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THE POETRY OF AGHA SHAHID ALI: A VOICE TO RETURN TO LANGUAGE AND CULTURE



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Abstract: 'I don't have a philosophy I have a temperament'

There are some authors who are more sensitive to their cultural scenario. The conception of art as growing solely from the ego, from artist without any reflection of social realities is obviously, a superficial view. It seems that an artist always portrays culture with his multiple point of views. His comprehensive approach comes from his imagination and his faith in culture. This imagination might be linked to the people living outside native boundaries or their perseverance power for their culture which forms the rubrics of return. As Warren and Wellek says 'the writer has been a citizen, has pronounced on question of social and political importance, has taken part in the issues of his time' (Wellek 97). If art and society mirror each other, it is not merely the enjoyment which is reflected but the cultural web that makes art more pungent. Individual liberty and cultural instability have been the preamble of Agha Shahid Ali's writings.

Keywords: Poetry, cultural scenario, social realities, national political.

INTRODUCTION:

While culture forms the content or the matter of Ali's writings, his expression of thought, at the same time, is also influenced from the form of his native language. The language not only provides matter propensity to return and claim but also a powerful medium to reinstate culture. Return is the crux of the post colonial culture. Sometimes it is a prerequisite to reclaim the value of the neglected culture and to make it more prominent on the global stage. This is not physical return but psychological one. This is a return in which two geographical positions work like two poles and the cord of nostalgia brings them together. At one level this may be because of national political upheavals or due to personal loss. This paper reads the cultural and the language aspects of Agha Shahid Ali's poetical world. Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001) Indian born, got his education in Shrinagar, Delhi and then in America. As a 'Kashmiri American' (highbeam.co) he wrote eight volumes of poetry. His collection of poetry 'permeate with loss and bereavement' (Urdustudies.co). The inspiration of his poetry comes from his Kashmiri belonging. Kashmir is the central imagery of his dreams. As he says 'I am dealer in words/that mixes culture/and leaves me rootless' (Agha Shahid Ali –dear editor). His belonging 'includes memory, death, history, family, ancestors, nostalgia for a past he knew, dreams, Hindu ceremonies, friendships' (Bruce King 260). He is a poet who has strong sense of place and related identity. His life in America is pain of belonging in which he searches the catharsis of return. He is not like those migrants 'masala diaspora' who celebrates their separation and multicultural identity. His belonging makes him in one way 'a part of

diaspora' (King 258) and on other way a revolutionist who cannot see injustice of any kind done to Kashmiri people. It is because of such dreams of belonging that he shows so precisely the oppression and exploitation of Kashmiri population in his poetry.

'From windows we hear
Grieving mothers, and snow begins to fall
On us like ash. Black on us of flames
It can not extinguish the neighborhood
The home set ablaze by midnight soldiers
Kashmir is burning' (Ali 25)

Ali explores the truth of belonging. Sometimes he acts like a nationalist, other times he becomes a nostalgic but his theme of belonging makes him more poignant and most powerful voice of Kashmir in the western world. He explores the secular cultural tradition of Kashmir. His mind captures different dimensions of belonging as he thinks himself 'the last snowmen' (Ali) whose mind is full of 'narrative of loss and intricacies' (www.highbeam.com). Agha Shahid Ali explores his heart and mind and returns to cultural perspective of northern India. This perspective reflects his genuine feeling for the culture of the native land and his heart never loses its touch throughout his poetical career. From the method of writing to the subject matter he never loses the co-relation between his heart and culture. It seems the fabric of his very self is the amalgamation of exaltation and compulsion of the loss which has become his identity. Sometimes his tone captures the virtue of mourning and sometimes it mystifies the place and culture to which his heart belongs. Kashmir is

pivot round which his mind revolves. This is the place which lives in his mind and creates attachment and feeling of love like his mother. Its troubles and disturbances are his own troubles and disturbances. Hamlet may be a very good metaphor for him, whenever he mourns over losses and rottenness of Kashmiri culture. Kashmir was not in this condition but now it has become like that, and the immaculate face and environment, which was the very identity of this culture, is still in his heart. Because of such grievances his description of Kashmir becomes more and more painful. As in *NatyaShastra* a lover longs for his beloved and his heart and mind muses over only one thing, in the same way Ali craves for Kashmir. It seems as if Kashmir has acquired the state of platonic idea deep inside the mind and heart of the poet. 'Nothing caused Shahid more pain and outrage than the troubles in his beloved Kashmir' (Daniel 18). Kashmir is not merely a political territory for him, it is a bridge between the alien world and the cultural mother land. It is indelible because it is his belonging which seldom loses its contact from him. Even living far off from his 'beloved' he can still capture her image at his will.

'Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,
My home a neat four by six inches.
I always lived neatness. Now I hold
The half inch of Himalaya in my hand' (Ali 1)

Ali returns to the general phenomenological way of living of Kashmiri life to the highest secular thinking of Indian society. His description and portrayal of life and behavior reflect the Kashmiri perseverance towards the secular life. This is the reason that 'in the lake the arms of temples and masques are locked in each other's reflections' (Ali 22 cwpo). He is of belief that Kashmir 'is a culture in which generosity and hospitality are elevated to high moral principle' (Daniel 18). Ali returns to these things in such attachment that all the issues like nationalism, nostalgia, memory, myth and other general questions of diaspora seem to be interwoven. It is difficult to distinguish these from his poetry. Religion becomes allusion in his writings. The very tradition and myth of Islam which comes as imagery and allusion in his poetry to prove the destruction done to his beautiful land reflect the sense of belonging and helplessness.

'He is driven
through streets in which blood flows like Husain's.
Our hands won't return to us, not even mutilated, when
Death comes- thin bureaucrat – from the plains. (Ali 85
CWPO)

In this way 'Islam exerts a particular powerful force on many of these poems' (Daniel 16). If at times his belonging grasps Islamic imageries to prove social and political injustice then sometimes his mind also mourns and feels for secular ceremonies which he celebrated and experienced in the cradles of Kashmir. His poetry is not merely symbol of such themes but the characters of his poems are also in the same ceremonial touch.

Flute is heard on the shores
Of the Jamuna. She played old records
Of Banaras thumari-singers,

Sidheshwari and Rassoolan, their
Voices longing, when the clouds
Gather, for that invisible
Blue God. (Ali 44)

The belonging of his mind captures the very tone and method of his mother tongue that is Urdu. His captures its tone in entirety and gives poignant expression to his thoughts and emotions. He imbibes the qualities of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Galib and other great poets and popular singers of Northern India. His poetry is like constitution of belonging in which injustice and human ethics are put together. One shows human brutality other shows its sublimity. Both are put together like William Blake's the world of innocence and experience, like lamb and tiger. It is resistance against oppression with diasporic distance and tone. The presence of hegemony is recurrent in his poetry. He is not propagator like many of the diasporic writers instead he feels the presence of every aspect of cultural phenomena as inherent part of return. He may live anywhere but their presence can be felt everywhere.

They tap every year on my window
Their voice hushed to ice. (Ali 34)

He brings all the images of his lost beloved land of Kashmir into his poetry. He says 'I am everything you lost' (Ali 22). It is his inner self which accepts itself as the keeper of all the treasures of culture which he has left. His poems are like process of memory making a horizon from America to Kashmir. His poetry also expresses the images of American set up where he was living. 'Agha Shahid Ali, was, by his own count, the beneficiary of three cultures – Muslim, Hindu, and lack of a more precise rubric, western' (Daniel 15). He uses a lot of things in his poetry from all three cultures because somewhere they suit his thought and stand fit for his return. For example he takes many lines as epigraphs for his poems from these sources because somewhere and to some extent they reflect the sense of loss which is similar to his own loss. He is a true cosmopolitan poet as is evident from the 'Remarkable range and variety of his sources: the literature of several continents; Bollywood, Hollywood, and art house cinema; classical Indian and classical European music; and American pop' (Daniel 16) make his concept of belonging more diasporic and genuine. In this way his return is very cosmopolitan. He does not give voice to his culture only but returns to all the cultures and people with whom his grief suits. So his poetry is not for one place and culture but acts an inspiration for every all the poetry loving readers of the world.

Although he is a Diaspora writer yet this sense provides him an insight to see social injustices done to the Kashmiri people. Although he passed most of his time in America yet the images he brings from dreams and memories⁷ presents the social devastation of Kashmir. The images of his poems, simultaneously, describe the social

wailing and political oppressions.
From windows we hear
Grieving mothers, and snow begins to fall
On us like ash. Black on us of flames
It can not extinguish the neighborhood
The home set ablaze by midnight soldiers
Kashmir is burning8.

Ali describes the transience of existence of human life. His mind does not see any "immanent will" like Hardy, a noted Victorian poet, but an imminent exploiting power of politics. This is the politics which makes the living conditions uncertain in the Kashmir and threatens the people. In this country we step out with doors in our arms

Children run out with windows in their arms
You drag it behind you in lit corridors
If the switch is pulled you will be torn from everywhere.(Ali 22)

This dividing of country, the division between Hindu –Muslim, Muslim- Hindu you can not imagine how much I hate it(urdustudies.com/). Ali illustrates the harmonious atmosphere which has become a dream in the lake. His mastery over ghazals form in which he mingles the socio-political pathos is another example of his traditional mindset to secure what in he has lost. His approach to the socio- political issues seems a cosmopolitan because almost in every poem he takes few lines of great poets from all over the world to make his pathos similar to the men in other parts of the world.

The concept of freedom is prominent in Ali's writings. Ali describes a time when people were allowed to live freely. The life of Kashmiri people was without any imposition. Today the situation has changed, now everywhere is restriction and hope for freedom is an illusion. The sight of the city is not what it was once,

"The city from where no news can come
Is now so visible in its curfewed night
That the worst is precise."(Ali 178)

Agha Shahid Ali expresses loss of a city which was once the paradise on the earth. Now, with so much of destruction done to the city, it has become a desolate sight. Everything is dejected, stagnation has become destiny.

"Everything is finished, nothing remains"
I must force silence to be a mirror,
To see his voice again for directions.
.....
Only silence can now trace my letters
To him. Or in a dead office the dark panes. (Ali 204)

Ali transforms the ghazal form into English and adds flavor to it with his social tone. His return to language is very remarkable. Although he writes in English but his pain and loss reflect the true sense of ghazal His own personality as poet seems to be a true saga of ghazal which comes so close to his sense of loss and the separation that is unparallel

in history of diaspora poets. We may say that his cultural treasure was bequeathed to him by his ancestors like Faiz and Galib but his real contribution to poetry reaches its summit when he so precisely transforms poetry in to ghazal form. At one level it is his claim for his culture against the eurocentric norms and at another it his return to the core of the attachment for which his heart laments that makes him so special a poet for all ages.

So I'll regret it. But lead my heart to pain.
Return, if it is just to leave me again.(Ali 3)

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