

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

**“THEY HAVE A PRAYER. ARE YOU LISTENING, GOD?”. AGHA SHAHID ALI’S
NOSTALGIA FOR KASHMIR**

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ABSTRACT

Agha Shahid Ali is a prolific Kashmiri American poet who wrote extensively about his homeland Kashmir. His poems have a sense of poignancy and nostalgia when he talks about his homeland. His two volume of poetry Half inch Himalayas and a country without a Post office is extensively about his homeland Kashmir Ali was in an self imposed exile in America but he did not turn alien to the concerns of his homeland . Like the diaspora writers he was nostalgic for his Kashmir. This paper aims to depict Ali’s depiction of Kashmir. If his Half Inch Himalayas is tinged with nostalgia remembrance for the cultural past, memory and nostalgia, A country Without a Post Office is a collection which is a direct reaction of the violence perpetuated in the valley and on the people . His writings have a lyrical beauty that capture the pain of the people. The decade of 1990 was a tough and tortous one for the people of Kashmir. The militancy and the counter state action rendered the people vulnerable and exposed to all sorts of atrocities and violence. This is very well captured in his writings. This paper seeks to present Ali’s nostalgia for his homeland and the subsequent representation of this nostalgia in his beautiful lyrical poetry. Also I have sought to portray his humanistic concern for his violence-ridden homeland and a hope that peace would prevail in the valley.

“the mansion is lit up with roses. He is driven through streets in which blood flows like Husain’sour hands won’t return to us . not even mutilated, whenDeath comes-thin bureaucrat –from the plains.” (21-24, Muhurram in Srinagar)

Agha Shahid Ali has in recent times come to epitomize the diasporas longing for a home, in his case his beloved Kashmir. Agha Shahid Ali’s identity as a Kashmiri- American poet had a deep impact on his poetic acumen. The Kashmiri ancestry inspired him to write about the beauty of his homeland. The almost musical quality of his descriptions is accompanied by the sense of sheer nostalgia that he feels for his homeland. He has captured the essence of Kashmir, its history, culture and mythology in his

work. He is the author of eight volume of poetry, *Bone Sculptor* (1972), *In Memory of Begum Akhtar* (1979), *A walk through the Yellow Pages* (1987) , *The Half-Inch Himalaya* (1987), *A Nostalgic Map of America* (1992) , *the Beloved Witness* (1992), *The country Without A Post office* (1997) and *the Rooms are Never Finished* (2001). Poetic esthetic along with technical precision dovetails with the question of identity and nostalgia in his poems. Kashmir as his native place has always been tied up with his fate as a poet.

Before the flames of violence engulfed the state, Kashmir was famous as an idyllic paradise in the European and the South Asian traditions. From the time of Mughal rulers, when the European travellers visited, Kashmir has always found a place the travelogues and literature. The age of

imperialism created the space for exploration with an aim for colonization. The peripheral regions were travelled to and records were maintained of these explorations, which ultimately resulted in conquests. Kashmir occupied an important place in the annals of the travellers and the European writers. "There are near about eighty European travel texts, covering a span of more than three centuries, carrying Kashmir as a favourite travel trope. Some of them even exist in more than one volume. And over the years for their presumed neutrality they have been utilized in reconstructing the history of the region. Besides, as texts on their own, they have gone through various editions and circulated in the print form for the purpose of wide reading. What led the European drive in Kashmir is an interesting question". The era of colonialism driven largely by curiosity is one of the reasons why so much was written about Kashmir. Most of these accounts have a very clear echo of the colonial prism through which they were largely seen. "The presence of colonial power in the representation of Kashmir had made it much of the travel writing what Michel Foucault had termed as "place making". Foucault argues that we are no longer living in a world of time that moves forward, but in networks of places opening onto one another. Kashmir as a space served as a trope for colonial writing where it was fetishes for its exoticism apart from serving from accounts of memoirs celebrating its pristine beauty and potential for adventure activities like trekking etc. The edifice of colonial account has always eclipsed the cultural or social potential of Kashmir and its people.

Home for Agha Shahid Ali is always tied with nostalgia. It is interesting to note is that Agha Shahid Ali is not exiled from his homeland. Nostalgia or a desire for homeland is a characteristic feature of the diaspora writing. The diaspora writer feels culturally and physically alienated or exiled from his homeland and is unable to return to his homeland. Ali Shahid Ali could always come back to his beloved Kashmir and there was nothing physically barring him from visiting it. The exile that he talks about is the nostalgia for the time past that he cannot return back to or visit. This nostalgia can be seen in the poems in the first part of Half Inch Himalayas. The

nostalgia for his native place is mingled with his parent's youth and past of which he could never be a part of but he imagines it in his own way. This revisiting in memory is his tool to revisit the past as well. In the poem A Lost memory of Delhi he writes

I am not born
It is 1948 and the bus turns
Onto a road without a name
There on his bicycle
My father
He is younger than I
At Okhla where I get off
I pass my parents
Strolling by the jamuna River
My mother is a recent bride
Her sari's a blaze of brocade
Silverdusts parts her hair.."

Memory acts as an instrument to visit places and situations of the past and it acts as a bridge between the past that can never be recovered and the ubiquitous present. Ali uses the trope of memory to write about His parent's past, the memory of Kashmir of his mother and grandmother and ultimately the collective memory of Kashmir.

The Diasporic writers either tend to write out of sheer nostalgia about their native land which they have left behind or they are able to transcend the nostalgia and write about their second home. Diasporic writers like Sujata Bhatt, leelaGhandhi or Agha Shahid Ali constitute an attempt on the part of the diaspora to understand the severance from their cultural and national past. The post colonial memory merges the individual with the racial memory. In the case of diasporas memory is an important tool as it becomes a cultural archive of the past. Half Inch Himalayas was published in 1987 is often seen as the transition point in Ali's writing . The volume is about Ali's residence in America which he accepts as his home but looks back at India with continued nostalgia. The volume is divided into 4 parts each with its own distinct imaginative narrative but is connected to each other loosely through images . The volume deals with the theme of exile, memory, loss of home and the acceptance that you cannot go back to how things were in the past . The first volume bridges fantasy with imagination where Ali imagines his family's history . In the poem

"SnowMen" ali fantasizes the beginning of his family history

"My ancestor , a man
of Himalayan Snow
came to Kashmir from Samarkhand
carrying a bag
of whale bones:
heirlooms from sea funerals "

Through this trope of memory Ali also prods the painful collective memory traumatised by the violence . The Half Inch Himalaya is the first book he wrote in 1987 and it deals with his strong longing and nostalgia for his home and family. The volume is about his acceptance of a new home but he still looks back nostalgic at Kashmir through the prism of memory and imagination. Home or Kashmir takes on a mythological place in Ali's poetry and the volume is structured in a way that it looks at the change of Ali's home from Kashmir to America. The Country without a Post Office is written in the backdrop of the 1990's violence. Home for Ali has always been imbued with sublimity and beauty and he was pained greatly to witness his homeland being ravaged by the incessant violence. The breakdown of any communication system in Kashmir meant that people could rarely receive any communication in terms of telephone calls or letters on time. The poems in this collection are personal and at the same time tied up with the universal idea of exile and loss .In this figuring of his homeland, he himself became one of the images that were spinning around the dark point of stillness—both shahid and shaheed, witness and martyr—his destiny inextricably linked with Kashmir's, each prefigured by the other.

"I will die, in autumn, in Kashmir,
and the shadowed routine of each vein
will almost be news, the blood censored,
for the Saffron Sun and the Times of Rain. ...
" (The Last Saffron ,pg 181)

. In many poem nostalgic narratives of Kahmir intersect with tales of his mother's and grandmother's attachment to their own ancestral past in India In the poem Decca gauzes the delicate fragments and the loss of them become metaphor for the greater tragedy that affects the indian and the Kashmir culture. The fate of Kashmir is

intricately linked to his family's fate. Post card from Kashmir is one of exemplary diasporic poems . In the poem Ali views his past, present and future relation with home . This engagement is through memory and imagination

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. 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.

The image of Kashmir shrinking into an mailbox is an illustration an image which Ali creates in his imagination . it enables him to be home , the home that is in his memory. There is a discrepancy in the Kashmir he imagines and the real Kashmir. the waters of Jhelum will not be "so clean , so ultramarine" as it is in his imagination. Home therefore is "a giant negative, black and white , still undeveloped". It is a distant image in the recess of his mind. All'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. The photograph created a mental image of home in his mind and when he visited the house, the underdeveloped film of the memory in his mind was startled to see the reality burst into colours:

All the volumes of Agha Shahid Ali remain replete with poetic expressions of displacement, exile and longing to come back to the place of belonging i.e. the valley of Kashmir. These images come to the fore in his writings when the poet conceptualizes the loss of lovers, home, country and the memory itself

"...in that archive for letters with doomed
addresses,

Each house buried or empty.
Empty? Because so many fled, ran away,
And became refugees there, in plains
...The soldiers light it , hone the flames,
burn our world to sudden papier-mâché."

The images of Kashmir in this volume are either of desolate and 'empty' land where people have left due to the intensity of the violence or a living grave yard where families waited frantically for their missing members who were taken up for interrogation by the Indian forces and were never heard of. The canvas for this volume of poetry is the backdrop of Kashmir in the throes of political turmoil. His voice carries agelessness when he mourns about his homeland. The poems narrates the woes and the pain of the people and shahid with his powerful words creates the picture of suffering for the reader where the houses lay empty and dim, and the grim scenes of the interrogation by the Indian forces

"From the zero bridge
ashadow chased by search lights is running
away to find its body. On the edge of the
cantonment,
whereGupkar road ends,
it shrinks almost into nothing , is
Nothing by interrogation gates
so it can slip , unseen, into the cells:
Dripping from the suspended burning tire
Are falling on the back of a prisoner,
The naked boys screaming. "I know
nothing."

The picture that Ali paints is of pathos and pain and the systematic torture that was inflicted on the residents of Kashmir. In his poems there is a recurrent figure of Irfan and Rizwan. The boy screaming, "I know Nothing", assumes the identity of Rizwan in the next part of the poem where he dies in front of the poet and is mourned. Rizwan thus becomes a trope and a representative of all the young nameless boys who perished at the hands of the brutal state apparatus and were buried in nameless graves

"I follow him through the blood on the
road.
..I follow him through blood on the road
/ and hundreds of pairs of shoes the

mourners / left behind, as they ran from
the funeral, / victims of firing...

From windows we hear
Grieving mothers, and snow begins to fall
on us, like ash. Black on edges of flames,
it cannot extinguish the neighbourhoods,
the homes set ablaze by midnight soldiers.
Kashmir is burning... (11)

There are also encapsulations of the everyday life of people marred by constant curfews and the sufferings of his people Ali very poignantly and beautifully captures the pain and terrible plight of the people in his poems . However his poems do not solely focus on the tormented present of the land .it expresses a hope for the future when peace will prevail . in the poem Dear shahid , Ali says

" Things are here as usual though we
always talk about you .will you come soon ?
Waiting for you is like waiting for spring.
We are waiting for almond blossoms. And if
go wills, Othose days of peace when we all
were in lve and the rain was in our hands
whenever we went."

But Shahid is an optimistic that the suffering is temporal and that sooner or later "days of peace" will return to the valley.

He refused to be put in a slot. According to him one is a universe in itself , a product of historical forces. He argues that his identity is created by the interweaving of many historical forces and that multiple personality are reflected in his works through reference to Hindu, Muslim and Christian myths and imagery. When he compares Kashmir to The Garden of Eden.

In his poem "A faith brief memoir" for example is narrated by clothed one of 3 mythological fates. Shahid's poem 'Farewell', which he describes as a 'plaintive love letter from a Kashmiri Muslim to a Kashmiri Pandit', addresses this issue. The poem speaks eloquently about the 'othering' of the two sides in the Kashmiri conflict: 'You needed me. You needed to perfect me. / In your absence you polished me into the Enemy' There is a historical backdrop against which Shahid writes The Country without a Post Office. He felt the early 1990s to be a personal turning point, after

which he became increasingly preoccupied with the effective war taking place in his distant homeland.

Kashmir his homeland has always found a special place both in his heart and in his poetry .the volume of a Country Without A Post Office was written in response to the political turmoil of the state which pained him . he mourned the sufferings of the people as he mourned the exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits, who were their own brothers . The departure of the familiar faces had lent an eerie almost exiled look to his homeland. However in his poems he does expresses a hope that peace will return to its people and like a fresh shower will wipe away the tears of his people

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