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Imagery in Agha Shahid Ali's poetry**Abstract**

Imagery is integral part of poetry. It uses figures of speech and other poetic devices. Agha Shahid Ali was a Kashmiri-American poet and creative writer. He has painted Kashmir, India and America in his poems. He has portrayed his homeland Kashmir with two different views. He has depicted not only the physical beauty of nature but also portrayed the contemporary issues of Kashmir. History, culture, art, migration have occupied the major space in his poetry. Agha Shahid Ali makes use of vivid imagery in his work effectively and creatively.

Key Words: Imagery, Agha Shahid Ali, poetry.

[1]

Introduction:

Poetry acts as a vehicle which carries poet's mind image in the form of text. Text again creates its picture in the mind of readers while reading the poem. A cycle of image formation by poet's mind and transfer of his imagination to the reader's mind will get completed when someone reads the poems. Poets create their world with the words. They paint it with the colors

of imagination. Images are used to convey their inner conflict. Images denote the association, close affinity with the physical world around the poet and his psychic and emotional bonding with that. When images recur in a pattern, they become symbols. Once images are repeated or scattered everywhere in the poetic world, they convey or connote the unsaid, unexpressed. It heightens the poetic complexity as well as enriches the poetic quality of the poet.

Images, symbols form the core of the poetic genius of a poet. Imagery indulges in a concrete and abstract objects or concepts giving altogether different texture to the structure of the poem. Imagery thus becomes indivisible part of poet's imagination. Religious poetry contains the imagery related to religious artefacts, concepts connoting religious vision of the poet whereas romantic poetry is full of imagery of nature, landscapes, colors, seasons, geography and common human life. Imagery is a combination of observation, imagination, thought processing and description by a writer about particular place, time and thing. Observation creates a mind imagery in the brain of a writer. Writer imagines the picture and correlate it with some other things present in his surroundings. Imagination and comparison works hand in hand in this process. Various subjects are compared by writer according to mood, contemporary situations and issues. These all processes come under the thought processing. Writer creates an image in his writing. It may be real or imaginary. The last step in the process of image formation is a description. It is in a text format. It is a child of writer's imagination. Writing includes different types of genre like fiction, poetry, drama etc. Fred B. Millet has defined imagery in *Reading Poetry* as: "Imagery is the result of evocation, with varying degrees of clarity, of mental reproductions, representations, or imitations of sense perceptions" (47).

Many writers, philosophers, novelists, poets make use of imagery to beautify their piece of writing. It brings reader in that particular world of writer's imagination. Imagery develops the writer and readers relation. It increases the writer's importance in reader's mind. Reader can experience different types of emotions according to the nature and form of literature. Imagery also depicts the contemporary issues, nature, problems and increase the social awareness in the public or reader. Some imagery leads to action as it contains issues and problems while other gives happiness as it depicts the beautiful description of nature.

So, the study of imagery in poems helps one to understand the theory behind its use. Poetic devices play an important role in its creation. Different poetic devices are present in English language poetry. It is also known as figures of speech. They work differently in poems and will give birth to creativity. Simile, metaphor, hyperbole, personification, apostrophe, alliteration,

assonance, onomatopoeia are some of the examples of figures of speech. It works through the comparison, description, imagination and picture formation. Imagery's role in poetry is described by W. E. Williams in *The Craft of Literature* as:

Poetry, whose concern is to make pictures no less than to embody thought, needs imagery as fundamentally as it needs sound and rhythm. And its need for imagery is a more urgent one than that of prose, in the exact proportion by which poetry is a more compact and economical and transcendent form of expression than prose. Poetry must use pictures to save words. (26)

Poets use all the techniques to make their poetry special. It conveys a particular message in the society. Readers enjoy the poetry. It also gives inspirations to them.

Creative writing works well with the use of poetic devices which helps a poet in the formation of image and pictures. Simile and metaphor are frequently used in the poetry. They are effectively used for comparing two things. Imagery is the feelings of five sense organs that reader senses at the time of reading. Five senses are classified according to feelings of five sense organs such as ear (audio), nose (smell), eyes (visual), skin (touch) and tongue (taste). Different senses are activated during the act of reading any literature. Sometimes only one sense is expressed in a line while in the other more than one senses work together. For example, in a poem the sound of a bird's singing gives a sense of hearing or auditory while in a war poems, it gives senses of sound (auditory), bloodshed (visual) and vibrations of earth (tactile or touch).

[II]

Present paper is an attempt to trace the vivid imagery in the poetic world of Agha Shahid Ali.

Agha Shahid Ali was born in New Delhi and grew up in Kashmir. He was Kashmiri-American poet, creative writer and translator. He was the director of the M.F.A. Creative writing program at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. He gave lectures in the M.F.A. Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College. He was a Pushcart Prize winner. (Ali 85, 86)

Agha Shahid Ali generally uses images that part of his life in Kashmir and America. Images carry the echoes of beauty and bounty of Kashmir. He wrote the poetry collections such as *A*

Walk Through the Yellow Pages, The Half-Inch Himalayas, A Nostalgist's Map of America, The Country Without a Post Office and Rooms Are Never Finished.

Agha Shahid Ali portrays different situations, places, history and mythologies from different cultures in his poems. His views about postcard, photographs, oil lamps, bells, anklets, Himalaya, water, fire, frozen river, air, snowmen and cracked portraits depict the imagery of Kashmir. These images also express issues such as violence, terrorism, migrant issues, etc. The dual nature of images show creativity of poet. Senses are developed through these images in the mind of readers. It may vary from one reader to another. Word paintings of different routes, tribes (nomads, Navajos, Hohokam) and friends unfold *A Nostalgist's Map of America*. Dal lake imbue world of Kashmir while Jamuna river of Banaras. Chandani Chowk, airport depict Delhi. Philadelphia, Houston, Northampton, Massachusetts, Amherst represent America. These are all mind images which carry the attention of conscious mind of reader while reading the poem. Poet draw natural world and manmade issues together. It shows his writing skills. There are some major examples from his works as:

The Country Without a Post Office has evoked issues present in Kashmir. Agha Shahid Ali in "*The Last Saffron*" presents the imagery of Kashmir's beautiful places such as Dal Lake.

Next to saffron cultivation in interest come the floating gardens
of the Dal Lake that can be towed from place to place. (13)

These lines represent the epigraph of the poem. "Dal Lake", "saffron cultivation", "floating gardens" expresses the beautiful world of Kashmir. The beautiful scenery created by poet gives the visual senses to the reader. Kashmir is main tourist's attraction. The purple coloured flowers of saffron draw the attention of poet. He emphasizes the economic importance of saffron cultivation. He also pulls reader's attention towards co-existence and helping nature of people by using the word of "tow". It evokes the "kinesthetic" image in the minds of reader. Kashmiriyat is expressed by poet in these lines. It has also focused on the water boats, house boats, floating gardens which amuse the tourists visiting the Kashmir. The experience is rare and unique. Beautiful imagery, Kashmiriyat and economic importance of Kashmir shows poet's different views about one specific thing. "Dal Lake" and "floating gardens" develop the visual senses of readers. In this connection what Dr. Deshmukh writes in his article is apt comment:

The idyllic beauty and lyrical scenery of Kashmir has inspired poets, artists to sing praises for it in their creative works. Kashmiriyat is often a synonym used for the composite culture that was prevalent in Kashmir. Kashmiriyat has infused the admixture of Hindu and Islamic religious, cultural and musical traditions. It weaved the strong fabric of Hindu-Muslim bonding, communal harmony and socio-religious co-existence in Kashmir. (1)

Agha Shahid Ali writes his thought about the saffron in the *Notes* section of this collection as, “The world’s best saffron is believed to be grown in Kashmir and Iran (it takes the stigmata of seventy-five thousand sand flowers to make one pound of saffron). A paste made from it is used in various Hindu rituals. The color associated with Hindu traditions, green with Muslim culture”(83).

Saffron is symbolically used in the poem. It shows the Hindu tradition and culture. The title of the poem expresses the last Hindu cultural or traditional event took place in the Kashmir. Poet raised the issue of Kashmiri pundit in this poem. The feeling of poet towards the Kashmiri pundit is presented in the poem. Ali also believed in Hindu culture and tradition. After exodus of Kashmiri pundits he also didn’t want to live in Kashmir. He mentioned himself as “The Last Saffron” by portraying his own death in the poem at the beginning as:

I will die, in autumn, in Kashmir,
and the shadowed routine of each vein
will almost be news, the blood censored,
for the Saffron Sun... (13).

The word “blood censored” represents the death of poet “for the Saffron Sun” or Kashmiri pundit. The return of Kashmiri pundit to Kashmir is also a part of Kashmiriyat. It will bring back life to the Kashmir. Kashmiriyat is the representation of communal harmony, co-existence and living together of Kashmiris in a peaceful manner. History gives the evidential proof of Kashmiri’s coexistence and communal harmony where Saints and Sufis had their great contribution in the Kashmir’s development. His imagery is still relevant as the problems of Kashmiri Pundits are still unaddressed.

The Dacca Gauzes from *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, has presented the history and imagery of Dacca gauzes as:

Those transparent Dacca gauzes
known as woven air, running
water, evening dew:
a dead art now, dead over
a hundred years. (15)

Agha Shahid Ali portrayed Dacca gauzes as “soft”, “silky” and “smooth” for “woven air”, “running water” and “evening dew” respectively. However poet has used these three words to express the transparency or transparent nature of the Dacca gauzes. Dacca gauzes was giving the feelings of nature and environment. Natural and artificial world has come close to each other in his poems. The word “woven air” is giving the visual and kinesthetic image in the mind of the reader. The word “running water” gives the sense of visual pleasure as well as audible movement. The word “evening dew” expresses the visual and tactile image in the readers mind as senses.

Simile is used in these lines. It compares the Dacca gauzes with “woven air”, “running water” and “evening dew”. While comparing it with these words poet did use the word “as” so it shows the presence of simile in these lines. Metaphor and Simile indicate the figurative use of language in the poem. It makes the poem more attractive in its norms and forms.

The words such as “woven air”, “running water” and “evening dew” are representing the cool nature of water, air and evening dew. It is focusing on the quality of the Dacca gauzes. The experience is unique, sensible and it gives pleasure to those who wear it. Grandmother of the poet wanted to pass its heritage to the future generations to experience it as:

“No one
now knows,” my grandmother says,
“what it was to wear
or touch that cloth.” (Ibid).

Another reason of passing it to the future generation is that the production of the Dacca gauzes is “a dead art now”. Kashmir was one of the economical trade center of silk production during the colonial period. Poet also described the present day condition of Dacca gauzes and silk production in Kashmir as a “dead art”. He also gave the reason of its “dead art” in the poem.

In history we learned: the hands
of weavers were amputated,
the looms of Bengal silenced,
and the cotton shipped raw
by the British to England. (15-16)

History of “looms of Bengal” and “loss of glorious past” presented in these poem lines. Creativity was killed by British by cutting the hands of creators. They not only stopped the production but also transferred the raw material to England. It mainly focused on the characteristics of British i.e. cruelty, greediness and injustice. It gave rise to the problems of unemployment, economic loss which ruined the lives of many families in Bengal. Agha Shahid Ali on one side shows the glorious past of the “Dacca gauzes” and on the other side portrayed the cruelty and injustice of British.

“Amputated hands of weaver” are correlated with the “silenced looms of Bengal” in the above lines. If the operators of machines had no organs to work with it then there is no use of that machines. He also gave emotions of “silence” to a motionless object. It expresses the use of symbols in the poem.

A Nostalgist's Map of America, a title poem expresses the experience of America through different routes:

The trees were soon hushed in the resonance
of darkest emerald as we rushed by
on 322, that route which took us from
the dead center of Pennsylvania. (35)

The imagery of trees, routes and the highway 322 are from America. Green colour of the trees present beside the highway is compared with the “emerald”. Metaphor as a figure of speech or poetic device is used in these lines. Readers will get the visual and the auditory sense of imagery. The “resonance” word expresses the vibrations developed in surrounding trees due to the vehicles travelling on route 322. It gives birth to the “kinesthetic” image in the reader’s mind. The mixing of different sensations moving from one to other expresses the “synesthesia”. The last line of the above stanza expresses the dangers and threats of highway number 322.

Rooms Are Never finished has depicted the tragic journey of Ali's mother, from Kashmir to America and return to Kashmir via New Delhi. She had come to America for the treatment of cancer. However she died during her treatment. *New Delhi Airport* has stand for wishes of returning alive to Kashmir as:

Haze of April heat. We are on the tarmac.

Soon a journey's end will begin and soon end.

How she longed for home, to return alive, go

Home to light candles... (38).

These lines are full of emotions, senses, images and symbols. "April heat" expresses the "name of the month" and the "senses of hot sun" as well as poet's condition. "Haze" word indicates the state of mind of poet on his mother's death. The place of airport is also expressed by the use of word "tarmac". Second line of poem is the example of "paradox". Delhi is a place where circle of life and death ["life of poet" (his birth) and "death of his mother"] gets completed. Delhi is the birthplace of poet. Beginning of his life and end of his mother's life with reference to Delhi shows biggest tragedy. He is alive at airport of Delhi but his mother was dead. It creates the oxymoronic feelings of the poet where life and death are juxtaposed together.

Exile condition of poet's mother is described in the third and fourth line. "Longed for home" expresses her exile condition in America during the treatment of cancer. She was away from her home and homeland Kashmir for so many days in a painful condition. During the cancer treatment chemotherapy, use of radiations made Ali's mother's life undesirable, unbearable to her. She wanted to be free from hospital to go to Kashmir. Her wishes are painted through these images. He remembers the past days of his mother when she expressed her feelings about home and homeland. "Candles", "light", "home" are the symbols of optimism and faith. "Lighting candles" also shows the rituals, culture and belief in God.

The imagery in the poems of Agha Shahid Ali portrayed through emotions, feelings convey his poetic world. Every poem by Ali has an optimistic note. Use of symbols made it so expressive in its nature. He has depicted happy as well as sad moments of his life.

Agha Shahid Ali's *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* has dealt with the subject of communication technology and loss of communication to the homeland. A line from the poem

“Reach out and touch someone far away. Use your phone for all it’s worth.” is the best example of telephonic imagery.

Once I plugged into the sleep of friends
and interrupted their dreams.
I spent years apologizing. (88)

Agha Shahid Ali’s creative writing increases the perceptions of reader. It is the result of senses and imagery. Sense of “sleep”, “dream” and a movement of passing through them, gives rise to the mixture of senses known as the “synesthesia”. Movement sense gives birth to the “Kinesthetic” image in the reader’s mind. Poet beautifully captured the situation in words.

Action and reaction are also mentioned in these lines where poet apologizes to his friend for his deed. Third line expresses a long time. It also indicates the use of “hyperbole”. It gives a sense of amazement.

Another example of imagery in the poem is telephone call from a long distance. It is portrayed with no response given to it by a live receiver. Poet exaggerated the situation in his poem where “dead woke up” as:

Once I let the phone ring
till the dead woke up. (Ibid)

These lines express the poet's eagerness to communicate to his homeland as he was far away from it. It also shows poet’s anxiety towards his homeland Kashmir. He wanted to communicate with his friends, family members, neighbours, relatives to ask the current status of Kashmir. Ali expressed his pain, grief and mocks at his own problems to relieve himself from his tension and stress. It depicts the issues of terrorism, violence present in Kashmir. Different senses aroused in these lines such as “sound” and “visual” through words “phone ring” and “dead”.

“Phone” is used in this collection as a symbol of communication. Ali portrayed the issues of a migrated person in his poems such as Loss of communication to the homeland, loneliness and alienation.

Conclusion:-

Agha Shahid Ali has used subtle imagery in his poems. It helps readers to get picture of subject and issues present in his poems. Readers not only get the image but also feel the poet's inner turmoil. Ali presents Kashmir's beauty and cruelty together in the poem. His poetry evokes different motions of politics, community, terrorist attacks, culture and diaspora in his collection. Kashmir and America have been portrayed in his collections. History of contemporary period is well drawn in his poems. He bridged the past and present in his poetry by using imagery from Kashmir and USA. Imagination with realistic touch, poetic devices, symbols, rhyme and rhythm are used by Ali.

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