujan and Agha Shahid Ali.

Keywords: Diaspora, Exile, Hybridity, Identity, Nostalgia, A.K. Ramanujan, Agha Shahid Ali.

Introduction

Diasporic literature is a broad term which deals with the experiences of migration, exile, and displacement. It is most often discussed in the context of postcolonialism. This kind of literature has grown with the many dispersals caused by traumatic historical events such as colonialism, war and forced transportation. Uma Parmeswaran has defined the immigrant experience as follows:

First is one of nostalgia for the homeland left behind and mingled with fear in a strange land. The second is a phase in which one is busy adjusting to the new environment that there is little creative output. The third phase is the shaping up of diaspora existence by involving themselves in ethnocultural issues. The fourth is when they have arrived and start participating in the

larger world of politics and national issues. (Parmeshwaran 164)

The migrants suffer from the pain of being far off from their homes, and the memories of their motherland haunt them. The anguish is constant and consuming. William Safran has observed that the migrants “. . . continue to relate personally or vicariously, to the homeland in a way or another, and their ethnic-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by their existence of such a relationship” (Safran 23). The diasporic Indians, too, do not break their relationship with the ancestral land. There is a search for continuity and ‘ancestral impulse’, an effort to look for their roots. Salman Rushdie has said, “. . . physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of redeeming precisely the thing that was lost, that will, in short, create fictions not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indians of mind.” (Rushdie 10). Nostalgia, loss, sense of betrayal, and duty are daily issues of struggle for the diasporic protagonist. The authors belonging to various races, cultures and countries have been producing great works that are rooted in the immigrant experience. There is a constant shifting between two worlds, voyaging back and forth between locales. As one navigates through the Indian diasporic literature, one can find these traits embedded in the works of A.K. Ramanujan and Agha Shahid Ali. Ramanujan, the trilingual poet and translator, tries to find a meaningful relationship between his fragmented Western-Indian identity and the notion of home in exile in his works. Ali sings the songs of loss of home and country, with laments not only for his past but also for the pasts of his great ancestors too. His poetry projected a unique strength in exile that nourished his poetry. ‘Exile’ can be defined as a breach or a rift: as a break between the self and its home that is beyond repair. It produces incessant misery and emotional trauma. The gravitational pull of the past, the mother

country and the place become overpowering obsessions. Yet exile can also become a dynamic and enriching experience of an individual. There is a constant flux; moments after moments flash, re-flash and create a global experience of becoming a being of vivid knowledge and versatile personality.

Between Home and Exile

A.K. Ramanujan has succeeded in exploiting the trope of exile. His panoramic vision and his poetic sensibilities have assured him protection from falling into the usual trap of exile and its unhappy consequences. But there have been moments of breach in him too. The conducive work atmosphere and the sense of achievement at being a phenomenal success in an alien land cannot transform the United States into a home. However, this constant sense of having a hybrid status has given him the positive urges to create a significant poetic career. With full liberty to practise Kannada, Tamil and Telugu in a Western sphere, Ramanujan never truly felt cut off from his real home. The years that were spent in the U.S., majorly in Chicago, made him understand the value of one’s roots. The more he stayed and wrote abroad, the more he perfected the understanding of his deep Indianness. His Indianness was not merely a part of his past but what continues to exist within him, stimulating and conditioning his behaviour, attitudes and values. Living in Chicago, Ramanujan unabashedly wrote about his village and his deep childhood fears and experiences and perceived his experiences in Chicago through the optical devices of an Indian literary scholar. Amidst the Western environment, he wrote about a wrestler in his village (*At Forty*). He then came up with a series of poems that were based on well-known Indian myths (*Mythologies 1, 2, 3*), folklores (*No Amnesiac King, No Fifth Man*) and poems written in the manner of Tamil Cankam (Sangam) poetry. In poems like *Conventions of Despair, Snakes, Entries for a Catalogue of Fears*, and *Anxiety*, there is a strong interplay of both the great and the little

traditions of India. Further, in Ramanujan's poetry, the past is not past; it continues to present itself to the poet's mind. This interesting intermingling of past and present can be seen in the poem *Waterfalls in a Bank*. This poem is a beautiful reflection of Ramanujan's thought process, where every image of the poet's past about his homeland is masterfully juxtaposed with the images of the present panorama of the host-land.

. . . And then one sometimes sees waterfalls as the ancient Tamils saw them, wavering snakeskin, cascades of muslin . . . (*Waterfalls in a Bank*)

Ramanujan's poems effectively suggest the co-existence of Indian and Western systems of conceiving and perceiving the world and practices. This scenario can be pointed out in the poem *Death and the Good Citizen*. Here the two contrasting cultures, the East and the West, have been showcased through the obscure images and metaphors relating to crematorium rituals. While the Western burial process represents liberal ideologies, the native one represents conventionality and rigid stereotypes popularized through Sanskrit chants. Memory plays a vital role in the poetry of Ramanujan. It has helped him to stay connected with his roots, with India, within and without. The memories bring alive all that is useful in his past. As a matter of fact, these memories add vigor and progress to his idea of rootedness. His poetry volume *Relations* is centered around his complex, individual relationships. Here, he glorifies his camaraderie with his family members. The mental image of the old mother in the poem *Of Mother Among Other Things* can be traced through the images, such as her picking up a grain of rice from the kitchen floor. Further, he recalls the memory of his mother in different stages - "the silk and white petal" determining her youth, her running back "from rain to the crying cradles", and her wrinkled hands in old age like a "wet eagle". The presence of the absent father is felt intensely in the poem *Obituary*. Without the highlighted grief and

nostalgia, Ramanujan talks about his father's death in a mock-heroic tone. In *Snakes*, there are subtle vignettes of memory of home and family, of mother giving milk to snakes in saucers, and the snake man looking "for father's smiling money". Even a poem like *A River* reveals his obsession with memory and relationships. The poem is born out of the memory of his Madurai visit. The poet here contrasts the images of drought and floods. Further, he complains about how the contemporary poets do not focus on portraying their creative sensibilities when talking about human situations. The poem brings out the locale of Madurai, and the grim images suggest the emotional drought and aridity in contemporary Tamil poetry. The deep rootedness in one's own culture and the undying love and respect for one's family have offered a strong emotional stability to Ramanujan. The freshness of his past and the liveliness of his present have helped him to speak about his insecurities, his disfigured identity, his fragmented relationship with his wife and his personal feeling of being at home while living in exile. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that for Ramanujan, home is not a place to go back to; it is a place where one is.

While ending the study of Ramanujan and his ideas about existence in exile, this paper now swiftly moves towards another magnificent craftsman belonging to the large corpus of Diasporic literature. He is none other than the Kashmiri poet Agha Shahid Ali. Famously known as the poet of exile, Ali's grand poetry collections such as *A Walk Through Yellow Pages*, *The Half Inch Himalayas*, *A Nostalgist's Map of America* and *The Country without a Post Office*, bear a significant testimony to the presence of displacement and exile, longing and loss - the loss of self, home, country and memory itself. Born as a Kashmiri Muslim and being taught at the educational institutions of Kashmir, Delhi and the United States, respectively, Ali's poetry envisions 'home' and asserts an identity that is transnational, fluid and exclusively his own. Colorfully imbued in "ghazalesque" style, his

poetic creations not only impart the greatness of the Indo-Islamic tradition but also bring out the American way of storytelling. Ali's poems are not mere representations of love and longing; they are rather concrete visuals of personal importance and political conflicts. Further, his verses not only echo the deep lamentation of his own past but also the past of his ancestors too. An example can be taken from the poem *The Snowmen*, where he says, "My ancestor, a man of Himalayan snow came to Kashmir from Samarkand. . ." Memory often plays an important role in the mapping of Ali's identity and his cultural heritage. This is very much embedded in the poem *The Season of Plains*, where Ali presents the memory of his mother's nostalgia for Lucknow, the monsoon season and the Thumri lyrics. While Ali's poems breathe the constant trauma of how expatriation can come to feel like a terrible exile, they also kind of sustain the idea of how exile nourishes the passion for the homeland. This thought perhaps instigated in him the safeguarding of the idea of an imaginary homeland. Kashmir becomes the symbol of an imaginary homeland for Ali. The never-ending attachment with Kashmir – the homeland is poignantly summed up in the poem, *Postcard from Kashmir*. The images of home which are apparently unreachable haunt Ali's consciousness so much that he, as if in a trance, utters:

I close my eyes. It doesn't leave me, the cold moon of Kashmir which breaks into my house and steals my parent's love. (*A Call*)

While in the poem *The Last Saffron*, Ali has compared the beauty of Kashmir with heaven, he has also disclosed to Amitabh Ghosh about his final wish – "I would like to go back to Kashmir to die." Further, the poet has been diligent enough to tell the truth about the ongoing political strife amidst the heavenly locales of Kashmir. He confesses with a heavy heart that his deeply loved homeland has changed into a "black velvet void". With reference to grief, nostalgia, memory and

somehow anger, Yerra Sugarman rightly says, "Shahid's poetry casts its craft and concerns upon the histories of loss, injustices, and brutality, particularly those endured by his ravaged Kashmir" (129). In Ali's poetry, the sense of loss, loneliness and longing are yoked together due to his close acquaintance with different cultures – Hindu, Muslim and Western. This has made him the man of multiple identities. But somehow, the larger picture in terms of his poetry has been quite uplifting. With his multidimensional sensibility, he has achieved a unity between his traditions and his immigrant experiences. If his poetry is said to express the dilemma of exile and homelessness, it is not wholly what his poetry talks of.

Conclusion

With reference to the above discussion, we can very well state that the dynamics of diaspora have been crucial to the personal and personal lives of the poets A.K. Ramanujan and Agha Shahid Ali, respectively. Their intermingling with different cultures, knowledge and languages has indeed helped these two craftsmen to solidify their unique verdicts on immigrant existence and experience. Ramanujan's poems have always been an amalgamation of East and the West. His belongingness to his Indian roots is all pervasive. With the constant movement of past and present and immediate and remote and within and without, Ramanujan strikes the perfect chord of being a rooted Indian English writer.

Similarly, Agha Shahid Ali has generated a global experience when it comes to his rich poetry and ghazals. Writing on the edge must have been an unavoidable situation for him, but he has always been unfazed by these complications. With multiple identities and orders to conform to, Ali has bravely declared that he considers himself a poet of the English language first and foremost. With all the contemplation, nostalgia, grief, anger, loss and longing in his poems, Ali has somehow

managed to bring out the unification of his thoughts and experiences. With the historic forces at work, Ali has been lucky enough to be imbued with the dynamic colors of Hindu, Muslim and Western cultures.

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