

Pluralistic Politics: Intertextuality in Agha Shahid Ali's *The Country Without a Post Office*

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Abstract

Agha Shahid Ali's *The Country Without a Post Office* is a collection that is steeped in the politics of Kashmir. It is a poetic manifesto of resistance, hybridity, and the refusal to be confined by imposed identities. Through a rich web of intertextual references, Ali constructs a transnational and transcultural poetic space that resists political, linguistic, and religious divisions. This paper explores how Ali's intertextual approach is not just a poetic technique but a political act—one that asserts his hybrid, borderless identity against forces that seek to impose rigid definitions on language, culture, and belonging. The paper relies on the theoretical framework of intertextuality as propounded by Julia Kristeva, while also drawing insights from Mikhail Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, and others. The paper centres on the argument that intertextuality is a conscious act and in case of Agha Shahid Ali it is a conscious act of protest and resistance to monologic definitions.

Key Words: Intertextuality, language, identity, plurality, subversion

Introduction

It was Julia Kristeva, a Bulgarian theorist, who redefined the idea of text and came up with a very radical concept of *intertextuality* – a postmodern idea of resistance to singular definitions of text and meaning, where a text derives its meaning solely in relation to other texts and discourses. A text, in this sense, functions not as a self-contained system, but as dependent upon other systems and texts. The theory, however, has its roots in the works of Saussure and Bakhtin (whose work informed much of Kristeva's ideas). Saussure focused on the semiotic aspect of language that how signs are related to each other. It is not that signs, or for that matter words, exist on their own, but they have their existence only in relation to others signs or words. As against referential, Saussure stressed on the relational value of language and asserted that “in language there are only differences” (120). However, what Saussure missed was the human subject (existing in a particular social setup) performing the speech. Bakhtin focused on this aspect of language and in place of Saussure's *sign*, he uses the word *utterance* to lay an emphasis on the social dimension of language. For Bakhtin, every *utterance* of a human speaker exists within a particular context, a cultural milieu, and carries a baggage of the societal traditions and norms. So, it can never be innocent of all those influences; the life of the word, as Bakhtin writes in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, “is contained in its transfer from one mouth to another, from one context to another context, from one social collective to another, from one generation to another generation” (201). Bakhtin's idea of *dialogism* was also crucial to the development of Intertextuality. *Dialogism*,

for Bakhtin, is the idea that meaning is not static but emerges from the variety of viewpoints, voices, and contexts. Meaning, in this sense, is always dependent on other ‘meanings’ and cannot exist on its own: meaning is *dialogic* – in a continuous dialogue with the ‘other’.

So, what Kristeva did is that she fused these two different approaches and came up with the theory of intertextuality. However, she shifted the focus from Saussure’s *sign* and Bakhtin’s *utterance* towards the text and *textuality*. She melded Saussure’s *semiotics* with Bakhtin’s *dialogism* and defined the text as functioning along both the horizontal and the vertical dimension. She maintains that the text does not only function on the semantic level, but also on the social level. She explains in ‘Word, Dialogue, and Novel’: “horizontal axis (subject-addressee) and vertical axis (text-context) coincide, bringing to light an important fact: each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read” (64). Thus, a text simultaneously engages in a dialogue with the reader and his/her culture and society (horizontal axis) and the past texts (on the vertical axis). A text, in this sense, is not an isolated object but informed by other texts and also the socio-cultural norms. She writes in ‘Word, Dialogue, and Novel’:

The word as minimal textual unit thus turns out to occupy the status of mediator, linking structural models to cultural (historical) environment, as well as that of regulator, controlling mutations from diachrony to synchrony, i.e., to literary structure. (64)

The most significant contribution of Julia Kristeva to the field of intertextuality was the psychoanalytical model of Lacan that she applied to the theorizing of text and textuality. This is also where her idea of intertextuality as a conscious practice comes into play. Lacan’s psychoanalytical model differentiates between *the symbolic* and *the imaginary* states of human experience so that the “imaginary (imaginaire) refers to perceived or imagined images in conscious and unconscious thought The symbolic (symbolique) refers to the signifying order, signifiers, in language, which determine the subject ...” (Hendrix 1). What Kristeva does is that she approached writing or text in the light of this model and maintained that a text can either promote the force of the *imaginary* and repress *symbolic* or do the vice-versa. The *imaginary* or what Kristeva calls the *semiotic* is the representation of human experience in its totality – plural and not restricted. Against this, the *symbolic* signifies the orderly and monologic representation – brought in place by the state and its singular definitions of language. Intertextuality, for Kristeva, exploits the force of the *semiotic* by contesting the linear representation and celebrating the variety of human experience. It does this by investing in an art that is explicitly plural, non-linear and fluid.

In this sense Intertextuality is a conscious act and for Roland Barthes, as for Kristeva, only modernist and postmodernist literature self-consciously puts into play the power of the signifier, celebrate the variety of subject positions and liberate the art from the shackles of singular and monologic notions of identity and meaning. As Graham Allen writes: “Only literature after the emergence of Modernism allows the reader to become fully active in the production of meaning; a fundamental characteristic, it would appear, of what Barthes and Kristeva mean by the ‘text’” (68).

Analysis

A poet of “unmatched elegance and virtuosity,” (Maqbool 1) Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry is a reflection of his pluralistic outlook that defied linear and monologic definitions. One of his

most overtly political collections *The Country Without a Post Office* voices the troubles surrounding Ali's homeland in the early 1990s when violence reigned in the valley. However, even amidst all the pain and suffering, Ali maintains the integrity of his inclusive self and promotes tolerance and a desired return to the past glory of his homeland, marked by multiplicity and syncretism. Pained by the state of his homeland, Ali follows a conscious intertextual model to highlight the sufferings of his people and contest discourses that fuel violence and discord.

The Painful Present

The Country Without a Post Office is deeply concerned with highlighting the dismal state of Ali's homeland. It follows an intertextual approach of merger and appropriation of other texts and discourses. Ali's text thus performs a purposeful role of engaging with other texts in order to highlight the painful state of his homeland as well endorse the 'relationality' of texts. As Julia Kristeva writes in 'The Bounded Text': "The text is therefore a productivity ... a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another" (37). *The Country Without a Post Office* is sustained by a host of other texts and writers and consciously includes these voices into the fabric of its poems to accentuate the woeful state of his homeland.

The collection opens with a prose-poem titled *The Blessed Word: A Prologue* and Ali weaves it around Osip Mandelstam's untitled poem beginning with the line, "We shall meet again, in Petersburg." Mandelstam's poem is written in the backdrop of the violence that Petersburg witnessed during the Stalin-era. This is Ali's strategy of aligning the present-day Kashmir with the Petersburg of past times, when violence ensnared it. In a typical intertextual manner, Ali writes:

From an untitled poem, that opening line announces heartbreak as its craft: a promise like that already holds its own breaking: "We shall meet again, in Petersburg / as though we had buried the sun there."

.... "When you leave home in the morning, you never know if you'll return." "We shall meet again, in Srinagar," I want to answer Irfan. But such a promise? I make it in Mandelstam's velvet dark, in the black velvet Void. (1)

These lines strongly display the intertextual merger of different voices to generate meaning. The pain of Mandelstam's lines is effectively carried and Mandelstam's Petersburg, as Ali wants to suggest, continues to survive in its modern reincarnation of Kashmir, where "When you leave home in the morning, you never know if you'll return" (Ali 1). In this way, Ali effectively highlights the painful reality of his homeland where fear and darkness fill the streets.

It is not that the alluded text always carries the weight of its former context, but rather it can be incorporated in the present context in such a manner that it completely loses its earlier import and attains a new meaning. This intertextual appropriation is also at display in the poem titled, *After the August Wedding in Lahore, Pakistan*, where Ali uses Emily Dickinson's line, "Where Thou art – that – is Home – / Cashmere – or Cavalry – the same" in his poem to stage a clash of the competing realities of Kashmir/Cashmere. Although Dickinson's use of 'Cashmere' signals the extravagance and wealth associated with the word, however, the present context of the poem, which is grim and painful, alters this connotation of the word and aligns it with 'cavalry', so that we readers are prompted to read 'Cashmere'

alongside ‘cavalry’, or, more precisely, as a place where cavalry-like chaos and violence prevails. A little further in the poem, Ali again uses Dickinson’s line, “Butterflies pause / On their passage Cashmere –” to further accentuate the dismal condition of his homeland where even butterflies hesitate to enter.

The Glorious Past

The Country Without a Post Office, apart from highlighting the dismal present, is a protest against every narrative that promotes singularity of experience and divides people on the basis of culture and nationality. In this collection, Ali emerges as a transnational and transcultural poet who defies monologic identification and endorses the plurality of experience. Throughout the collection, Ali is seen highlighting the painful state of his homeland; however, he is also aggrieved at seeing the pluralistic outlook of his homeland being torn apart. Thus, in this collection, he time and again reverts to the past image of his homeland, marked by tolerance, compassion, and syncretism. This is purposefully done as he wants to contrast the dismal present of his homeland with its glorious past and also to contest the narratives that denounce plurality and promote discord and violence.

As a postmodern theory, Intertextuality resists linear and singular definitions and celebrates the multiplicity of meaning and perspectives. In this sense, as Graham Allen writes, Intertextuality is “meant to designate a kind of language which, because of its embodiment of otherness, is against, beyond and resistant to (mono)logic. Such language is socially disruptive, revolutionary even” (44). Thus, intertextuality extols the plurality of experience and radically challenges the linear and monologic perceptions of life. Agha Shahid Ali’s *The Country Without a Post Office* shares the same resistance to the pigeonholed and singular definitions of life. In this collection, Ali tries to promote plurality and thus he looks beyond the present violence in his homeland to the glory of its past. For example, in a poem titled *Farewell*, Ali showcases the true essence of his homeland, marked by inclusivity and tolerance. The poem is “is a plaintive love letter from a Kashmiri Muslim to a Kashmiri Pandit” (Ali 83) and highlights the past syncretism of the two communities, now strained in the ongoing violence. Ali writes in the poem:

In the lake the arms of temples and mosques are locked
in each other’s reflections.

Have you soaked saffron to pour on them when they are
found like this centuries later in this country
I have stitched to your shadow? (8)

As these lines reflect, Ali’s concern is to present an inclusive and compassionate view of his homeland and life in general. While highlighting the present violence, Ali also presents a counter-image of his homeland which is tolerant and syncretic. This is what defines his homeland and this is what Ali celebrates. Ali’s art, in this sense, is typically intertextual as it defies singular definitions and extols the multiplicity of life and experience.

Moreover, Ali’s use of language and adherence to a variety of forms, like prose-poems, letters, ghazals, villanelle, canzone, and others is again an intertextual enterprise that promotes the multiplicity of expression and in context of the collection, it is a conscious practice that extols the variety of perspectives and resists linearity of experience. Ali’s collection radically opposes monologic definitions and unleashes, what Julia Kristeva calls, the force of the *semiotic*, a use of language that is plural and not restricted.

Conclusion

Agha Shahid Ali's *The Country Without a Post Office* offers a grim picture of his homeland caught in the ugly cycle of violence. It painfully explores the pitfalls of this violence which has rent apart the tolerant and inclusive fabric of his homeland. To highlight this pain, Ali adopts a conscious intertextual strategy of merger and appropriation to lend force and gravity to his stance. Moreover, as the paper highlighted, Ali's intertextual enterprise resists the narratives that bracket people's experiences and promote discord. Instead Ali invests in the multiplicity of expression and experience by adopting a language that is plural and also by extolling the syncretic and compassionate outlook of his homeland.

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