IJELLH
International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities
Volume III, Issue IV, June 2015 – ISSN 2321-7065

Shadows of Past in Shahid Ali's Poetry

Bindu Sharma
Associate Professor
PG Department of English
MCM DAV College for Women
Chandigarh
India

The term 'Diaspora' has come a long way from its original meaning based primarily on the Jewish paradigm of expulsion and return. These days, it extends to any group of people living in displacement. Though migration may be caused by some material, political or academic reasons, yet all expatriates struggle with the problematic of identity, loss, alienation, loneliness and socio-cultural discord. Such a group, according to Jaques Derrida, is bound to be traumatized by questions like: "Where *are we*? Where do we find ourselves? With whom can we identify in order to affirm our own identity and to tell ourselves our own identity?" (Qtd. in Pranjape 32). In this context, the memories, recollections and thoughts of the homeland and the past associated with it provide succor from such disturbing questions. Diasporic writers/poets, irrespective of geographical, ethnic, social or linguistic backgrounds, often try to re-create the images of the bygone world to tackle the discontents endemic to their exilic situation. Agha Shahid Ali, a Kashmiri-American poet is in no way immune to the psychological demands of such a state of expatriation manifesting themselves in the form of nostalgia, recollections and haunting memories. The present paper is an attempt to discover how Shahid Ali lends voice to his exilic angst originating from the long shadows of the wistful reminiscences of his homeland.

Throughout the gamut of his poetry, Ali looks beyond the regular diasporic issues pertaining to hybridity, alienation, discrimination, and sense of rootlessness to concentrate on the issues of loss, memory, recovery and recollections of the home of his childhood distanced temporarily and spatially. Many of his poems such as "The Country Without a Post Office", "Half-inch Himalayas", "Farewell", "Snowman" etc. are fraught with the shadows of the past. These poems lay bare the conscience of the America-based poet, haunted by the disquieting images of the contemporary strife-ridden Kashmir in contrast with its scenic and peaceful past. Apparently, there appears a clear dichotomy between his physical and

emotional locations. It must also be remembered that Ali was born in Delhi and brought up in Kashmir and later, shifted to the US. Having travelled from one country to the other and one city to the other for a major part of his life, the state of exile had been almost a permanent feature of his life enabling him to adapt to, accept and assimilate different cultures. Bruce King regards Ali as one of those expatriate Indian writers who have "the ability to tolerate, accommodate and absorb other cultures without losing consciousness of being an Indian" (King 210). Hence, unlike other diasporic writers, he did not lament any cultural or social alienation, though he could never ignore the pull of his native land which haunted his heart as fond memories of the past, and spurred his poetic activity.

A diasporic writer's obsession with the past is a ubiquitous phenomenon. Shahid Ali's pre-occupation with his past in Kashmir may be understood in light of the views of A. K. Ramanujan who dwelled upon the issue in the following words:

Because you can not entirely live in the past, neither can you live entirely in the present, because we are not like that. We are both these things. The past never passes. It is with us, it is what gives us the richness of – what you call it – the richness of understanding. And the richness of expression. (qtd. in King 214)

It goes without saying that Ramanujan's own poetry is also steeped in the South Indian life, and reflects varied aspects of the traditional Tamil culture, though in an ironic idiom. Similarly, Sarat Chandra is unable to fling his poetry free of its domineering influence of his past experiences which compel him to project India as a land afflicted with moral, cultural and financial corruption. Even Shiv Kumar's poems exhibit a similar attitudinal proclivity towards India. However, unlike those who proclaim no emotional commitment either to their homeland or to the country of their exile, Agha Shahid Ali appears emotionally bound to his roots. The recurrent references to Kashmir in poem after poem vindicate how the psychosomatic trauma perpetuated by his displacement becomes the stimulus for Ali's creative outburst. In fact, both his aesthetics and poetic concerns seem profoundly influenced by multiple structures – historical, geographical, political, and familial. An exposure to multi-cultural and multi-lingual influences such as Urdu, Persian, Arabic, and English poetry especially of the revolutionary 20th century Urdu poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz, the classical singer Beghum Akhtar and T. S. Eliot has shaped his poetic responses to Kashmir.

Tender memories of home and past enshrined in the form of recondite images, metaphors and allusions abound in Agha Shahid Ali's poems. What he recalls most is the characteristic beauty, placidity and the composite culture of his homeland lost amid the

prevailing political turbulence in Kashmir. Torn between his love for the Kashmir of the past and his sense of horror at the existing tumult, Ali documents in his poems the discord between a loving vision of home and its harsh actuality. Memories, resemblances and images of the happy past sneak into the present and are re-lived most strikingly through his *The Country Without a Post Office* which is based on a real life incident in which a friend discovered a letter addressed to Ali by his own father on the top of a heap of undelivered letters. The violence-ridden state in the 1990s is visualized by the poet as an isolated land, alienated from the outside world as its post office, a symbolic representation of human communication, self-expression and camaraderie, has been gutted in a terrible fire. The ruin of the post office and the desolation of the city bring out the horror of the present. The empty streets are sad reminders of all those "who ran away/and became refugees." Amidst the ashes of the burnt houses, Ali seeks his old time friend with whom he has had no contact for a long time. He hopes against hope to see him alive, and yearns to re-establish the broken ties of the past:

Phantom heart, he's alive
I have returned in rain
To find him, to learn why he never wrote.
("The Country without a Post Office")

Shattered and deeply anguished at the sight of the ashen remains of the undelivered letters, doomed houses and vacant neighbourhood, the poet laments: "Everything is finished, nothing remains." In his article "The Ghat of the Only World: Agha Shahid Ali in Brooklin," Amitav Ghosh recounts how, while discussing the political turmoil in Kashmir, Ali had condemned not only the parochial forces operating in Kashmir but also the partition of India in the following words:

I wish all this had not happened. This dividing of the country, the divisions between people – Hindus, Muslims, Muslims, Hindus – you can't imagine how much I hate it. It makes me sick. What I say is: Why can't you be happy with the cuisines and the clothes and the music and all these wonderful things? (Ghosh 6)

Evidently, the gulf between the paradise of his childhood and the inferno of the present lies at the heart of Ali's poetic sensibility. The torment caused by the breakdown of communication between different communities signified by the destruction of the post office is matched and further exasperated by the death of the muezzin in the mosque symbolizing the snapping of ties between humanity and God. Ali decries the seemingly endless darkness

of unrest, violence and death that has engulfed his homeland now, and mourns: "There is no sun here. There is no sun here."As the shadows of the past appear dimmed by the thick smoke of the protracted tumult in Kashmir, his personal suffering is unmistakable in its intensity. Lending voice to the nothingness that pervades his memory of that place, he laments:

> Let me cry out in that void, say it as I can. I write on that void: Kashmir,
> Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir, Cashmir, Cashmire, Kashmere,
> Cashemiere, Cushmeer, Cashmiere, Casmir. ("The Blessed Word: A Prologue")

Indubitably, the diasporic and ethnic identity of a migrant is shaped by the disagreement between his native value system and the new culture of his adopted land. Nevertheless, the concept of home, homeland, loss, rootedness and homesickness varies from one individual to another, and one generation to another. Displacement from one's homeland often generates a gnawing sense of alienation, and an absorbing sense of nostalgia, perpetuating recurrent images and memories of the past associated with it which dictate every thought, mood and impulse. This is evident in yet another poem by Shahid Ali titled "Farewell" which echoes Ali's anguish at the loss of his friendly neighbourhood – the Kashmiri Pundits who have fled their homes in Kashmir to save their lives. He addresses his lost friends:

> At a certain point I lost track of you.
> You needed me. You needed to perfect me:
> In your absence you polished me into the Enemy.
> Your history gets into the way of my memory.
> I am everything you lost. You can't forgive me.
> I am everything you lost. Your perfect enemy. ("Farewell")

A similar anguish caused by the sight of communal divide imposed by provincial forces resurfaces in yet another poem where Ali laments:

> Kashmir is burning:
> By that dazzling light
> We see men removing statues from temples.
> We beg them, "Who will protect us if you leave?"
> They don't answer, they just disappear
> on the road to the plains, clutching the gods.
> ("I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight")

Having shared a common socio-historical and cultural background with the Pundits for centuries, the poet is grieved at their absence in the valley today. The wide chasm between the two communities perturbs him as he recalls the syncretic vision of the bygone days when he used to witness "In the lake, the arms of temples and mosques/ locked in each other's reflections" ("Farewell"). Evidently, the image is a sad reminder of the lost cosmopolitan life of Ali's homeland which stands in a glaring contrast with its insular character of the day.

Nostalgia, reminiscences, loss and yearning which distinguish the diasporic idiom is palpable in Shahid Ali's poems too. His poetic voice represents, in its sparkling eloquence, the complexities of relationship between expatriates and their original home. The poet's strong bond with his motherland despite his expatriation may be interpreted in the light of Edward Said's perception which regards an exile as "an unhealable rift between the self and a native place, between the self and its true home: Its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (Said 173). Ali's love for his native place is certified by the fact that Delhi and Kashmir feature perpetually as his favourite locales in his poems such as "I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight", "I Dream I am the only Passenger on Flight 423 to Srinagar", "Muharram in Srinagar, 1992", "Postcard from Kashmir", "Chandni Chowk Delhi", "A Lost Memory of Delhi", "I Dream it is Afternoon when I Return to Delhi", "New Delhi Airport" and several others. Moreover, Kashmir, the place for which he held special fondness, appears as a recurring leit-motif, a multilayered symbol, in poems like "Snowmen", "The Season of the Plains", "The Correspondents," apart from many others, and acquires myriad references in different contexts. All these endorse the poet's allegiance to his homeland. "Post Card from Kashmir" brings out very vividly and poignantly, the dichotomy between the past and the present yet again as the poet sees the image of the vast Kashmir valley diminished to a neat "four by six inches postcard shrunk in his mail-box." As he holds the "half inch Himalayas" in his hand, a bitter realization strikes him:

> This is home. And this is the closest
> I'll ever be to home. ("Post Card from Kashmir")

A similar juxtaposition of the binaries of time appears in Ali's Prologue to *The Country Without a Post Office* wherein he compares and contrasts the situations of his homeland in varying environs. The poet recounts the horror of the current times when he writes:

But the reports are true, and without song: mass rapes in the villages,
towns left in cinders, neighbourhoods torched. 'Power is hideous
like a barber's hands.' The rubble of downtown Srinagar stares at me
from the *Times*. ("The Blessed Word: A Prologue")

This harsh actuality re-kindles in the poet a desire to revive the past and re-capture the bygone days when life used to flow smoothly in the placid valley. He wonders:

And will the blessed women rub the ashes together? Each fall they gather
chinar leaves, singing what the hills have reechoed for four hundred
years the song of Habba Khatun, the peasant girl who became the queen.
("The Blessed Word: A Prologue")

There also persists in Ali an overwhelming desire to recall and recover the historical and cultural identity associated with the rich and glorious poetic and musical legacy of Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Ghalib and Begum Akhtar. Femke Stock, in his essay "Home and Memory" avers that the act of "remembering is always contextual, a continuous process of recalling, interpreting and reconstructing the past in terms of the present and in terms of an anticipated future" (Knot and Mc Loughin 24). Likewise, Homi Bhabha asserts that remembering the past "is never quite an act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present" (Bhabha 63). In this regard, his attempt to initiate the art of writing ghazals in English may be seen as an endeavour to re-create the artistic beauty and glory of the past for the joy of the present, and re-capture the elusive essence of his homeland.

However, it would be fallacious to say that Shahid Ali glorifies or sentimentalizes the past at the expense of the present, for many of his poems voice his discontent with his own heritage too. In "Cracked Portraits" – Ali presents a picture gallery of the family of Ali, a religious man, who had immigrated to Kashmir from Samarkand. The poet traces the persona's lineage and narrates how his grandfather had "sauntered into madness" while his great grand-father, a drunkard, had perfected only in whipping his servants and horses. The poem charts the linear pattern of the loss of the pious and religious legacy of Ali, and laments the collapse of the value system of his forefathers.

No one now comes from Kandahar
dear Ali, to pitch tents by the Jhelum
under autumn Maples,
and claim descent from the holy prophet. ("Cracked Portraits")

His disenchantment with the past finds eloquent expression again in "Cremation" wherein he dramatizes the restrictive hold of the past manifest in his ancestors. He writes how after their death, their "bones refused to burn … /who would have guessed/ you'd be stubborn in death." The realization that his ancestors were exiles from Central Asia in the past heightens Ali's own consciousness of his present exilic state in the U.S. He too is bearing the same burden as they. Similarly, in "Snowman", he introduces us to his ancestors as marked by "arctic coldness" which seems to have permeated all subsequent generations. Discontented, he pledges to defy all of them to establish a new, liberal and progressive personal and social order. The poem brings out clearly the young man's disillusionment with those aspects of his historical past, which instead of being enriching and fulfilling, are arid and cold.

Concomitantly, distressed at the pervasive turbulence and violence in Kashmir, he laments the loss of its multi-ethnic plurality, its compound culture and eclecticism. Being a product of the variegated roots and "multiple geographical and textual locations which include the Koran, Shakespeare, Milton, Sufi mystics, Ghalib, Faiz, and Marx" (Nelson 9), Shahid Ali finds it difficult to reconcile the two binaries of time. Though the shadows of past keep on impinging his mind, he does not idealize them absolutely. Torn between the two, he envisages a brighter and safer future for his homeland. In "Snowmen" for instance, he pledges to break the conventions established by his ancestors and stakes his claim on a legacy of change and transition:

> No, they won't let me out of winter
> and I've promised myself
> even if I am the last snowman
> that I'll ride into spring
> on their melting shoulders. ("Snowmen")

Thus it is evident that Ali's poems resonate with his love and concern for his motherland accentuated due to his own displacement, yet equally strong is his denunciation of the restrictive tendencies of the past as well as the insular social structure of the present. The shadows of the pristine and paradisiacal beauty of the past further darken the disrupted socio-political atmosphere of the present. Hence Kashmir is not merely a favourite "destination of his home-trips," it may also be seen as a "locus of his nostalgia and nightmares" (Knott and Mc Loughin 24). Enriched by inter-textual elements, allusions to myths, history, literature and personalities of the past and recondite images, Ali's poetry is a

vitriolic attack on the divisive and fundamentalist tendencies which have forced the natives of Kashmir to flee to other lands. His poetic sensibility envisions the restoration of the beauty, prosperity and peace of the bygone days when his lost friends return to their abandoned homes. He wishes ardently:

> We shall meet again in Srinagar
> By the gates of the villa of peace
> Our hands blossoming into fists
> Till the soldiers return the keys and disappear
> Again we will enter
> Our last world, the first that vanished
> In our absence from the broken city. ("A Pastoral")

Memories of fellow Kashmiri Pundits coupled with his lamentation of the loss of friends and the decay of the rich multi-ethnic past of his homeland constitute the dominant flavour of Ali's poetry. Undeniably, Shahid Ali's diasporic present flourished under the shadows of the recollections of his past. Though Kashmir and its political turbulence lies at the core of his creative odyssey, Ali refuses to be strait jacketed as a political writer. His political views, shaped by his father's, were predominantly secular. Though devoted to his faith, Ali recognized that religion and politics are two separate identities. In this context, his vision is broad, inclusive and ecumenical. Hence he looks beyond both the shadows of the past and agony of the present to a new future of Kashmir. His is the voice of sanity, conciliation and tolerance predicting a peaceful, bright and progressive future for his homeland.

IJELLH
International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities
Volume III, Issue IV, June 2015 – ISSN 2321-7065

Works Consulted and Cited

Agha, Shahid Ali. *The Country Without a Post Office*. New York: Norton, 1997.

Agha, Shahid Ali. *The Veiled Suite: the Collected Poems*. New York: Norton, 2009.

Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.

http:/www.urdustudies.com/pdf/17/04_Ghosh.pdf.

Jayaram, N. *The Indian Diaspora*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004.

King, Bruce. *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. New Delhi: OUP, 1987.

Knott, Kim, and Sean McLoughlin, eds. *Diasporas: Concepts, Intersections, Identities*. Jaipur: Rawat, 2011.

Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna, ed. *The Oxford Indian Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets*. New Delhi: OUP, 1992.

Nair, Rama, ed. *Trends and Technique in Contemporary Indian English Poetry*. New Delhi: Prestige, 2001.

Nelson, Emmanuel S., ed. *Writers of the Indian Diaspora: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*. Jaipur: Rawat, 2010.

Paranjpe, Markand, ed. *In Diaspora: Theories, Histories, Texts*. New Delhi: Indialog, 2001.

Said, Edward. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays.* 2nd ed. Cambridge: CUP, 2001.