

Poetics of Remembrance and Loss: A Study of Agha Shahid Ali's Poems

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Abstract— *Diasporic literature refers to texts which record the geographical and cultural displacement of individuals or communities to a new location. Sense of loss, identity crisis, hybridity and memories of home and nation are some of the common themes examined by the diasporic writers. The characters are often struggling to negotiate between the two cultures- old and new. The memories of the lost nation or homeland are often recaptured in certain images and objects which recreate the imagined past from memories of immigrant characters. Through their supple and cultivated imagination, these writers draw on different cultures simultaneously, bringing together the two distinct physical and emotional landscapes together.*

Agha Shahid Ali, the renowned Kashmiri-American poet is one such famous writers among Bharti Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie, Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt and Sunetra Gupta, to name a few. His collection of poems The Veiled Suite takes across the themes of mourning and loss, rendering an entirely afresh legacy to the American poetic lexis. A deep sense of nostalgia pervades through his works, tinged with themes of exile and lost history. He emerges as a cartographer, mapping the 'imagined homelands' and lost 'nation'. This paper is an attempt to trace the themes of 'dislocation' and 'memo-realization' under diasporic concerns, in the select poems of Agha Shahid Ali from The Veiled Suite.

Keywords— *Nostalgia, Memory, Home, 'Imaginary Homelands', Dislocation.*

Writing is an act of imagination cutting across time and space and creating a trajectory between thought and expression. In a sense, all literary art is the reproduction of accumulation of experiences in the form of memory. Diasporic literature falls under the canon of texts which is marked by sense of nostalgia and loss, mourning and longing and a desire to recreate the home through the act of writing memory. The word diaspora posits many questionable concepts and terms, such as ethnic, cultural affiliations and migrancy and national identity, which problematize the understanding of the word, rather than

defining it in clear terms. According to William Safran the painful truth of diaspora is not given considerable attention within the context of nationalism under the postcolonial studies for since ages, the term is appreciative of the historical fact that Diaspora refers only to "the historic displacement of Jews from their homeland and their dispersion throughout many lands, signifying as well the oppression and moral degradation implied by that dispersion" (83).

In times of globalization, diaspora has positioned itself in a significant manner by its varied influences on world literature and other literary and cultural studies. Scholarly readings should therefore be centered on the experiences of exiled/expatriate or migrant of this event stimulated by various economic, political and environmental drives, rather than dwelling upon the formulations of a theoretical background which attempt an exploratory study while superseding the real stories of "de-territorialization" and "re-territorialization". The diasporic communities carry a special affinity with each other as they share a common cultural imagination, memory of their homeland and a mythic return. In postcolonial times, the act of diaspora or human dispersion is commonly integral to historical mass dispersal of involuntary nature. These communities are connected to each other as they share collective memory myth, desire to return through memory, idealization of ancestral home and solidarities with the members of other communities.

The merger of old and new culture gives birth to a cultural assimilation, leading to new content and language to articulate their culture in negotiation with the culture of host space. Uma Parmeswaran comments that it is characterized by amalgamation and disintegration of culture, immigrant experience from immigrant settlement, nostalgia mingled with fear and problem of adjustment. To understand the concept of home, it is worth to look at the concept of home which "to be once unhomed, is to be always and forever unhomed, if by home one understands an apt location in history, time, community and culture"(Trivedi ,30).

The world of these writers and their life is a testimony of an individual's survival on the fringes of two cultures. In this traversing, cultures either gets lost or relocated, leading to internalized nostalgia or oblivion. Their writings are powerful enough to prove the occurrence of the expansion of margins to extend the span of distance and space between the home country and the new land. It becomes essential to realize the rich cultural encounter, while oscillating between the two cultures and creating the foundations of a new culture during diasporic experiences. Eleanor Byrne in her book *Homi K. Bhabha* writes that "Said reiterates the 'plurality of vision' of the exile, emphasizing on the truth that exile is compelling because of its contradictory impulses of belonging and strangeness, gain and loss"(18). He comments that the 'pleasures of exile can be traced in the literature of exile and a critical embracement of it' (28). Agha Shahid Ali evokes the notion of exile truly in Saidian sense as he states that in this process when something is lost, "the achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever" (35). In "Postcard from Kashmir", his homeland

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox

My home a neat four by six inches (29)

The poem is marked by a sense of both physical and socio psychological sense of displacement. He laments the geographical exile and the memories of old beautiful Kashmir before his exile. The expansive geography is gathered in the picture of "half-inch Himalyas" on the postcard. It is the poet's love for "neatness" that brings only the magnificent beauty of Himalyas before his eyes. The homeland or home is defined in this limited assimilation of memory into images. The feeling of being "closest" to home is haunts the spaces of writing exile through the process of analepsis- visualizing the past. At the same time, he looks into the future through 'prolepsis' by mourning the loss of original home in coming times. Ramzani notes that, "memory and artifice transform the very past that he pursues." He further opines that, "The postcolonial poem, like a postcard, risks miniaturizing, idealizing and ultimately displacing the remembered native landscape"(603).

To note, "in many cases, the memory of the 'old country' is false in the sense that the exile tend to superimpose a memory that may not be coterminous with the real one"(Nayar, 192). Similarly, Ali is not sure whether the waters of "Jhelum be so clean, so ultramarine", or it is his "love so overexposed" that creates the idea of home as a mythic place, longed for in the diasporic imagination or in the postcard from the nation. The poet thus reconciles

between these two spaces of "geographical origin" and "imaginary origin". Like an artist who gives colours to his emotions, he variegates the background with "black and white, still undeveloped" and akin to Salman Rushdie's reflections on "broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievable lost" (11). Home is like a nightmarish image in the child's mind eye, and the only metaphorical image could be of "a giant negative"(29). It subsists only in this surrealist appearance that "exists in a fractured, discontinuous relationship with the present"(McLeod, 211). Thus, 'home' or Kashmir is only a product of thoughts and imagination which can be relived, held or reclaimed only in memory, or to say in a "postcard". The old and new vision of homeland creates a new identity in traversing of self through past and present, old and new, real and imagined.

The constructive process for the search of identity begins when the global and local assimilate through associations of thought and reality. The existence of temporal and spatial space manifests both personal and collective memory in nature. Diasporic literature transcreates an identity, caught between new and old home, a narrative trapped between "de-territorialization" (the loss of place) and "re-territorialization" (finding a new place)"(Nayar, 193). For the transplanted, the old preserves its hold over the new world, and with the acquisition of new identities, the painful realization and awareness of the original and the old continues to co-exist.

In diasporic writings, a constant effort to reclaim and reconstitute the original and new culture can be witnessed by the writers' conscious efforts of retrieving shared and individual imaginaries. Sometimes, the process of cultural citizenship, which can be defined as "the maintenance and development of cultural lineage through education, custom, language and religion and the positive acknowledgement of difference in and by the mainstream"(Miller,2), becomes essential for survival. For Ali, the past is a temptation to write the poem to keep his roots alive in routes in America when for him

India always exists

Off the turnpikes

Of America (123)

He takes a psychological enroute to Howrah and Ganges, while physically he is located in America. In "When on Route 80 in Ohio", he attempts to form a cultural citizenship through "an imaginative re-location within their collective memories, nostalgia and customs" (Nayar, 196). In the process of making the home 'real' in memory through commitment to the recollected memory and its

constituent objects, the poet takes a leap forward to “memo-realization” where collective national and cultural identity facilitates a homecoming to ‘space’ that still claims some hold in the mind of the writer. The local and global become one in the images of “old passengers on roofs, sun’s percussion on tamarind leaves, empty cans of children, voices of vendors bargaining over women, trees lowering their tresses” (124). The entire nation space is compressed within this ‘contrapuntal’ component that travels through trajectories between the original identity and the existing new identity.

According to M.G. Vassanji, “This reclamation of the past is the first serious act of writing. Having reclaimed it and given himself a history, he liberates himself to write about the present” (63). But the poet tries to retrieve his ancestral history when he is trapped by the memories of “cold moon of Kashmir which breaks into the house”(76). The sense of alienation becomes stronger in the foreign spatial location when the past slips from his hands and leaves them “empty,empty”(76). Ali internalizes the ‘homeland’ in the nostalgic question asked by his father, “When will you come home”?(76), by exploring his “imaginary homelands” and Kashmir in mind. The repeated question evokes a counter question in reply, inquiring, “Are you all happy”?(76). In “A Call”, the turmoil of emotions and conflict of being torn between the two different national identities arrives at the point of quite stillness when the sea of emotions is covered by “the cold, full moon of Kashmir”(76). In the words of Avtar Brah ‘Home’ is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no- return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of “origin” (192). Similarly, home for Shahid Ali in “A Call” is reconstructed through the memories of his parents’ love and cold moonlight which seems to invoke a nostalgic sense of being and belongingness in a foreign land, creating a bridge between the temporal and spatial distance in his closed eyes. Home becomes “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”(Amato, 17).

The writer in exile seems to collect fragments of this mythic homeland through the discourse of poetic ‘return’ to a powerful “imaginary homeland”. The “January snow, slopes of Kumaon, terror of the man-eater and the villagers”, all struggle to come back to life by being desirous to be printed on the blank pages. The poet recreates them in writing by relocating them in a new land through “memo-realization”. The loss of place experienced by the

poet becomes a moment of finding a new place for Kashmir and its peasants in “The Tiger at 4:00 A.M.”(77). The possibility to bring together the community of one’s own people with same language and history has refashioned the meaning of exile when the national boundaries are eroded and the past, in the form of words “stalks through the page” (78). The experience of the poet is similar to what Meena Alexander writes in “Exiled by a Dead Script”:

Language....Degenerates into a dead script when the bodily power of people no longer instills it with particularity, no longer appropriates it in the expression of a emergent selfhood...In the battle between the body and the spirit, the outworn script of English as we find it here must be made to open its maw and swallow, swallow huge chaoses, the chaoses of uninterpreted actuality. (1977)

He looks at a cohesive culture and nation which he attempts to revive through writing about his friends, imagination and lyrics. Shaden M. Tageldin writes : “For here nostalgia is a longing not for the simple past, but for the past reconstituted and futurized, a past restored to an imagined pre-colonial, pre-exilic integrity and relived, elsewhere”(232). The idealized home becomes the locus for the writer’s imagination which he re-erects through his constructive imagination.

In “Prayer Rug” he reestablishes his own faith in Kashmiri culture and customs by reliving the faith of his grandmother and other women on an imaginary journey with them to Mecca. The time between the prayers is made alive by seeing them “pulling thick threads/ through vegetables/ rosaries of ginger/ of rustling peppers/ in autumn drying for winter”(40). As the habit of keeping vegetables through thread will support them during the lack of fresh vegetables in winter season, the act of writing and collecting memories will serve as the only balm to the aching heart of the exiled body in an alien culture. The act of preserving the old cultural memories eases the process of assimilation into the new culture. These archived memories in the form of traditional practices, images of kitchen and household chores and psychological presence of grandmother and other women are the only accumulated sources of hope and love in moments of exiled loneliness and homelessness.

In the words of Rushdie, “The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*; fragmentations made trivial things seem like symbols and the mundane acquired numinous qualities”(10). The memories shift from the past and become an integral part of the present for Ali and enable him to “look back in the knowledge- which gives rise to

profound uncertainties-----that we will in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind”(10). When in a poem like “The Season of the Plains” he takes a route to double roots of the past by recalling what his mother remembered about the Lucknow plains in Kashmir valleys, he forms a metaphorical lyric by adapting these memories into a poem, and through these revoked metaphorical images, the poet and the writer both imagine and remember each other.

The extended nostalgia resonates not only with the poet’s sense of buried past, but associates his own sentiment of aching remembrance and loss while narrating the saga of his mother’s memories of grief and separation. The lyrical notes of recollection playing the “Banaras *thumri*” on the old musical records twirl and move in a rhythmic movement, resounding “Krishna’s flute” and swinging memories back and forth in time, space and culture. The right to remember and responsibility to recall do not stretch only between Kashmir and America, but expand beyond the geographical boundaries and move to the plains of Lucknow. The eternal bond of love between Krishna and Radha affirms the strong bond of love between the lovers Heer- Ranjha and the cultural bond between the poet’s mother and the bygone times in Lucknow. The burning incense sticks with “soft necks of ash”, fragrance of jasmine and humming Heer’s lament- all signify the act of remembering and recollecting the monsoons of Lucknow which “never cross the mountains of Kashmir”(44).

“All diasporas are unhappy, and each diaspora is unhappy in its own way”(Mishra, 189). In tune with the idea, Agha Shahid Ali not only longs for the long left and forgotten past by recreating it, but also laments and mourns the loss of beauty and innocence of old and real Kashmir or his ‘homeland’, and therefore there always exists a huge difference between the old and new home of the poet. By engrossing and covering all his distress and helplessness under poetic expressions, he exaggerates the loss. All personal grief transmute into a diction 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). Poetry releases the exiled writer’s emotions into pure lyrical language, thus unfettering agony into a pool of languages and across geographical boundaries. The movement from Lucknow to Kashmir and Kashmir to Amherst does not diminish the pain, but contributes to wider remembrance. Like a translator translating a work into other languages, the poet

has recreated his loss in multiple languages through the shared experiences of various cultures.

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