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Agha Shahid Ali Lamenting the Loss of a Cosmopolitan Society in Kashmir in His *The Country Without A Post Office and Rooms Are Never Finished*

Abstract

This article focuses on the Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali as a poet, imbued with the awareness of a cosmopolitan citizen, with specific reference to his two collections of poems *The Country Without a Post Office* and *Rooms Are Never Finished*. These two volumes delineate Kashmir, his beloved motherland, which has been “the cause of hostility between India and Pakistan since their creation in 1947” and in the 1990s it “erupted into a full-scale uprising for self determination”. The disheartened poet laments the loss of a cosmopolitan society that Kashmir used to be in his time, when the different cultural and political others lived together in peace. But the spirit of tolerance and respect for the otherness of the others is now under seize by the unprecedented show of violence. That dream valley of the poet is in split among the Hindus, the Muslims, the supporters of India, of Pakistan, of Kashmiri Separatist Nationalism, in the name of religion and nationalism. In this context one is reminded of the words of R.N. Tagore that large nations do what they wish, but small nations accept what they must. The poet has a clear idea of the sufferings of the Kashmiri people and of the political scenario of the Kashmir issue, standing as the apple of discord between the brand new Indo-Pak nuclear powers. Still, he does strongly condemn each and every act of these self-proclaimed “jihadis” and patriots, both from Kashmir and outside, who have forgotten the most important implication of the term, i.e., fighting against the darker side of one’s own self.

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, Kashmir, Loss, Others, Love.

Cosmopolitanism escapes precise and definite specifications, and what is more important is that any attempt to do so will be an un-cosmopolitan thing. Cosmopolitanism is what people do and say to engage with the otherness of the other and oneness of the world; rather than an abstract idea. It is the infinite ways of being. However the ‘oneness’ does not

mean oversimplification and generalization of the specific varieties. No universal is truly universal until it recognizes every particular within. Cosmopolitanism also must give way to plurality of modes and histories. The term was first used by Diogenes of Sinope when, at being asked where he is from, he had replied that he was a citizen of the universe (*kosmou polite*). Later Immanuel Kant reinvented the term. He is regarded as one of the first modern critics of cosmopolitanism. However, the concept has been renewed and modified over time, as has been the need. Most of the critics argue that it has three main varieties—moral, cultural and political. The poetry of Ali shows, more or less, the textual examples of all three of these.

Cultural cosmopolitanism does propagate that eclectic, idiosyncratic and culturally mixed up life-style is possible and that it is a fulfilling way of life. It defends against the ideologies of racism and religious fundamentalism. The poet describes how in his Kashmir “In the lake the arms of temples and mosques are locked/ in each other’s reflections”. (Veiled Suite 176) Ali came from a liberal Muslim family and since his childhood he grew up showing positive interest in Islam, Hinduism and Christianity at the same time. Bearing a hyphenated identity he disliked being pigeonholed to any one of them. Amitav Ghosh in his essay mentions that Ali was specifically fond of the “Kashmiri food in the Pandit style” and when asked for the importance of such combination he had answered about a recurrent dream that panicked him; that all the “Pandits” were banished from the valley and their food became extinct. A poem in *The Country Without a Post Office* reads that men in Kashmir one night are seen removing statues from temples; no priest in saffron is left to toll the knell; as if God’s vintage loneliness has turned to vinegar; as if He has poured rust into the Sacred Well. The angry poet voices the bitter truth:

I wish all this had not happened....This dividing of the country, the divisions between people—Hindu, Muslim, Muslim, Hindu—you can’t imagine how much I hate it. It makes me feel sick....Why can’t you be happy with the cuisines, and the clothes and the music and all these wonderful things?At least here we have been able to make a space where we can all come together because of the good things? (Ghosh 3)

It just seems to be an echo of the words of the greatest philosopher and poet Rabindranath Tagore that our mind has faculties which are universal, but its habits are insular. Yet, something of the bond and love of them for each other is still alive:

Five hundred years have passed, but our break up is not final,
And the messages between us never stopped. The wars
did not change the gardens of my Granada. (Veiled Suite 305)

Cosmopolitanism provides an alternative to the closed society of nation-state. It promotes an end, not to nation or nationalism in general, but to the ethnocentric ideologies that has led to disasters in recent histories. In a cosmopolitan society the borders between markets, societies, nations become blurred, though not abolished; the flow and exchange of emotion through it is made more permeable. Ali uses the metaphor of a river flowing freely through nations, ignoring the man made barriers; a flow that branches off from the Indus in Tibet to join again in Pakistan and in between runs through the land of King Porus. Without caring for the political disturbances he brings Hudson, Kashmir and Palestine in the same line. One cannot but feel the truth of the words that nothing in this world is without terrible barriers except love. This beautiful line makes the message clear. Love for humanity makes it possible to cross all impediments and physical barriers. The poet himself feels this when he is physically separated from his mother at her death but find that the spiritual connection with her was still intact.

His mother plays an important role in his life and literary creations. He once says that his mother is his poetry. She herself is the embodiment of cosmopolitan spirit. *Rooms Are Never Finished* was composed at the occasion of her death from cancer in America and then bringing her body to Kashmir for burial, as was her last wish. But in *The Country Without A Post Office* too she is a recurrent figure. She loved to listen to the “bhajans” by the thumri singers about Krishna playing flutes in a cloudy evening by Jamuna. Her imaginative mind could visualize the scene and felt with Radha for him. After so many decades of Karbala massacre she could empathize with the sufferers: “...my Mother was suddenly in tears...since she was a girl she had felt Zainab’s grief as her own.” (Veiled Suite 253) She had heard about how the Huns had once oppressed the Kashmiris; even they had loved to hear the cry of falling elephants off the cliffs. In sharp contrast to them, she remembered Lord Buddha with respect, who was fond of the footprints of elephants. In her death-bed in Lenox Hill hospital she had a hallucination; she could hear the cry of elephants forced off from Pir Panjal rock cliffs in Kashmir. The elephants, symbolic of the Kashmiri people were made to suffer by the “punishing khaki”. This spirit of her attitude to the universe, the way she felt for the entire humanity, runs through the lines of his poems. Her death was, as if symbolic of the death of the cosmopolitan Kashmir, so dear to him:

I, one festival, crowned Krishna by you, Kashmir
listening to my flute. You never let gods die.
Thus I swear, here and now, not to forgive the universe
that would let me get used to a universe

without you. (Veiled Suite 247)

Cosmopolitanism is that form of identity that guides one out from local obligations to identify with people and situations, not directly known to him. Just as her mother felt with Zainab, he also felt for Hans Christian Ostro, the Norwegian hostage who was killed brutally by a militant group, Al-Faran, “the lovelorn people/ longing for God” (Veiled Suite 237). He condemned the misuse of power in the hands of autocrats—be it Emperor Akbar who tortured the family of Kashmiri Hubba Khatun; or the British colonizers who led poet and Emperor Zafar of Delhi in chains to be a witness to his sons being hanged; or the Indian Army letting drippings from a suspended burning tire fall on the back of young Rizwan. The vivid descriptions of these sufferings, particularly the suffering of poor Rizwan is so intensely evoked that it leaves one feeling a lump in the throat. Cosmopolitanism, unlike these activities of people, is about caring at distance. It’s moral and political dimensions are, according to many critics, a genuinely felt moral commitment to the world and justice at universal level. It demands introspection and self-scrutiny; the ‘jihad’ against the evil in mind first and then against the evil outside. This message is beautifully conveyed in the lines by the poet:

Are you carrying anything that could
 be dangerous for the other passengers?
 “O just my heart, first terrorist.” (Veiled Suite 284)

The poet in the two volumes repeatedly uses images of a gardener, a weaver, a postman, a muezzin, the post office and letters which are metaphors of communication -- something that help people connect across cultures, religions, ethnicities, nationalisms; putting humanitarian ground on top priority. But the images of negative forces like cold days, dark cells, midnight soldiers and ruined cities too abound. Enough hints are dropped that the gardener, weaver, postman, muezzin are killed. The letters are piled up, undelivered. The country becomes infamous as the country without a post office. The phone lines are dead. The poet frequently shifts to past tense: “I was not a passer-by in the words of singers/...I was the words of the singers, the reconciliation of Athens and Persia, an East/ embracing a west/ embarked on one essence.” (Veiled Suite 305). The present is ruined and under seize. Only memory of the happy days and a harmonious Kashmir has remained when they were all in love and rain was in their hands wherever they went. It will be very much against the dignity of the poet to see the world die before they die. So, the disheartened poet recoils from the universe to his own imagination, to create a chain of unfinished rooms — distinct yet interconnected. The walls will be mirrors, to multiply things. It will be a house under

progress always, and he has brought the world indoors, no city is left. Only the rooms are deliberately left dark, so that one can sigh here in peace.

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