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MEMORY AND HOME: AN ANALYSIS OF SELECT POEMS OF AGHA SHAHID ALI

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Abstract

Agha Shahid Ali remained exiled for most of his life. His homeland, Kashmir, has remained a zone of conflict, disturbed by usurpation politics and wars for over seventy years now. Its geographical boundaries, as well as its culture, has been altered by various agencies for a long time now. The poet has tried to carve his homeland in his poems through memory and in the process has left behind a body of work that speaks for Kashmir's collective cultural heritage. His poems at their core are driven by a yearning to return to the ideal home. This research article analyses select poems of Agha Shahid Ali to understand his conception of home. The research article also tries to look at related concepts like belonging and identity and their shaping because of the poet's memory of the homeland. For this, the paper makes use of ideas propounded by writers like Salman Rushdie, Astrid Erll and Paul Ricoeur etc. within the postulates of Psychoanalysis, Postcolonial Studies and Memory Studies.

Keywords: Memory, Exile, Nostalgia, Identity, Homeland.

When Odysseus set out for Ithaca from Troy, he did not know that it would take him twenty years to return home. In the course of his journey on his long way home, he discovered and rediscovered home in his imagination many times, in his memory, while having the adventures which would 'make' him ultimately. Homer indicates at various places that it was only the thought of Ithaca that kept him going through the hardships in the way. In Book IX of Odyssey, Homer makes Odysseus say that,

"...for there is nothing dearer to a man than his own country and his parents, and however splendid a home he may have in a foreign country, if it be far from father or mother, he does not care about it" (Homer).

Meenakshi Mukherjee writing on nostalgia talks about the writing process of expatriate novelists,

"when an expatriate writer goes back to the memories of his childhood to write a novel, the impossibility of return assumes both temporal and spatial dimensions" (Mukherjee 72).

So, it becomes essential for an expatriate to remember to fill the lack that is created by this 'impossibility of return'. Without memory, he will be filled with a void that cannot be countered. For Luis Bunuel, the famous filmmaker, it is memory that decides an individual's place in the world. In his book *My Last Sigh*, he writes,

"Life without memory is no life at all, just as an intelligence without the possibility of expression is not really an intelligence. Our

memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing" (Bunuel and Israel 15).

The coherence and sentiments in Agha Shahid Ali's poems are derived from memory. Born and brought up in a home of mixed culture, he inherited a value system built upon coexistence and variety. His ancestry composed of educated men and women. Nishat Zaidi in her monograph on Agha Shahid Ali, mentions, "It was a household where not only Plato but Rig Veda of Raghvachariya was also read along with the Persian Masters" (Zaidi 1). Zaidi also points out that his mother had a major impact on his formative years.

"If on the one hand, Sufia inculcated a love for music – ragas, bhajans and ghazals – among her children, she also sang elegies (*nauhas*) mourning the slaying of the Prophet's Grandson, Imam Hussain during Muharram" (Zaidi 5).

Spending a major part of his life in the United States of America, Agha Shahid Ali was to revisit these memories in his poems while yearning for his homeland. Far away, the memories of his childhood and early youth were going to carve the home in his imagination. Home for him is Kashmir, a place that has been a zone for conflict for a long time. Zutshi in her book, *Languages of Belonging*, finds Kashmir to be a place of, "...many appellations, all flattering, most undeserved: Paradise on Earth, Solomon's Garden, Happy Valley, Supremely Beautiful Woman, Switzerland of India to name but a few" (Zutshi 323). While showcasing the different imaginations of Kashmir throughout history in her other book called *Kashmir's Contested Pasts*, Zutshi has written that,

"The interaction between the idea of Kashmir as a sacred space that existed beyond quantifiable temporality and a political territory located within historical time continued to define the subsequent narrations of Kashmir's past" (Zutshi 71).

The subsequent narrations have led to various cultural and socio-political exchanges, ultimately leading to a complex idea of Kashmir. It is this rich and complicated heritage that Agha Shahid Ali

inherits and is made of. This plurality and intermixing of various cultures over time manifest themselves in Agha Shahid Ali's poems as remembrances. Astrid Erll quotes Maurice Halbwachs to define a remembrance as

"...very large measure a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present, a reconstruction prepared, furthermore, by reconstructions of earlier periods wherein past images had already been altered" (qtd in Erll 17).

Agha Shahid Ali reminisces about his own and travels towards his ideal - in exile, in longing, to reconstruct. From far off, he collects the shards and traits which would help him create a home. He says,

"This is an archive. I've found the remains of his voice, that map of longings with no limit (Ali 205).

What would be archived is explained in the stanzas before. "The entire map of the lost will be canded" (Ali 204). An alteration of past images has to take place and this is the task a poet must undertake – one that must become his duty.

"This is your pain. You must feel it. Feel it, Heart, be faithful to his mad refrain-" (Ali 205).

From far away, an effort must be made to make home meaningful and attainable. The heart, according to the poet, must persevere in exile, which is "fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past" (Said 440). Only by remembering can the forgotten be again brought to light. This is the pain he must undertake and bear. From far away, an effort must be made to make home meaningful and attainable even if it is possible only in imagination. Salman Rushdie says that,

"exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt...our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing

that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" (Rushdie 429).

The sense of distance from Home is deeply itched in the poet's mind and the poems keep reiterating it. In a poem called, *Postcard from Kashmir*, he says

"This is home. And this is the closest I'll ever be to home...
And my memory will be a little out of focus, in it a giant negative, black and white, still undeveloped," (Ali 29).

For Agha Shahid Ali, the focus is on Kashmir which the poet must reclaim and reconstitute in his imagination. The memory is undeveloped because of the distance but it is of home nevertheless. What is being remembered or recalled is partial. Salman Rushdie feels that the partial nature of memory lends it greater importance. He says,

"The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities" (Rushdie 429).

It is from these shards of memory that Agha Shahid Ali begins to plot the ambiguous and the probable, an entity very much like his own self. The crooked becomes celebrated. In a poem called *Cracked Portraits*, he invokes his memory of three generations of his family. The memory has been handed down to him, thus creating a distance between him and his previous generations. In the concluding part of the poem, he expresses the alienation and distance that he feels,

"Cobwebs cling to the soundless words of my ancestors.

No one now comes from Kandhar, dear Ali, to pitch tents by the Jhelum, Under autumn maples, and claim descent from the holy prophet.

Your portrait is desolate in a creaking corridor" (Ali 37).

The poem resonates with a sense of isolation and loneliness – the state to which the land is put into because of political propaganda. All channels of communication are cut off in this poem and only a memory of interactions from the past is visible. This is how Kashmir is to Agha Shahid Ali - an ailing land, a country without a post office ridden with violence. Before Agha Shahid Ali, Kashmir lacked a voice that could present the point of view of the resident citizen to the global community. In his reinvention of the homeland, he provides authenticity to the individual experience. In the poem, *The Blessed Word: A Prologue*, he writes,

"He reinvents Petersburg (I, Srinagar), an imaginary homeland, filing it, closing it, shutting himself (myself) in it." (Ali 172).

Agha Shahid Ali invokes the memory of Osip Mandelstam in this poem and compares Kashmir to Mandelstam's Petersburg. Kashmir, like Petersburg, is home and as it has been lost, it becomes the task of the poet to impart meaning to it to cover the loss. Astrid Erll calls literature, an expression of cultural memory. For her, it is "the compression of several complex ideas, feelings or images into a single, fused or composite object" (Erll 145). This object that Agha Shahid Ali desires is Kashmir, his home – his beloved and his muse. In the same poem, he writes Kashmir with different spellings,

"Let me cry out in that void, say it as I can. I write on that void: Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir..." (Ali 171).

The poem indicates the multidimensionality of the idea of home in his memory. At the same time, it showcases that the longing Agha Shahid Ali feels is multi-fold. It is a space where he has "flowers that will never die, roses that will never fall" (Ali 172). Commenting on Agha Shahid Ali's memory, Daniel Hall writes,

"Shahid's memory was staggering-late in his life he memorized the whole of 'Lycidas' – and he was a fearsome mimic. He had an ear cocked at all times for the surprising turn of phrase, the unintentional joke, the

fresh bit of slang – anything that might be of use” (Hall 17).

The longing that he feels is at least on two levels – the distance that he tries to cover with memory and the violence that infests Kashmir. Agha Shahid Ali never shied away from writing about the socio-political issues of Kashmir and his works “included political poems- or what might more accurately be called poems about injustice” (Hall 17). In the narration of these events, Agha Shahid Ali’s memory plays a major role. He remembers the forgotten embedded in the stories that History has created. Homecoming, in this respect, is riddled with this nuanced relationship between memory and history. It is a quarrel he must become a part of. Commenting on the role of memory concerning history, Paul Ricoeur has written that,

“The privilege that history cannot take away from memory is that of, on the one hand, preserving...the relationship with the past, and also, on the other hand, of bringing out clearly the dialectic between space of experience and horizon of expectation. This dialectic tends to be obscured by history, which focuses on the events and human beings of the past methodically and with, as it were, a gaze that is professionally sharpened to such a degree that we might well be led to believe it possible to have an interest in history that is cut off from any connection to the present and the future” (Ricoeur 475-476).

In a poem called *Farewell*, Agha Shahid Ali comments on this complication,

“Your history gets in the way of my memory
I am everything you lost. You can’t forgive me.

I am everything you lost. Your perfect enemy.
Your memory gets in the way of my memory”
(Ali 176).

Agha Shahid Ali’s purpose of poetry is to expose the dialectics between actuality and imagination that has become obscured because of history’s need to generalize. Without this exposition, home cannot be imagined and the wrong cannot be made right. This particular idea is explored again and again till a

whole city comes into being. Syed Humayoun in his essay, *Missing Home, Imagining Violence*, talks about the city which is Agha Shahid Ali’s home -

“Ali’s Spatial entities consisted of Srinagar, the river Jhelum, Dal Lake, fields of saffron, and other aspects of the city and surrounding landscapes. Similarly, his temporal memories were engaged with his memories of family, childhood, and so on. With rise of violence in Kashmir, however, this spatial vision shifted from a beautiful and pristine vision of his homeland to the horror of bloodshed in Srinagar” (Humayoun 133).

Several poems express this intermingling of yearning and actuality. The horror, the bloodshed and the remembrances of the lost people keep appearing in his poems. He writes,

“I will look for any sign of blood
in captions under the photos of boys,
those who by inches-after the April flood –
were killed in fluted waters ...” (Ali 181).

Sentences after sentences are lined with sorrow. Poem after poem, Agha Shahid Ali expresses his agony and turmoil. Analyzing Ali’s 1997 collection, *The Country without a Post Office*, Stephen Burt comments that,

“Every time the book laments a corpse (Rizwan’s for example) it also laments the enforced isolation that befalls places engulfed by civil war, isolation both physical (it’s hard to go there) and cognitive (once there, it’s hard to think about anything other than the war). That is what Ali’s title “The Country without a Post Office” means...” (Burt 110).

This lack of connection with the homeland makes the poet’s task tougher and therefore also expresses Agha Shahid Ali’s genius. For establishing the connection, he uses the important markers on the cityscape, the memories of his childhood and events of loss from history and mythology. Also, the home that he imagines will remain incomplete without talking about the impact his mother has on her. The home that he constitutes has his mother in its

centre. Agha Shahid Ali remembers her with an intensity rare in the language. Her death changed his poetry. Daniel Hall writes,

“The pitch of grief in his poems about her is almost unbearable: such overwhelming emotion required new means” (Hall 17).

On the level of form, he moved towards classical forms, translating Faiz into Sapphic stanzas and writing Canzones – both poetic forms belonging to oral tradition and relying on memory. Imagining how the home had altered after the death of her mother, he wrote *Lenox hill*. Due e Aziz Amna says that it is a poem that Shahid “gilded out of mourning, memory, and myth” (Amna 152). Homecoming for him becomes almost impossible after his mother’s passing. In the poem, Kashmir becomes her mother and her mother becomes Kashmir. His exasperation gives birth to a rare melancholy, an expression of loss which is heartbreaking,

“...Kashmir, she’s dying! How her breathing drowns out the universe as she sleeps in Amherst. Windows open on Kashmir: *There*, the fragile wood-shrines – so far away- of Kashmir. O Destroyer, let her return there, if just to die” (Ali 248).

So, memory is Agha Shahid Ali’s aid in carving out his ideal home. The ideal conception of Kashmir, the memory of lives lost due to violence and political propaganda, and the memory of his childhood and his mother, together constitute the home he yearns to be in. It is through them that he gets as closest as he can get to home. In a poem dedicated to Faiz Ahmed Faiz, he stresses the role of memory in his life,

“Near me breathes the air that’s your kiss. It smoulders, slowly- slowly, musk of itself. And farther, drop by drop, beyond the horizon, shines the dew of your lit face.

Memory’s placed its hand so on Time’s face, touched it so caressingly that although it’s still our parting’s morning, it’s as if night’s come, bringing you to my bare arms” (Ali 263).

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