

Kashmir, Agha Shahid Ali and His Diasporic Consciousness



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Abstract

Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2002) has mastery to convey the private to the general. Ali has his personal griefs that are grief of being in diasporic and living at a place that never received him and haunted him by the diasporic consciousness about his motherland. He has regrets of losing his mother that about whom he writes in his verse and his writing has a purgatory consequence on all who ever reads his poetry experiencing same kind of griefs, they sense one with the poet, hence his poetry gives universal message. Consciousness which Shahid Ali is talking of is the quality or state of being aware of an external object or something within oneself. It has been defined as: sentience, awareness, subjectivity, the ability to experience or to feel, wakefulness, having a sense of selfhood, and the executive control system of the mind.

Keywords: Consciousness, Kashmir, Exile, Diaspora, selfhood

Kashmir (The paradise on earth) is geographically denoted the valley between the Great Himalayas and PirPanjal mountain range until mid-19th century and was considered the northwestern region of the Indian subcontinent but today it is denoted with a large area including The Pakistan Administered Kashmir or Azad Kashmir, Indian Administered Kashmir, Gilgit-Baltistan, the Chinese-administered region of Aksai and the Trans-Karakoram tract. Kashmir is best described by Ananya Jahanara Kabir as: “Locked within the inhospitable terrain, but professed by all to be a singularly beautiful place, the Valley has, in the course of the twentieth century, emerged as a bone of contention for three nationalisms, Indian, Pakistani and aspirant Kashmiri”. Kashmir was the center of Hinduism in the first millennium and later of Buddhism. Shah Mir was the first Muslim ruler of Kashmir in 1349 who inaugurated the Swati dynasty. For the next five centuries, Muslim monarchs ruled Kashmir, including the Mughals, who ruled from 1526 until 1751, and the Afghan Durrani Empire, which ruled from 1747 until 1820. That year, the Sikhs, under Ranjit Singh annexed Kashmir. In 1846, after the Sikh defeat in the First Anglo-Sikh War, and upon the purchase

of the region from the British under the Treaty of Amritsar, the Raja of Jammu, Gulab Singh, became the new ruler of Kashmir. The rule of his descendants, under the paramountcy (or tutelage) of the British Crown, lasted until 1947, when the former princely state became a disputed territory, now administered by three countries: India, Pakistan, and the People's Republic of China., although the majority of the population were Muslim, except in the Jammu and Ladakh region.

According to folk etymology the name "Kashmir" means "desiccated land" (from the Sanskrit: Ka means water and shimeera means desiccate). According to the sources it is said that Kashmir was a lake surrounded by Himalayan Mountains and it is also said that it was drained by the saptarishi Kashyapa (son of Marichi) in mid-20th century by cutting the gap in the hills at Baramulla (varaha-mula). Kalhana, the first writer of Kashmir wrote also in Rajatarangini (The history of Kashmir) that it was a lake surrounded by Mountains. When Kashmir had been drained, Kashyapa asked Brahmans to settle there. The name of Kashyapa is by history and tradition connected with the draining of the lake and the chief town or collection of dwellings in the valley was called Kashyapa-pura, which has been identified with Kaspapyros of Hecataeus (apud Stephanus of Byzantium) and Kaspatyros of Herodotus. Kashmir is also believed to be the country meant by Ptolemy's Kaspeiria. However an earlier and well known recorded reference can be found in the writings of a Chinese Buddhist monk in the 6th Century. Hsien Tsang referred to a state called 'Kash-mi-lo' that had existed in the 1st century.

Agha Shahid Ali Kashmiri Diasporic writer was born in New Delhi on February 4, 1949 and grew up in Kashmir. He was later educated at the University of Kashmir, Srinagar, and later on in Delhi University. He spent his childhood in Kashmir, and after completing his studies from Presentation Convent School, Burn Hall School and University of Kashmir he moved to Delhi, to do his post-graduation from Hindu College, where he also taught. From there he moved to U.S.A. He was awarded a Ph. D degree in English from Pennsylvania State University in 1984 and an M.F.A. from the University of Arizona in 1985.

Agha Shahid Ali is the most popular and accomplished poet of the twentieth century. The exploration of his poetry reveals a diasporic world in which the dark forces of life threaten to destroy any trace of redemption. He conveys his complex inner state of mind. That is why there is a great deal of diaspora in his poems. It is the result of this diasporic feeling that the rain in Amherst reminds him of Kashmir and Lahore, and Karakoram ranges transform into Hindu Kush and Arizona. Instead of surrendering to the position of a person in exile, he became the cultural representative of his country by having diasporic consciousness. He spends most of his life in self-exile alienation in West. Ali divides his time between U.S.A. and Delhi and Kashmir. His life and works were similarly affected by his state of being "exile". Since, from the dawn of civilisation many of social, political and religious inequalities are existed. As a consequence, all the humans did not enjoy a comfortable position in society. There are so many great personalities, who fight against these discriminations, among them writers are at the top level, they were not demanding only equal rights and equal status, but they also resisted the dangerous power of the literature that forced

them to suppress their feelings. They claim that major portion of literature has been written from the dominant point of view either by ignoring or suppressing common masses point of view. Literature reflects the private as well as the social life of a writer. Writers started to write on these topics of discrimination under a new form of literature called 'Resistance literature'. So the 'Resistance literature' writers in the recent past have launched a liberation movement demanding equal rights and equal status for all men without any difference on the basis of religion, region, sex, etc. So, equality, freedom and justice are central topics to these writers for bringing about a radical change in society. One of the Asian writers of Indian sub-continent namely Agha Shahid Ali, form a witty pair of victims of different types of discriminations on the basis of society, politics and religion etc. and he express the same with the help of 'Resistance literature' in his poetry. He expresses his feelings and emotions through his poetry with the help of different techniques of literature such as: confessional mode, diaspora, feminism, religiosity etc. All these techniques are interconnected with their diasporic consciousness, as he spends his life in exile and he expresses nostalgic feelings in his works. He had traveled a lot so he has different cultural experiences which become a tool for developing his diasporic consciousness that he had expressed in his poetry. He was so much fed up with his diasporic life that he wished to die in Kashmir.

The sense of loss, the memory of 'home' and the pain of being separated to a new land and culture disturbed him. Thus due to the fear of losing the socio-cultural individuality in newly displaced Western society he make conscious efforts to affirm his Indian national individuality and at the same time to absorb with the new culture of West. He studied on the basis of the wide range of experiences which he gained not only from his exilic life, but also from his motherland by different means which help to grow his diasporic consciousness. Through diasporic type of poetry he developed his own consciousness about his culture, religion, land and the people of Kashmir. There is no doubt Agha Shahid lived in west but he was always haunted by the land of Kashmir and its people which were suppressed and excise from homes by the forces. Kashmir has had many flattering appellations: "Paradise on Earth", "Solomon's Garden", "Happy Valley", "Supremely Beautiful Woman", "Switzerland of Asia", to mention a few. In recent times, the epithets like Atoot Ang and Jugular Vein have been rhetorically canonized into the nationalist languages of India and Pakistan, respectively:

I am writing to you from your far-off country.
 Far even from us who live here
 Where you no longer are.
 Everyone carries his address in his pocket
 At least his body will reach home. (TCWAP 29)

These appellations have emanated from the Orientalizing and homogeneous tendencies of categorization prevalent among the dominant discourses. Kashmir's history and people are being held hostage by these dominant powers who have assumed the role of story-tellers of master narratives in its context. Agha Shahid Ali refers to such Foucauldian panoptic states controlling the lives of Kashmiris in following lines, in his poem "Death-Row":

Someone else in this world has been mentioning you,
 Gathering news, itemizing your lives
 For a file you'll never see. (TCWAP 69)

Critics like Lawrence Needham and Jeannie Chiu have discussed Ali's artistic vitality of exilic homesickness, miserable, and slaughter centered on Kashmir. He writes poetry of "compassionate cosmopolitanism," which, fixed in his multi-cultural tradition, not only foregrounds an ethics of empathy across countrywide and civilizing limitations but also

implies an assessment of colonial and neo-colonial power. He laments for the lost identity of his people in exile. Agha Shahid become a voice of the voiceless people of Kashmir. In diasporic writing we always found that writers think about their homeland and their culture. Even in diaspora they were welcomed but they feel and find it difficult and this treatment haunted them. William Safran defined the diasporas as “expatriate minority communities” who “regard their ancestral homeland as their true and ideal home and the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return” (Safran 83) and highlighted the bonds of “ethno communal consciousness and solidarity” (Ibid) as the basis of such survival. This definition of William Safran about Diasporas is well applicable for Agha Shahid Ali as he belonged to minority in their exile life. As his ancestors had migrated to Kashmir from Central Asia, and live in Kashmir in minority as Shia sect among majority Suni Muslims, then in Delhi in minority as Muslim among majority of Hindus and finally in minority in USA in minority as Muslim among Christians. It is his poetry which exposes his diasporic feelings of Indianess. In other words, his poetry has centered itself around self in relation to society, history with family as the core unit and in relation to self, its own pushed emotions and feelings of diaspora life. Michael Collier says “As a Kashmiri, Ali is aware of the historical vicissitudes that breed violence and hatred in people who once lived together peacefully. His poems speak to the enduring qualities of love and friendship.” Although he spent his life in exile happily but he never stopped thinking about his motherland with his haunted diasporic consciousness. His poetry shows that he was pulled by his motherland again and again. His poems prove that he was not only emotionally alienated but also physically from his mother land. His poetry also proved that he was deeply rooted towards his homeland. It is also known that he was feeling alienated in west and face identical problems. It is his diasporic consciousness through which he was known by all over the world. In “contemporary poets” critic Bruce King (2001) remarks that Ali’s poetry swirls around insecurity and obsession [with] ... memory, death, history, family, ancestors, nostalgia for a past he never knew, dreams, Hindu ceremonies, friendship and self-consciousness about being a poet”.

Kashmir remains an imaginary homeland for Ali. He wrote of his barricaded home, the loss, the ghastly violence, and the brutal killings in his homeland. There are personal strains and touches to his poems where he alludes to the marginalized voice, which suffers silently, and trembles his way back to the fire that seethes in his heart. His subtle but strong voice is that of resistance and expression which alludes to the metaphor of his homeland’s continual and conflicting strife that has bloodied its soil:

I hid my pain even from myself; I revealed my pain only to myself

(Ali, Farewell)

Ali mirrors the heartrending, yet true, plight of Kashmir to the outside world. His consciousness about his home’s stark reality is an all-pervasive theme that he blends with the rhythms of despair and hope, desire and longing, tears and smiles. His voice does not romanticize or exaggerates but it is a compelling voice of protest against the continued suppression and exploitation, an entire era of violence, demonstration and a choking freedom. Nothing caused Shahid more pain and outrage than the troubles in his beloved Kashmir.

And draped in rain
 Of the last monsoon-storm,
 A beggar, ears pressed to the metal cry,
 Will keep waiting on a ghost platform,
 Holding back his tears, waving every train

Good-bye and Good-bye.

To conclude I can say that Ali felt diasporic throughout his life about the once called Paradise on earth which he expressed in his writings be it his collection of poetry or any other book. All the collections deal directly or indirectly with the theme of diasporic consciousness about Kashmir. He best mirrored the Kashmir in his poetry and tries to merge diverse cultures and come close with the saying of S. Radhakrishnan “As diasporan citizens doing double duty ... we have a duty to represent India to ourselves and to the United States as truthfully as we can.”

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