

**THE ROLE OF KASHMIR IN THE POETRY OF AGHA
SHAHID ALI**

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Abstract

The poetic corpus of Agha Shahid Ali is intricately weaved with many shades of region, religion, cultures and continents. As he grew up in Kashmir, his poetry reciprocates his love for the land of Kashmir. In this paper an attempt is made to analyze the role and the character of Kashmir in the poems of Agha Shahid Ali. The paper studies the poet's regional affiliation, his love for the beauty of Kashmir and the impact of marginalization and victimization of people due to regional and political turmoil. As the image of beautiful Kashmir is repeatedly visited by Ali, the present paper underscores the influence of Indo-Islamic tradition in his poetic world. Ali belongs to different cultures and regions-Kashmiri, American, Islamic and Indian that paves way for the multi-ethnic ideas prevalent in his poetry.

Keywords: Cultural Plurality, Indo-Islamic tradition, Multi-ethnicity. Identity, Marginalisation.

The idea of postcolonial poetry imbibes varying aspects from racial, regional, psychological and physical parameters. It is retracing the history and reinventing the lost identity. Simultaneously, poetry as a work of art is under the influence of another socio-political phenomenon emerging around the world. And thus poetry, like any other work of art is under dynamic shifts and it changes constantly. Therefore, contemporary studies in poetry are more

of interdisciplinary nature and now-a-days it lies in regular interactions with not only social and political world but it releases a picture of neo-colonial global world.

Meena Alexander also highlights the function of poetry in reflecting the shifts and changes of the world around us. She states, “The shape of the world keeps shifting and it is into and out of the world that the poem works its sense. Time becomes us and the poems that we compose, part of the fragile compact we make with history, part of the precarious balance of our interior lives. To compose a poem in this manner of reckoning makes the act an intrinsic portion of a phenomenology of the real”. (Alexander, 140)

In this context, Agha Shahid Ali’s multi-cultural belonging laid an ultimate effect on his poetic endeavor. His motherland, Kashmir, where he grew up, is witnessing the agony of war and claims of ownership between India and Pakistan, to the present times. Ali’s upbringing amongst three languages have also created a poetic gallery with fusion of themes and cross-cultural subjects. Augmenting his poetic zone, Ali’s migration from India to United States, has raised the concept of travel, migration, diaspora and cultural plurality.

Reading Ali’s poetry under this lens, it is intriguing to understand the implicit meaning of home as well as the poet’s traditional and cultural affiliations to one’s native land. His poems also throw light on Kashmir’s colonial history and the after effects of colonialism on the present, socio-economic growth of the land of Kashmir.

Kashmir in Ali’s poems:

The idea of nation in Ali’s poetry is composed in response to the actions taken by the political powers for the land of Kashmir. Strolling around the beauty of Kashmir, Ali comments upon the pain and fear of the nuclear war. So, the war and violence are simultaneous frames through which his verses circulate. Kashmir is a place that lacks communication and it meets its voice on the poetic platform of Agha Shahid Ali.

Kashmir forms the center of Ali’s world. The constant urge of the poet to long for the beauty and identity for his land raises the relative question about the political unrest between India

and Pakistan. It is the vehicle which the poet opts to reflect the loss of his homeland which was once called the paradise on earth. In this respect, Akshaya K. Rath, remarks, “That Shahid Ali constantly portrays Kashmir as a disturbed place has a long history and an extensive purpose in mind. The large –scale atrocities, constant subjugation, mass rapes, curfews and tortures in army camps are embedded in Shahid Ali’s poems, so as to show the real image of a place that was once termed ‘the blessed land’ or ‘paradise on earth’. (150, Rath).

Kashmir, has now emerged as the ‘no-man’s land’ which is full of harsh realities. It is about war, ownership, identity, peace and search for a new horizon. Ali’s poetry evolves such perspectives and concern for Kashmiri people. Therefore, it is a captivating task to estimate the expression of ‘Kashmir’, the character and role of Kashmir and the artistic subject of the Kashmir in the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali.

The natural beauty of the land of Kashmir was unparalleled in yester years. Its beauty was admirable in ancient time and it was termed as ‘paradise on earth’. In ancient times, it was a land where people from Hindu and Muslim religion, lived in complete harmony. Thus, such Hindu-Muslim bonding made the land a beautiful picture of strong socio-religious bond.

Unfortunately, with the course of time, Kashmir has sadly turned into a land of war and violence. The political lust and religious discord has fractured the beauty of Kashmir into pieces. It has turned into continuous war of the ownership between the two countries- India and Pakistan. Both the countries claim ownership of the land. The people of Kashmir have been badly affected due to this political and religious war. Many people have migrated and left their home due to unbearable socio-economic conditions and the harsh realities, ruling this land. Thus, the people of Kashmir are in constant search for their identity and their lost homeland.

Making ‘Kashmir’ as an indivisible vehicle of his verses, the poet has raised issues and agendas before the readers about the loss and the longing, the feeling of alienation and exile, for his motherland. The character of Kashmir is reflected through language, tradition, scenes and communication, in most of the poems of Agha Shahid Ali. Thus, it is interesting and motivating to glorify the various roles of motherland in his poetry. It is also compelling to understand the fate of Kashmiri people on the twists and turns of political powers.

Ali, too longs for his motherland Kashmir like any other diasporic writer. His poetry dwells on the words taken from the land to stress his love for the place. In “Postcard from Kashmir” Ali portrays the feeling of nostalgia, exile and loss of identity. He visits his homeland through memories and pictures, through musical ‘gharanas’ or the old artifacts, lakes and rivers. This style of writing creates and recreates the space for homeland through words and images.

Kashmir has witnessed the political and social turbulence for decades. It is now a saga of the loss of love and relations, lost communication, unanswered calls and destruction. The people and their beloved land has lost its identity, its physical charm and its harmonious existence. Ali carves the disturbances and broken worlds with shortest sentences, in his poetic lines.

His words bring the image of horrors that life meets on the street. War, violence, curfew, blooded streets, broken houses, burning monuments, describe the condition of Kashmiri people. The political controversies have given the people of Kashmir a constant suffering, both physical and mental. The Armed Forces Special Power Act has severely changed the life of Kashmiri people, where citizens are interrogated for their links to militant organization. In such case the innocents are also victimized on the grounds of their real identity. This has resulted for the life in Kashmir as a havoc where Kashmiri people need to carry their identity cards. Agha Shahid Ali has brilliantly casted this toll paid by the people of Kashmir in his poems and ghazals. Ali’s Kashmir yearns for a new dawn and new beginning. Ali dreams for togetherness and harmony in the land of Kashmir as he writes, “What is the blessed word? Mandelstam gives no clue. One day the Kashmiris will pronounce that word truly for the first time”. (174, Ali)

Agha Shahid Ali belonged to a heavenly place which was subjected to huge massacre agony and experiences that state the unveiled tale of the violation of human rights. Doubtlessly his poetry has varied wider and deeper layers of study. The basic idea exhibited in all his volumes is the portrayal of Kashmir. Though the ideas jotted in his poems are from distant places away from Kashmir, it has always tried to glorify and objectify the love for his motherland - Kashmir.

The homeland 'Kashmir' is reached through imagination where Ali discusses its socio-cultural spaces. In his poem "Postcard from Kashmir" Shahid is at a distance and links Kashmir from United States. There is regret and the struggle to hold balance with geographic and psychological change. The Kashmiri heritage of the speaker awakens him to understand the complexities of displacement. Kashmir now approaches to him, in the mail box as a postcard. He could experience the love and distance for his homeland which is now subjected to war due to political reasons. The present condition of Kashmir is gloomy which is in indirect contrast with the picture of Kashmir on the post card. The image of Kashmir on the postcard is serene and beautiful as it was once known as 'Paradise on Earth'. The poet longs for that mesmerizing beauty of his homeland which Kashmir does not hold any more. He emphasizes this contrast and says: "When I return/ the colors won't be so brilliant/The Jhelum's water so clean, so ultramarine. (29)

In "A Lost Memory of Delhi", Ali explores the time and era of the life of his parents. He wants to step back in past. The poet's narrative moves in fantasy about rich Indian culture and tradition. In "A Dream of Glass Bangles" the glass bangles worn by his mother provides an image of rivers that are frozen and glittering like glass or the house covered with such glittering material that enlightens Ali's house itself.

The poet recalls his great ancestors in the poem "Snowmen". His ancestors in the poem 'Snowmen' is seen travelling from Kashmir to Samarkand in the past. Recalling his ancestors his poem sketches his past generations of snowmen; tracing ancestral and racial origins. It takes the readers imagination prior to Indian freedom struggle and allows the reader to delve into the poet's fantasy. Likewise, in the poem "Cracked Portraits", Ali provides picture of his grandfather and his father and discusses their way of living and attitude towards life. In each of these portraits, the poet tries to configure the manners of the time and space to which the portrait –lives belong. And, thus, the reader is introduced to Korans and turbans, hashish and Malika Pukhraj's songs, Sufi-mystics and autumn maples.

Ali's poetry makes reader experience his narrative within many frames. History is witnessed and visited through different shades of memory as in the poem "The Seasons of the Plains". The poem "The Seasons of the Plains" discusses his mother's background. It explores the

myth of Krishna and Radha, and the oral stories “on the shores /of the Jamuna”(44). The Indian classical music of the celebrated ‘Banaras thumri-singers’ is drawn parallel to the love and longing of Heer and Ranjha, the legendary lovers from the land of Punjab. The secular image of India is drawn in all the poems of this volume.

In the two poems entitled, “In Memory of Begum Akhtar” and “Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz” the poet retraces the cultural and political history of Indian freedom struggle and the end of British domination. The artists and literary figures in these poems are glorified as the face of revolution

Writing about Kashmir in his most celebrated volume *The Country Without a Post Office* he shows the ambience of his native land in early 1990’s. Gazala Javid Wani in her article, “Agha Shahid Ali: Our Witness”, remarks, “Kashmir incessant struggle for justice, traumatic experience of people is reflected in his poetry. His most phenomenal work *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997) shows how very ordinary and basic facility in Kashmir became defunct during 1990’s when post offices were closed for seven months. As he said: Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox/My home a neat four by six inches”.

The volume nurtures the image of nation in semi-autobiographical, partly historical and partly poetical manner. Such is the aura raised by the poet that Kashmir’s recurrent image is seen in all his works even being in a foreign land. In a nationalistic fervor, Ali has voiced the voice of Kashmiris in this work. The agony, oppression, torture, mass exodus of Pundits and the picture of devastated land is shown by the poet. He sees the beautiful autumn leaves burning and the burning of the famous shrine of Sheikh Noor Deen Noorani at Charar-e-Sharief. He gives record of unidentified boy Rizwan who is being subjected to harsh treatment and stratifies in words, the plight of grieving mothers and answerless fathers. The image of bloodful street correlates the violence and resistance met by the people of Kashmir. Well-conceived, thoughtful and epigrammatic words used by the poet bring together many speakers in one sentence. As Ali aptly puts it, “They make desolation and call it peace”(175). Yet the poet is full of hope for a serene and peaceful future. Writes Ali in “The Floating Post office”, “O Rain, abandon all pretense/ now drown the world, give us your word”(208). In his last poem, “After the August Wedding, in Lahore, Pakistan”, of the volume *The Country*

Without a Post Office, he writes: “Freedom’s terrible thirst, flooding Kashmir, is bringing love to its tormented glass”. (Ali,241)

The expression for the native land is a common enterprise amongst postcolonial poets. The poems of Agha Shahid Ali celebrate in all shades, the character and role of Kashmir. Simply, Kashmir could be witnessed in background and foreground, in twists and turns, in all tones and shades. Sketching the picture of Kashmir Ali sets various perspectives in his poems.

The present study figures out that the image of Kashmir develops a cultural and historical frame in his poems. He therefore shares a nexus between different religions in India: Hinduism and Sufism. He weaved together the Kashmiri arts and artifacts, Krishna and Hussain, Heer Ranjha and thumri songs, through the medium of Kashmir. His beautiful versatility allowed him to move from one cultural and historical archive to another, appealing the attention of his readers.

Personal memories raised the intertwined thematic expressions for the tale of Radha Krishna to the longing of Heer Ranjha. Kashmir as a geographical space carried many shades of Indian subcontinent in Ali’s poems and reciprocated multicultural vision of the poet.

The image of Kashmir also communicated the need of communication from the no-man’s land. Ali showcased the agenda of ownership from the land of Kashmir between India and Pakistan. The theme of longing, love, loss and the question of identity are well expressed in his verses. His poetry expresses compassion for all religions. The people of Kashmir has lost their home and identity due to political unrest, war and violence. Ali encapsulates human loss and sufferings and shares his deep concern for the ignorance of humanitarian values.

The land of Kashmir in his later volumes is mingled with many other geographical sites in the world. War is a universal agenda, which is covered through the image of Kashmir. The celebration of cultural plurality is also given shape through the image of Kashmir. And lastly, by focusing on the writing of ghazals in English, Ali offers to the west, a new and rich form in the space of English poetry. Therefore, the character and role of Kashmir in Ali’s poetic outpouring is composite and multifarious.

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