

## **Diasporic Consciousness about Kashmir expressed by Agha Shahid Ali**

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### **Abstract:**

Agha Shahid Ali was born in New Delhi, and spent his childhood in his motherland Kashmir. His along with him travelled from Kashmir to Delhi and Delhi to USA. His parents owned a flat in New Delhi and his father pursued Ph.D. in the U.S. Ali had himself completed his P.G. from Delhi and Ph. D from USA. His real life as well as his creative writing was similarly affected by his self-exiled. ‘Diaspora’ means living away from one’s country, or, migration from one country to another which is completely applicable upon Agha Shahid Ali. He was born in New Delhi and died in USA, also spend his whole life in exile; but his motherland Kashmir haunted him. He considered himself a “*triple exile*” from Kashmir, India and United States. The focus of this paper will be Agha Shahid Ali’s diasporic consciousness about his motherland Kashmir in the light of his poetry collection “The Veiled Suite”.

**Key words:** Diaspora, exile, motherland Kashmir, travelled.

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Agha Shahid Ali expresses the benefits, that he gained through his state of being in “*Exile*”, in his article in the magazine “*Live Like The Banyan Tree*”, when he left Kashmir for Delhi. It is an exile that nourishes passion for the homeland. Agha Shahid Ali’s name as a diasporic poet is undoubted among diasporic Indian writers in the United States, or even other countries with a distinct Indian diasporic consciousness. He expresses his diasporic consciousness of loss and exile in his poetry and incorporates the international and the national. Ali is a renowned Indian English poet who expresses, nostalgic consciousness, by his poetry the exploitation done to with his original society. The expression of his diasporic consciousness through his poetry has a worldwide appeal. As a result of 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. His poetry is a genuine effort to make this culture accessible to the all human race. There are different themes of his poetry such as conflicted thoughts and emotions of exile, home sickness, colonization, migration, failure, disease, and death etc. Shahid Ali has traveled a lot and so he has different cultural experience which develops his diasporic consciousness that he had expressed in his poetry. So his poetry shows links between Islamic and Christian cultures, South Asian and Native American histories. Travel forever participates a important role in Ali’s life. As Lawrence Needham has noted, “*Being in-between comes naturally to Ali*” (63). “*Growing up in Kashmir, Ali lived in America as a child and studied in New Delhi before he traveled again to the United States as a graduate student*” (Islam 263). He then settled in America as a poet and professor and taught in several universities across the country. “*To be in a diaspora, writing the exile’s or the expatriate’s poetry, is a privileged historical site, today sometimes facilely so,*” Ali writes in 1999 (53).

In “A Tribute to Agha Shahid Ali: After You,” Christopher Merrill recalls that “Ali claimed he was exiled from Kashmir, from India, and from his mother tongue, Urdu. However, Ali’s travel within and between America and South Asia is largely voluntary”.

Agha Shahid Ali was born in New Delhi, into a respectable Kashmiri family of Shiite Muslims. The emigration started from the very beginning of his ancestors who came to Kashmir from Central Asia. Ali had represented their diasporic consciousness through his poetry. His parents Agha Ashraf Ali and Sufia Nomani had not migrated completely from Kashmir, but partially because they spend from Kashmir to Delhi and Delhi to USA, Their diasporic consciousness is also depicted by Ali's poetry. His parents owned a flat in New Delhi where they spent their winters. As his father, Agha Ashraf Ali, did his Ph.D. at Ball State University in the U.S. He taught at Jamia Millia University in New Delhi. When his parents moved to the US for their doctoral studies, he spent three years at a school in Muncie Indiana. He spent only his childhood in Kashmir, as after completing his graduation he joined his at Hindu College for pursuing his masters in English Literature, Delhi University. From there he moved to U.S. for pursuing his PhD degree in English from Pennsylvania State University and an M.F.A. from the University of Arizona. When he moved to the America, his brother Agha Iqbal was already there; and their sister joined them later. But their parents continued to live in Kashmir. Agha Shahid Ali's life and work were similarly affected by his state of being in "exile" even though he was self-exiled but he had diasporic consciousness about his motherland. So he moved from Kashmir to Delhi and from Delhi to Pennsylvania which is also presented by him through his autobiographical poetry. He held teaching positions at nine universities and colleges in India and the United States; but he was haunted by his motherland and this diasporic consciousness is released by him through his frequent visits to Kashmir and also by his expression of feelings and emotions in his poetry with the help of diaspora technique. During his settlement in USA, he continuously visits his motherland Kashmir every summer to be with his parents, friends and relatives. This made him a personally observer to the disturbances in Kashmir. He settled in United States as a professor of English and creative writing. His mother was suffering with brain tumour and she had been operated in 1996 in the Lennox Hospital, but the surgery did not succeed and died in 1997. At that time Agha Shhid Ali and his brother Agha Iqbal were teaching at the University of Massachusetts, and their sister Hena was also pursuing her Ph.D from there. So they decided to take her from Amherst to Kashmir for bury. This terrifying journey is reformed in Ali's poem "From Amherst to Kashmir". After his mother's death, he could visit Srinagar only once in August 1999. In the same year, he was appointed Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Utah. He was planning to return to Srinagar in the winter of 2000 but that could not happen as he too was diagnosed with cancer. He died on December 8, 2001, at the age of 52 years. Ali feel so much fed up with his diasporic life that he knows that he was not able to spend his whole life in his motherland and so he wishes to spend that after his death, but unfortunately he was not able to fulfill his wish even after his death. While the

descriptions of home which appears inaccessible to him but disturb his perception so much that he, as if in a daydream, says in his poem “A Call”:

I close my eyes. It doesn't leave me,  
The cold moon of Kashmir  
which breaks into my house.

Shahid Ali is studied on the basis of the wide range of experiences which he gained not only from his exile life, but also from his motherland by different means which help to grow his diasporic consciousness. He came across different cultures directly or indirectly such as Hindu cultures from his birth land India, Islamic culture from his religion Islam and Christian culture from his diasporic land USA. According to a British Anthropologist Sir E.B. Tylor “Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, customs, and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”. So, it is clear from this definition that Shahid Ali had full “knowledge” of “belief, art, morals, customs,” etc not only of Islam but of Hindu as well as of Christian, which help him to develop his own consciousness which he expressed through diaspora type of poetry . So he does the exchange of cultures, and values; the transmigration from one culture to another also from one nation to another. So, as Muslim from India in America, he owned three major world cultures (Hindu, Muslim, and Christian). As a Kashmiri from Indian subcontinent (India and Pakistan) writing in English, he had three major world cultures (Kashmiri, Hindustani, Pakistani). As a Kashmiri Indian writing in West about his motherland and diaspora life, he has three cultures (Kashmir, India and West). There is no doubt in it that Agha Shahid Ali spends most of his life in far off America but he was never far away from his mother land mentally. He feels much more feelings of isolation than that of diaspora, because his poetry depicts that his consciousness is much more than that of a diaspora writer. He has left his motherland for gaining higher studies, but it was ‘blessing in disguise’ for him as it is his exile that feeds his feelings and emotions about his mother land and he gives vent to them in the form of diasporic poetry. It gives him opportunity that his mother land ‘Kashmir’ becomes the imaginary homeland represented by him in his nostalgic technique of poetry. Agha Shahid Ali clearly describes his distinctive viewpoint towards the diasporic space he occupied. An Indian-American, a Kashmiri- Indian, a Shiite-Muslim, the hyphenated survival to him did not involve a life on the periphery or a miserly force. Ali was a man of multiple existences, because he has a close contact with different cultures. So his poetry is amalgam of sense of defeat, solitude, and yearning. His poetry reflects his Muslim, Hindu and Western heritage.

Daniel Hall rightly opines: “Agha Shahid Ali was, by his own count, the beneficiary of three cultures- Muslim, Hindu, and for lack of more precise rubric, Western.” (Hall.15)

Shahid has always been in exile, ever since he started writing poetry and ever since it has been recorded so his poetry is full of diasporic consciousness. He wrote his first poem at the age of 12 and always felt enthusiastic about his craft. Even when he was in India, he used to send his poems to various international journals without being ashamed of rejections. Most of his poems are marked by the sense of sorrow and that of loss. Exile is always an undesired state for every human being. Nobody likes to live away from their homeland and from their loved ones but Shahid went to Delhi to do his post-graduation, since that time, most of these poems bear a sense of sorrow and also a sense of loss in them and show his diasporic consciousness. So, Agha Shahid Ali accepts self- exile in order to pursue his career. However, in the land of dreams he had dreamed about his homeland. He is the Kashmiri poet, in spite of being migrated to USA surpasses all manmade environmental and cultural boundaries with the help of his complete poetic intensity. He tells the story of his tormented land in a way that only a poet can through a breath taking use of language. Thus being a member of the diasporic group of people the suffering and pain of ‘unhomeliness’ obsessed him and prompted him to generate ‘imaginary homeland’ in his imaginations and express that through his thoughts in the form of his poetry. His poetry is full of diasporic consciousness, with references to exile and his identity as a Kashmiri. So his poetry is mixed with the scenery of his motherland Kashmir and diaspora America. Ali spent his childhood in Kashmir so his consciousness has come to maturity in his motherland and then in exile at USA he in search of that diasporic consciousness. The phrase beloved-Kashmir-mother shows how deeply he was in love with his homeland. Ali was broadly engaged with the culture of Kashmir and as a result of which, as Hena Ahmed opines, “*different cultural experience intersected, overlapped and came together in Shahid’s poetry*”. Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry describes the story of the remembrance, desire and pain of a powerless spectator who sees from thousands of miles away his favorite Kashmir. Kashmir which was ones called heaven of earth but has now turned in to hell. The valley is everywhere overwhelmed, being the innocent scapegoat of a political game played by different agencies. Ali is the Master-Poet of Kashmir, a fan who immortalizes the beloved in exceptional artistic ornaments called poems. Most of the poems of Ali are directly or indirectly concerned with his motherland Kashmir. These poems disclose the present actual situation by the son the land. They work like tongue for the dumb people of suffering Kashmir. He is extremely worried about his colonized motherland Kashmir which was subject to the repercussion of colonialism from the ancient times and now at present neocolonial order. Ali, lamenting the destruction of

Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir, thinks about the future of his motherland as a devoted son even though in exile. So his poetry will also be remembered for its nostalgic homage to Kashmir- the lost and damaged homeland. The benumbing of a community is evoked in a matchless poetic technique and Amitav Ghosh pays the following tribute:

“If the twin terrors of insurgency and repression could be said to have engendered any single literary leitmotif, it is surely the narrative of the loss of Paradise. [...] [T]he reason why there is no greater sorrow than the recalling of times of joy, is [...] that this is a grief beyond consolation (Ghosh 308, 313).”

Some 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. Ali's poems of journey in two books, “*A Nostalgist's Map of America*” (1991) and “*Rooms Are Never Finished*” (2001) to examine how he widens distresses about his home to other marginalized cultures. His cosmopolitanism is especially meaningful if read in the context of postwar American travel poetry and enables review of the association between “*home*” and “*foreign*,” between local issues and universal apprehensions. Comparing the beauty of the place with that of heaven Agha Shahid Ali in the poem, “*The Last Saffron*” considers his motherland Kashmir as exceptionally admirable of being called a “*paradise*”. The poet quotes the famous expressions of King Jahangir, when he makes praise about the magnificence of Kashmir; “*If there is paradise on earth / it is this, it is this, it is this*” (Ali 15). His poetry suggests a sense of dislocation that seems about original, and visualizes a reaching out to a home in the past, especially making center of attention on the figure of Kashmir as a remembered cultural space, as a physical place on which destroy and damage have been visited by different agencies and as a poetic ‘Paradise’ which once was, and even now is, paradise in spite of the fire and murder that has cleaned through it, in spite of the mass departures and the demonisation. He tried to rewrite the sense of self i.e. Kashmir. He wrote much of his poetry in self-exile, and not while living in the in his motherland but most of his poetry deals with his motherland and his diasporic consciousness about it. He seems to be witnessed himself the situation of Kashmir and having a perfect sense of a historian. He reflects clearly the situation of 1990s of the valley for which so many agencies work and they are responsible for its current situation.

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”.

All of the Ali’s collections of poetry deal directly or indirectly with the theme of diasporic consciousness about Kashmir. The main themes of *“Bone Sculpture”* are love, loss, memory, death, cultural dislocation, nostalgia etc. Almost all these themes are related with his diasporic consciousness of Kashmir in one way or another. There are most of the poems which shows his diasporic consciousness in the *“In Memory Of Begum Akther and Other Poems”* Ali’s nostalgia for Kashmir is supplemented by his engagement with his life in Delhi, a city one home to the grand Mughals. The poem mourns the death of his favorite singer Begum Akhtar. In the poem *“A Walk Through the Yellow Pages”* the comedy is mysterious and gloomy touched with an element of the ugly; all this is related with the ominous mode of the poet about his diasporic consciousness about his motherland Kashmir. The poem *“The Half-Inch Himalayas”* was the first book of Ali to be published in America, in this book he returns to his past and felt diasporic conscious about his motherland. In this his personal memories are of Kashmiri recollection places and spaces as imaginary maps for border crossings. In the *“A Nostalgist’s Map of America”* Ali takes us on a trip from corner to corner of America and other counties through imaginary conversations between banish and a inhabitant. In this he focused on themes of homesickness, miserable, worldwide poetics and condition of banish, which relate with the gloomy nostalgia of Kashmir. *“The Beloved Witness: Selected Poems”* deals with disturbing and logical conflict in the brain of the poet that makes him agitated. *“The Country Without a Post Office”* was originally called *“Kashmir Without a Post Office”*, it depicts disturbance on the motherland of poet i.e. Kashmir .In the poem *“Rooms Are Never Finished”* he depict his mourn for the death of his mother and with her loss there comes stream of consciousness in his mind about his motherland. His collection of ghazals *“Call Me Ishmael Tonight”* he had used ghazal as an instrument to express his diasporic consciousness about his mother land Kashmir., In *“The Rebel’s Silhouette”*: Selected Poems and edited book of ghazals, he translated the works of great Urdu poet and have translated their sense in to English which help him in the exile life. As an editor of *“Ravishing DisUnities”*: Real Ghazals in English, he described the long history of interest of Western writers with ghazals, as well as offering a brief theoretical reading of the form itself, and through this edit book he wants to preserve and transmit his diasporic culture even in his exile land.

Thus Ali’s poetic work is best mirrored when he tries to merge diverse cultures and matches with the saying of R. Radhakrishnan as: *“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.”*

Like other Indian poets Agha Shahid Ali also had to tackle the means by which he can express his feelings and he chose poetry that also in English language. But most of the Indian English writers consider as a foreign language, while as he sees it as a natural choice. As the poetry to his is an expression of different cultures such as Indian, Kashmiri and American; and Islamic, Hindu and Christian etc. The amalgam of these cultures co-exists in him, and leaves him in the feeling of diasporic consciousness. On the intellectual side, his poems are full the expression of his inner diasporic feelings. As he spend his life in liberal and secular, with his family environment and exile life in West, which is represented by his poetry through autobiographical technique. In his family Persian, Urdu and English were not only spoken but its culture was practiced that haunts him in his exile life and was expressed by him through his diasporic poetry. There is no doubt that Ali writes in English but the sense is of India, so he is considered Indian English poet. He was always haunted in his exile life by motherland's great personalities such as: Habba Khatun, Ghalib, Faraz and Faiz; Begum Akhtar etc. He was born in a broad-minded family who has secular type of approach towards the life which is represented by his poetry even in exile life through the diasporic technique. He is haunted by the legends of Laila-Majnoon and Heer-Ranjha etc, which is found in his poetry even though he spend his life in scientific Western culture. He is haunted with the Indian festivals such as: Muharram, Eid, Dieali, Shab-e-barat, even though his exile life festival Christmas etc about this is written in his poetry. He writes so many poems upon Zainab, Hussain, Karbala, Krishna, Shiva, Parvati Radha etc. Agha Shahid Ali tried to immortalize the sense of self i.e. Kashmir which he haunts in his exile life with the help of poetry. He wrote much of his poetry in self-exile, and not while living in the motherland but about position of his motherland Kashmir. He seems to be witnessed himself the actual suffering situation of Kashmir and having a perfect sense of a historian. He reflects contemporary situation of the valley for which so many agencies work for their exploitation. There are a large number of poems which depicted directly or indirectly Ali's nostalgic feelings about his motherland. The important poems of his diasporic feeling are as: *"The Country Without a Post Office"*, *"I Dream I Am the Only Passenger on Flight 423 to Srinagar"*, *"I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight"*, *"The Correspondent"*, *"The Last Saffron"*, *"Tonight"*, *"I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror"*, *"A Pastoral"*, *"Dear Shahid"*, *"Bones"*, *"Another Death"*, *"Pilgrimage to Amarnath"*, *"Autumn in Srinagar"*, *"Painting a Kashmir Landscape"*, *"Legends of Kashmir"*, *"Postcard from Kashmir"*, *"The Dream of Glass Bangles"*, *"Snowmen"*, *"The Seasons of the Plains"*, *"Survivor"*, *"A Call"*, *"I Dream It Is Afternoon When I Return to Delhi"*, *"A Lost Memory of Delhi"*, *"Houses"*, *"Medusa"*, *"The Youngest of the Graeae"*, *"Son et Lumiere at Shalimar Garden"*, *"From Amherst to Kashmir"* etc. Realizing the fact that Ali closely perceived how



his indigenous culture was exploited we must acknowledge that his poetry is indeed the collective representation of the grief of the whole Kashmir. Yerra Sugarman rightly says:

Shahid's poetry casts its craft and concerns upon histories of loss, injustices, and brutality, particularly those endured by his ravaged Kashmir.(129)

Agha Shahid Ali's most of ghazals are directly or indirectly related with his diasporic consciousness, which he felt in his exile life in USA. These ghazals were posthumously published in a collection of poetry titled "*Call Me Ishmael Tonight*" by his siblings, Agha Iqbal and Hena Ahmad. The main thrust of these ghazals is no different than the rest of his poetry which he expressed through diaspora technique of poetry. However, what stands out in these ghazals is the absolutely new expression of poetry drawn from Indo-Persian tradition, which Ali brings in into English poetry. As in Persian, "*ghazal*" literally means "*talking to/of the beloved*." In one of his couplets Agha Shahid Ali makes clear the meaning of his name: "*They ask me to tell them what Shahid means / Listen: it means The Beloved in Persian, witness in Arabic*" (2003, 25). This overlap of the two meanings must have drawn this "Beloved Witness" to the ghazal form; this means that he depicts in ghazal his autobiographical life which he witnessed and experienced himself i.e. contemporary situation of Kashmir. So, he had used ghazal as an instrument to express his diasporic consciousness about his mother land Kashmir. Ghazal, by general acknowledgement, is a form that is acutely fixed in a certain traditional conventions. Hence, to imagine of writing ghazals in English involves the risk of using "form for form's sake." Why, then, did Agha Shahid Ali take the risk of not just writing and translating ghazals into English himself, but also inviting American poets to write ghazals in English as well? This question is best answered by Shahid Ali himself when he says, "What is someone of nearly two equal loyalties to do but lend, almost gift them to each other and hope that sooner or later the loan will be forgiven and they will become each other's?" (1992, 2). Apart from these stylistic features of the traditional ghazal form, these ghazals also reflect his diasporic consciousness of international politics, in particular an awareness of the political scene on the Kashmir. There is a unique nostalgic expression alongside the metaphysical anguish: "The birthplace of written language is bombed to nothing. / How neat, dear America, is this game for you?" (*Shahid: 2003*, 26). Again referring to the politics of Kashmir, Ali says, "And who is the terrorist, who the victim? / We'll know if the country is polled in real time" (*ibid.* 32). Agha Shahid Ali manipulated the ghazal form at three different levels in his poetry: he himself composed ghazals in English, he translated ghazals of famous maestros and he inspired many American poets to write "real ghazals" in English. Agha Shahid Ali asks his readers to see culture not as a static, fixed or given entity, but as something dynamic in its interaction with other cultures. He demonstrates the performative processes of cultural

engagement. In sharing his experience of multiple linguistic, geographical, and historical dislocations, and allowing his contemporary American poets the same experience of border crossing by inviting them to write in a poetic form completely new to them. To introduce the *ghazal* to a wide audience in English, Ali has relied not so much on his own work as on an [sic] another kind of bouquet, an intercultural collaboration, “*Ravishing Dis-Unities: Real Ghazals in English*”, published last fall by University Press of New England. It is a collection of *ghazals* written in English by 105 poets, as well as two *ghazals* by Ghalib and Faiz in translation. Although it contains none by Ali, each poem observes Ali’s code of the *ghazal*’s basic rules in English. The writers are a diverse lot, including South Asians, the occasional Irishman and Englishman, some of Ali’s best students, and US masters such as William Matthews, John Hollander and John Edgar Wideman. Besides writing *ghazals* himself, Agha Shahid Ali also translated *ghazals* by masters such as Mirza Ghalib, Ahmad Faraz and Faiz Ahmed Faiz. In his introduction to *Ravishing DisUnities*, Ali explains that it is not possible to stick to formal *ghazal* restrictions in translations because “*it would be impossible to sustain a convincing qafiaógiven the radifówhen translating couplet after couplet*” (2000, 11). He has the people who become famous for introducing and popularizing the most important form of verse i.e. ‘Gazal’ form in American poetry. So he does the exchange from one poetic form i.e. English verse to another i.e. Urdu verse. As Shahid Ali tells us, the *ghazal* is an Urdu poetic form consisting of “*autonomous or semi-autonomous couplets that are united by a strict scheme of rhyme, refrain and line length*”. So he exploits his unique diasporic consciousness to use this traditional poetic form to write English poetry. The last volume of Ali, “*Call Me Ishmael Tonight*” is a book of *Ghazals* in English. This act of writing *ghazals* in English was Ali’s way of merging his two worlds i.e. Kashmir, his mother land and America, his diaspora land. He finds his correct expression with *ghazal* – the form, the house is oriental, furnished with occidental language and the emotion is that of in-between, of diaspora. He succeed in his mission by molding the language of reason and pragmatism to go well with his own character and culture to express the diasporic consciousness by an oriental poet with the help of diasporic technique. Hayden Carruth notes “*Few poets in this country have such a voice or such a topic*”. Whole world shared poet’s grief and the mourning became wider. Carol Muske (2002) writes, “*Ali’s voice possesses this contemporary agelessness. Ali grew up in Kashmir, a citizen of that mountainous country torn apart by violence, its colonial past and present status as a disputed territory...*”

In his introduction, Ali has created a *ghazal*-writing primer for first-timers. Poet Christopher Merrill calls the collection “*a marvelous gift to the literary world,*” and speculates that “*nothing will ever be quite the same in our poetry.*”

In short, it is clear from above that, Ali felt diasporic throughout his life about his mother land Kashmir which he expressed in his actual life as well as through his creative writing. Amitav Ghosh being close to him in real life. Kashmir left such a great influence on Ali that in a conversation with Amitav Ghosh he disclosed his final wish- '*I would like to back to Kashmir to die*'(124).

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