

Crisis of National Identity in Agha Shahid Ali's Poem 'Postcard from Kashmir'

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Abstract – This paper offers a critical study of the poem 'Postcard from Kashmir' which presents the poets' sentimental and national feelings towards his birthplace or motherland. His homeland haunts his mind and he longs to experience and speak about it in this poem. The poem is introductory poem of his anthology titled "Half Inch Himalayas. Agha Shahid Ali, the Kashmiri author, while being migrated to USA transcends all regional, political and cultural borders by dint of his sheer literary genius. In his poetry he communicates his diasporic sense of loss and exile, merging the international and the immediate. Ali, the eminent Indian author, is the abuse of his society if thoughtful men such as Bhabha and Rushdie celebrate their diasporic role. My tendency is in this paper to present how Agha Shahid Ali sees home, reassert his cross-border, flexible existence, and make an honest effort to turn violent mapping into the ghat of the only world.

Keywords: Crisis, National Identity, Diaspora, Nostalgia, Isolation, Kashmir.

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INTRODUCTION

Postcard from Kashmir is a poem composed in 1987 by the renowned Indian writer Agha Shahid Ali. The poem is an essential part of his anthology entitled *The Half Inch Himalayas*. Ali was an Indian writer from Kashmir who lived in the US from 1975 to his death in 2001. While a Muslim Kashmiri, Ali is well known in America and describes himself in English as an American poet. The poem may be considered a diasporic, since Ali and several other poems have been written away from his mom's nation India and from his native Kashmir in America. The poet expressed his nostalgic feelings of loss of his birthplace and national origin and also how long one's memories of home almost vanished.

The author feels denationalized and has little name. He is attempting to connect an old house that is no longer home to a new house that doesn't really feel like home no matter how hard he tried to fit into his community. The poet, a Kashmiri in deliberate exile, is suffering three torments; regret that he has ever left his house, the agony of feeling like a stranger in the United States that is still in a diverse community, and the inability to live up to the changes that would have happened eventually in his absence in Kashmir.

MAIN TEXT

This inner fight is seen by gazing at a picture of a Postcard of Kashmir (PFK). The narrator has been brutally awoken to the fact of his home relocation when he realizes that all his Kashmiri history remains

a photograph four by six inches, now just a far-flung representation of what used to be. Ali was remembered as a poet at his death in 2001 as a poet capable of creatively mixing many cultural influences and concepts in both conventional and elegant free-verses. His poetry represents his Indian, Kashmiri, and U.S. legacy. Critic Bruce King observed in contemporary poets that the poetry of Ali is focused on fear and "obsessions.... memory, death, history, ancestors in the family, nostalgia for the past that he has never known, dreams, Hindu ceremonies, friendship and self-awareness about a poet." . (1.Ali, A. S)

It is also challenging for exiles to cope with the feeling of longing for their homeland. Even if a person settles in a new location and calls him or her home, a deep desire remains for the home. The poem *Postcard from Kashmir* reflects intense feelings and sentiments; the trigger is far from home and the gradual fading of home memories after time. The postcard that comes from 'home' transfers the poet's imagination to that far distant territory that he has abandoned, but is trying his best to keep his charm and aroma by his imagination. It is the nostalgia for which an exile has to contend and the emotion is so difficult to understand that he feels utterly out of balance. The yearning for his home is so intense that all about him appears vibrant and charming as if he were truly welcomed by that portion of his life that is beyond his control. He's physically elsewhere, however intellectually and emotionally he's at his heart's 'house.' 'Home' is not only the location where the end is; physically,

ethnically and socially it is the most personal relation. People go to various locations with different orders, but eventually look for the consolation and happiness that home gives them. Leaving home is a huge loss and only one has suffered from this submission.

Half-inch Himalayas and the poet here claim that the postcard he's got from his home and he will still be at home' is part of his book, the poem. The imagery he uses in his poetry indicates his loss; time and remembrance make his home insubstantial. This idea is particularly apparent in the poem when Ali expresses his frustration that the home, he describes can never be corporal again, that he can actually see it again. In his poem, Ali uses a significant picture to reflect his dissatisfaction that the distance between past and present is unbridgeable. Ali's poems are like 'impossible nostalgia in his sentences' to show.

The poet's speaker is denationalized and has little name. he unsuccessfully tries to connect his old home in his new state, which is no longer his home, and his existing home, which never feel like his home. The writer, a Kashmiri refugee, faces three tribulations: the repentance of having fled his country, a neglect of feeling like a stranger and the inability to deal with the shifts in his absence. The narrator's internal encounter is unveiled when he stares at the postcard photograph of Kashmir, where he belonged, but is now only recalled. He realizes that his Kashmir imagination is something greater than what he actually is, and this exposes his profound affection for the place he once belonged to. He realizes that his long trip has left his recollection a little out of control and he always manages to keep this remembrance – a set of pure and 'ultra-marine' elements that does not harm the great heritage of Kashmir as a consequence of recent blocks of pollution and coagulation. Exile offers him unconfined, people-friendly space to which he introduces human figures one at a time. Just like exile generates a room for any memory, lack determines what is missing, be it landscape, lover or self:

"When I return,

The colours won't be so brilliant,

The Jhelum's waters so clean,

So ultramarine." (Saurav Sarkar. 4)

In short, Agha Shahid remembers his past experiences in Kashmir in the Kashmir Postcard. Speakers also express a sense of loss, isolation, longing and recollection in this poem. 'Home' is what an individual has the most intimate mental, cultural and social connection. It is a location you expect to return to until the cause for your departure from home finishes. The term 'diaspora' comes from Greek, which means 'to disperse': it is the departure from the 'real' birthplace of a person or a group. Diasporic authors still fail to capture, synchronize and affirm the distress created by involuntary displacement and the state of

'postcolonial' migration in the realm of literature. Their sincere effort is to explore the connection and comparison between their homeland and the region in which they have scattered. They are plagued by the feeling of displacement, the recollection of 'family,' and the agony of isolation from a foreign land or community. Thus, they actively seek to claim their racial identity and at the same time strive to assimilate it into a foreign civilization in a new territory, since they avoid sacrificing their socio-cultural identity in their newly displaced community. In this article, my tendency is to demonstrate how Agha Shahid Ali, the poet born in Kashmir through his writing, sees the home and claims a transnational, complex and exclusively own presence.

Agha Shahid Ali was born in Kashmir to a prosperous and well-trained Muslim family in 1949. After finishing his studies in Cashmere, he graduated from Delhi and went to the USA for his doctorate in English. Ali was born in a culturally and linguistically dynamic family and learned to enjoy Urdu, Persian and English poetry and literature. The influence of these languages was so inevitable and immense that he called Urdu his mother tongue and English his first language. Guston Bachelard once found out that 'inhabited space transcends geometrical space'(47) and that passing the boundary to Agha Shahid Ali implies the same. The trauma of 'unhomeliness' has hurt him as a part of the diasporic culture and inspired him to build 'imaginary house.' While his personality is at the same time expressed between "home and away," his intimate, local and local history puts a common appeal on his poetry. The rain in Amherst reminded him of Kashmir and Lahore, and Karakoram ranges were Hindu Kush and Arizona. Thus, Ali's poetic work is better expressed in mixing various traditions and in conformity with what R. Radhakrishnan said, "As diaspora citizens doing double duty [...] we have a duty to represent India to ourselves and to the United States as truthfully as we can." (212)

Nostalgia is a virtual diaspora syndrome. The poet wants to return to his homeland like other diasporic writers. But because the return is unlikely, it at the same time reflects an irretrievable distance between the poet and his 'true house' and acts as a reference to the recognition of foreign land by the alien and fills the mind with a feeling of deprivation. Rushdie correctly points out that the narrator, observers and even outsiders, will feel this failure in amplified form. For him the physical reality of discontinuity, of his current being in a separate position from his experience, of being 'elsewhere' is rendered more concrete.

Memory also plays an important role in the literary personality mapping of the author, as is very clear in his poem "Postcard from Kashmir," where he says:

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox

[...] Now I hold

the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.

This is home. And this is the closest

I'll ever be to home..... (Postcard from Kashmir 1)

Ali's poetry is also distinguished by sadness and loss. This sorrow and unfulfilled desire to return home, however, is to a certain extent compensated by the medium of poetry which creates a connection between his home country and the 'trans and extra national world.' His feeling was so strong that in the same plain he had seen Sarajevo, Srinagar and Alexandria:

"Say farewell, say farewell to the city

O Sarajevo! O Srinagar!

The Alexandria that is for ever leaving." (The Veiled Suite. 230)

Ali's global and local dedication is distinctly evident in his fair consideration to all faiths. He was born into a family that resulted in diverse cultures; Ali's interview with Christine Benvenuto understands:

Three languages were spoken at home—Urdu, Kashmiri and English. I recall telling my parents when I was a kid that I want to create a temple in my room. And then once I said that I would like to create a Catholic chapel with Jesus' images, and they said yes. It was a wonderful atmosphere full of self-expression possibilities. (262)

Ali was often an 'ethno-global view' as a diasporic journalist. Firstly, he kept his cultural values close and secondly, he sought to imbue a society dominated by global echo. The impacts of literary masters such as Galib, Fiaz, Neruda, Zafar and Begum Akhtar were so great on him and he shifted his position so much that these helped him build a country of creativity. His English writing of Ghazals not only reflects his mastery of words, but also revives his root culture in America - his 'relocation society.' In Ali's feeling of loss, isolation and nostalgia, his near acquaintance with various communities renders him a man with many lives. Daniel Hall is correct to say:

Through his own count, Agha Shahid Ali was the beneficiary of three cultures: Muslim, Hindu, and Western, regardless of the absence of more exact rubric. (Hall.15)

Ali was extensively interested in Kashmir community and as Hena Ahmed believes, "different cultural experiences intersected, overlapped and joined together in Shahid's poetry"(35). He spent his kindergarten in Kashmir. The beloved-Kashmir-Mother expression indicates how intensely he cherished his homeland. In a conversation with Amitav Ghosh, Ali holds his homesickness in such a bold way that he

announced his ultimate wish - "I want to return to Kashmir and die". (124)

But the poet was truthful, revealing his determination to say the reality that Kashmir has been a 'dark velvet vacuum' and confesses with a deep heart that Kashmir burns and 'homes are shot' by 'midnight soldiers.' When we realize that Ali has known closely how his ancestral community was abused, we must recognize that his poetry is in reality a collective reflection of Kashmir's sorrow.

In his poem "Tonight," Ali depicted Kashmir as a location fully pervaded by darkness very vividly. He asserted succinctly, to reflect his own memories of a remote borderland in the Indian subcontinent while residing in America, "And I, Shahid, have just fled to inform you that God is sobbing in my arms."

In 'I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror' the poet was like a few other countries, like he was willing to see Argentina and Paraguay under a glass curfew," and could imagine that the night in Uruguay was black salt." As Ashcroft put it this 'ironical interplay of travelling subjects within and between nations' is further perceived when Ali expresses his identity as both, 'or 'plural and partial' and writes:

[...] he's brought the sky from Vail,

Colorado and the Ganges from Varanasi in a clay urn. [...]

He's brought the desert too...

What hasn't he planned? For music Debussy,

Then a song from New Orleans in the Crescent's

Time nearing Penn Station. (23)

Although the texture of his personality was shaped by multiculturalism and multilingualism, numerous locations he lived in greatly helped him become comfortable with different cultures. So, his poetry, his connections, recollections, memories and dreams, which documented his sense of loss also constituted his identity. Agha Shahid Ali developed a national consciousness on the foreign dimension with the aid of his poetic creations. If his poetry can articulate the feeling of exile and home displacement, his creativity can overcome disarray and make him enjoy his cosmopolitan mindset. Specifically, Keya Majumdar says:

The problem of all diasporic writings, particularly poetry, is to invent, investigate and rework the self by all its broken parts. Agha Shahid Ali poems relate the saga of the anguish, longing and agony of a powerless spectator who sees his beloved Kashmir, the fire-place paradise of property, in an everlasting siege, as the innocent scapegoat for political play,

the citizen, the desire, the aspirations of his environment, from thousands of miles.

Kashmir has always been a hotspot and a point of flash for dispute and cultural disparities, as claimed both by India and Pakistan and to a limited degree by China. The regions dominated by India, Pakistan and China and resulting national borders have separated the citizens of Kashmir into the areas of their national allegiance. This lack of one's birthplace can be seen from various viewpoints in the poem. In literary nomenclature, the meaning of loss is also a dynamic concept, and intellectual, mental, creative social and fact meanings of its thematic representations are rooted. The sense of loss is induced by a condition of uncertainty or where a man is able to be without any irritable factual or reason in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts," as described by John Keats. Long back, Goethe interpreted the condition of uncertainty in regard to both individuals and works of art in his essay *Escape from Thoughts*.

Agha Shahid Ali may be compared to other "regional" artists such as Seamus Heaney, of Ireland, Derek Walcott, from the Caribbean, and Mahmoud Dervish, of Palestine. What these authors share is a base and a native landscape. Ali writes his poetry about the huge loss of his motherland, relatives, foreign nation, and his beloved Cache mire. While a poet with strong sensitivities, he represents dimness and failure. It illustrates the truth of the poet's themes of isolation, absence, exile and displacement, typically flourish. In Ali's situation it was both in his head and in his blood. The disappearance and desire appeared to him a symbol for his lost one who he embraced happily and proceeded to be his partner. He was himself one of the pictures of his homeland, which spanned around the dark point of silence – shahid and shaheed, witness and martyr – his fate unwaveringly tied up with Kashmir's, one prefigured by the other.

Ali's sense of deprivation and longing takes another layer of his nostalgia in the Half-Inch-Himalayan poetry series. Here he concentrates on a particular circumstance as he wrote of the loss and that loss had a tag - India, Kashmir and his own Agha clan kin. Ali's first love was Kashmir, be it in New Delhi or Pennsylvania or in Amherst, and his pen never hesitated to write about the disappearance of the lovely Valley of Kashmir's citizens and meadows.

His view of Kashmir was limited to the mail box scale of a postcard. Take notice of the use of the word's 'mailbox' as in India, rather than 'postbox,' which indicates its incorporation into American jargon. He says his 'home' is cut to inches and still loves neatness and maybe because of the confusion generated by the numerous wars over its annexation and relocation of the citizens because of battle, ethnic strife and natural disasters, he never returned quite to his country. Obviously, he is quite remote from Kashmir geographically, a reality that ironically uses the term "home." Maybe he was born and stayed in

Kashmir for a long time, but now he's obviously living somewhere.

That's the nearest he'll ever be home now, keeping the Himalayas half inch in his lap. One of the most remarkable features of his birthplace has therefore been even less impressive and important. Keeping in mind the majesty of the mountains and the scenery of its native valley and regretting that the Jhelum River would not survive until then, through years of war it will be poisoned. His memory of his house, he claims, would be a giant negative; this may be seen as a derogatory impression or photo of Kashmir in the West's eyes. Their opinion would be unfolded and seen in black and white, like his memories. This could indicate that Kashmir is still evolving as a city, that it is actually still too polarized to live up either to the poet's idealized memory of it or to the idealistic portrayal of its beauty in general in the postcard and the globe. The Americans will not see the grey region between them and observe the locations of India and Pakistan respectively. Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, which is recognized by India or Azad Kashmir, and the Indian-controlled Kashmir have split the native populace in terms of their national origin.

In any situation, the next speaker says that he "always loved cleverness," a feature which emphasizes the irony he now can keep "the half-inch Himalayas in my hand". The vast mountain range has been reduced to a thin, clean image that is definitely not the kind of cleanliness that the speaker really needs. One of the most remarkable features of his birthplace has therefore been even less impressive and important. Though the speaker keeps the postcard, he has lost contact with the land he loves in a more literal way. These are probably the most interesting and puzzling lines of the poem:

This is home. And this closest

I'll ever be to home... (PFK 1)

Is the speaker claiming that Kashmir is home? If so, why would he suggest "this is the close he's ever going to be home? You might suppose he doesn't come back to Kashmir and then the postcard must be enough to replace a real visit. The speaker, though, seems to contemplate an imminent "return" in the very next sentence. So, when you claim "This is home," does it imply the undisclosed location he is staying at present, which might seem to be a bad replacement for Kashmir's actual home? The statement of lines is not completely simple and adds to the poem's intriguing complexity.

The speaker believes that the true sights of the place would not match up to the image portrayed in the postcard nor to the idealized recollection of it in the speaker when he finally returns to Kashmir (in real life and not merely through his imagination). In the closing lines of the poem, the speaker refers to the

fact that his memory is unreliable and that Kashmir itself may be like

“... a giant negative, black

and white, still undeveloped.” (PFK 1)

These lines – and the last word in particular – are suggestive. They might say that Kashmir is still evolving as a place currently too divided to live up to either the speaker's idealized memory or to an idealized presentation of its beauty by the postcard.

CONCLUSION

Kashmir is the main flashpoint between India and Pakistan, nearly at the verge of nuclear war between the two nations. Because of the conflict many indigenous people of the area have moved there, Kashmir is still called the heaven of the world, and many are still away from their country. With this poem the poet attempts to reflect on the feeling of the Kashmiri nation. The central theme of the poem is nostalgia for the motherland. The poet seeks the quest for national identification.

Ali's poetry then reflects on the tales of loss, desire, oppression and cruelty of those who are faced at the same time by Kashmiri who weave the threads of history and of those who are dear to him. Ali challenged himself to construct up a perfect original art and consciousness in order to combat the forces that eventually produce a sense of loss in his personal, social, emotional and intellectual engagement, particularly with the state of Kashmir which remains for him an alter ego, and a rich source for artistic inspiration. Ali's poetry has allusions to exile and Ali's Kashmiri identity. His dissertation blends the environments of Kashmir and America with the contrasting feelings of displacement, Colonisation and later loss, cancer and mortality.

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