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Home, Exile and the 'Other' in Agha Shahid Ali

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Abstract:

The paper attempts to show how Agha Shahid Ali longs for 'Home', but fails to belong due to geographic, political, historical as well as mental reasons. He plays with the concept of 'Home' in his poems. Due to his failure to belong and cultural hybridity, the paper shows how he constructs his essentialist 'Home' at 'Exile', in the 'Other' and by doing so gives a new dimension to the concept of 'Home'. The alienation felt at 'Home' and with Cultural roots is placed side by side the 'familiarity' of the 'other'.

Keywords: home, other, exile, diaspora, spacio-temporal diaspora, Indian English poetry.

“My life and my home are everything to me, but I will be killed or I will become a refugee, with no identity or status and no hope.....”

['Home', Louise McCorkindale]

The essence of life is inherently attached to a sense of belonging, the longing to belong somewhere, with someone, the longing to belong to a 'Home' – the geographical nation, the place of cultural affiliation, the familial bond. Hence the absence of 'Home' when narrativized “is necessarily identified with loss.” The writer in 'Exile', as Rushdie says in 'Imaginary Homelands', therefore has “some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt.” (10) But the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali presents a different perspective because in spite of the option to reclaim or return, there is “no way back”, because he chooses it.

Agha Shahid Ali is a poet exiled repeatedly. Born in Delhi, he lived in Kashmir before attending the Burriss School in Munice Indiana. In Kashmir lies his roots and India is his nation; but as an Indian residing in America, and as a Kashmiri residing in India Agha Shahid Ali has a double sense of loss: i) the physical distance of Ali from India resulting in absent 'nation' ii) the political differences between India and Kashmir leading to an absent 'Home' even when he is in India. Thus exile is his "permanent condition", and so 'Exile' appears in his poetry as a concept he is attempting to analyze, for he speaks of Exile not only in the physical level but also from a mental premise. Exile facilitates his transforming of existence into an absence which breaks borders, offers refuge, and by creating fictions reclaims "precisely the thing that was lost" in a unique way.

The ambivalent 'Home':

As an Indian diasporic writer with his ethnicity linked to Kashmir, Kashmir or/and India is Agha Shahid Ali's object of anxiety, longing and belonging. Hence in his poetry on one hand he presents his desire to return to the homeland and on the other hand he connects with the homeland on a metaphorical level. In 'A Pastoral' he speaks of returning:

"We shall meet again, in Srinagar,

By the gates of the Villa of Peace.." (Ali, *The Veiled Suite* 196)

But in 'Postcard from Kashmir' he speaks of no-return and recreates 'Home'. Kashmir has shrunk into his letterbox and transformed into a postcard. Exile breaks the spacio-temporal structures and 'postcard' and 'memory' is his 'Home', and so he writes:

"This is home. And this the closest

I'll ever be to home." (Ali, *The Half-Inch Himalayas* 1)

In the premises of Ali's mind and verse, the 'postcard', his 'memory' of Kashmir is the metonymy for Kashmir. Kashmir exists as a double – the physical Kashmir, the metonymic Kashmir. Thus through the construction of a mythic home in the form of

metonymic Kashmir, the borders are transgressed, but the loss is not compensated. Hence, the poet looks for consolation. The love for neatness of the poet becomes a consolation for what remains of Kashmir in exile:

“ Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox

My home a neat four by six inches.

I always loved neatness.” (Ali, *The Half-Inch Himalayas* 1)

The transgression of borders metaphorically and the creation of mythic home is what the writer in exile does; but Ali is not only doing that but is presenting the ambivalence at the heart of home and exile. Home, i.e. Kashmir, in Ali is the place of longing, but not belonging. Through the signifiers ‘postcard’, ‘memory’, ‘giant negative, black and white’ in ‘Postcard from Kashmir’ he is trying to feel the warmth and intimacy of home, but when in Kashmir, the home is located in exile and so even at ‘Home’ the feeling of alienation persists.

‘The Season of the Plains’ is built symbolically on the conflict and contradiction that defines Kashmir’s relation and position in context of India. “In Kashmir, where the year / has four, clear seasons” (Ali, *The Half-Inch Himalayas* 17), his mother spoke of Lucknow, her childhood there, the monsoons and the emotions attached to it. But, the poet says,

“..... The monsoon never cross

The mountains into Kashmir.” (Ali, *The Half-Inch Himalayas* 17)

The ‘monsoon’ is not just a regular rain-giving monsoon; the ‘monsoon’ is symbolic of the emotion that connects the rest of India.

“ Separation

Can’t be borne when the rains

Come :.....” (Ali, *The Half-Inch Himalayas* 17)

But the monsoon never comes to Kashmir . Thus 'Home' and 'Nation' are two conflicting term in the poet's life and being . When in Kashmir , the absence of monsoon is symbolic of the absence of Kashmir from the writer's geographical 'Nation' . He also has a sense of alienation in context of mother , which is symbolic of 'motherland'/'Nation' : " mother / hummed Heer's lament " , but he never came to know , due to lack/failure of communication , whether "she / also burned sticks / of jasmine that , dying , / kept raising soft necks / of ash ." (Ali , *The Half-Inch Himalayas* 17) . The mountains of Kashmir is the shadowy border symbolically , hindering the flow of emotions and communication . Thus Ali shows how 'Nation' as a façade of unity , masks the diversity , multiplicity leading to a predominant struggle between psychic representation and social reality . Suffering from a sort of postcolonial subalternization Ali is torn between the ethnic Kashmiri diaspora and 'Nation' as homeland , but temporal-spatial expressions in his poems shows that he is also trapped in a temporal diaspora in the mental plane . Agha Shahid Ali is torn between the land the Kashmiri's inhabit , i.e. India or Kashmir after Independence , and the land that they had forgone , i.e. India or Kashmir before Independence . He speaks of returning to Srinagar in 'A Pastoral' and concludes the poem by saying ,

" We'll go past our ancestors , up the staircase ,

Holding their wills against our hearts . Their

Wish

Was we return – forever ! – and inhabit (Quick ,

The bird

Will say) that to which we belong..." (Ali , *The Veiled Suite* 198)

Agha Shahid Ali through his poems presents the dream and hope of transforming the longing to belonging and 'being at home' , the 'Home' as an essentialist entity , not as a physical reality .

Cultural alienation:

Cultural hybridity of a diasporic writer makes his experience of culture and ethnicity a nameless one, and thus the writer emerges as a multi-cultural being imprisoned in his own mental premise, residing in his own psychic sense of loss. Agha Shahid Ali's cultural hybridity, thus, makes him problematize his connection with the roots. In 'Cracked Portraits', he remembers his 'grandfather's painted grandfather', 'Great-grandfather, Grandfather and Father, attempts to connect, but fails. He looks for spiritual affirmation, but finds only familial attachment. He looks "for prayers" in the eyes of his "grandfather's painted grandfather", but what he is left with is 'will':

"He's left us plots

In the family graveyard." (Ali, *The Half-Inch Himalayas* 9)

Moreover his great-grandfather 'disappoints' him, his father brings him closer to himself and then in the words of the poet,

"..... loses me as he turns to Gandhi ." (Ali, *The Half-Inch Himalayas* 9)

In a different way, even in 'Snowmen' he speaks of his disconnection and cultural alienation. The 'skeleton' of the snowmen under his skin is genealogically passed:

" This heirloom ,

His skeleton under my skin , passed

From son to grandson ,” (Ali, *The Half-Inch Himalayas* 8)

But then the 'skeleton' is "carved from glaciers" and suggests the temporality of roots, traditions. The physicality of roots is the bones present in Ali's physical framework, but alike William Blake, 'bones' for Ali refers to the past, tradition that often has to be broken: and thus even in the proximity of bones he is left absolutely at a distance from the roots:

"..... I've promised myself ,

Even if I'm the last snowman ,

That I'll ride into spring

On their melting shoulders ." (Ali , *The Half-Inch Himalayas* 8)

He hopes for a 'spring' brought regeneration , dreams of coming out of the shackles of ethnic bondage , the burden of affiliation and desires a distancing from the lost world . He rejects a single , unified identity and affiliations . Politically , physically and historically exiled , Agha Shahid Ali , it appears , chooses to be exiled mentally also . On a mental plane , he fails to belong .

The Exiled 'Other' :

Agha Shahid Ali , in spite of longing for 'Home' has chosen 'Exile' even at 'Home' . Agha Shahid Ali is repeating exiles in his poems and is reversing the Home/Exile – presence/absence dialectic . The traditionally ordered pairs presence/absence , sameness/other , Home/Exile in which the first term is the primary priority term while the second is read in relation to the primary is deconstructed and the second term becomes the priority and defines Ali's priority and comfort zone .

By failing to belong to the 'Home' traditionally speaking , synthesis of the physicality and belonging becomes an existential necessity . Dominick LaCapra in 'Trauma , Absence , Loss' , writes , "In speculative dialectics , an original identity is lost as it is dismembered or torn apart through contradiction and conflict , to be recovered on a higher level through 'Aufhebung' – the movement of negation , preservation , and lifting to a higher level " (703). "The ache for home lives in all of us" (Maya Angelou Quotes) , and hence to make oneself "at home" is a monopolizing seizure wanting vent . Thus Agha Shahid Ali restructures the priority dialectics and reconstructs 'Home' , giving the concept of 'Exile' and 'Home' a new dimension . In 'The Previous Occupant' , Ali shows he feels an attachment , connection and a sort of possible communication with the absent 'previous occupant' of the rented apartment . He metamorphoses the dusty "empty shelves" into "empty shelves" containing 'absent' 'Neruda , Cavafy' . The absence doesn't disappoint him as the absence has disappointed him in 'Cracked Portraits' :

“Great – grandfather ? A sahib in breeches .

He simply disappoints me ,

His hands missing in the drawing-room photo .” (Ali , *The Half-Inch Himalayas* 9)

He interiorizes the absence of the ‘other’ , and in ‘The Previous Occupant’ ‘self’ and the ‘other’ fuses to cast a single shadow :

“Now that he’s found me ,

My body casts his shadow everywhere .” (Ali , *The Half-Inch Himalayas* 41)

Thus for Agha Shahid Ali ‘familiar’ over ‘familial’ define ‘Home’ , for that’s the place of affiliation , repetitions and similarity : the same sunsign ‘Aquarius’ , the occupying of the same rented flat in a distant land away from home . The ‘previous occupant’ is nameless , and portrays the presence of an absence and thus as an absence “opens up empowering possibilities in the necessarily limited , non totalizing elaboration of institution and practices , in the creation of a more more desirable , perhaps significantly different – but not perfect or totally unified life in the here and now .” Thus Ali constructs his mythic home in the exiled ‘Other’ , the transcendental , transcultural home , the fate of a multicultural individual , because in a situation like Ali’s that is the highest intimacy possible . That is the ‘home’ of similar fated individual because the borders of ‘Home’ and ‘hostland’ , happens to vanish the demarcation between ‘self’ and ‘other’ . Agha Shahid Ali feels at ‘Home’ in ‘Exile’ at a rented apartment with a previous occupant through negation of roots , preservation of hybridity , difference and exile through the synthesis of ‘self’ and ‘other’ . The ‘previous occupant’ is his ‘Home’ and his absence , aids the construction of ‘Home’.

Conclusion:

The thesis of ‘Home’ and ‘Exile’ that we get in Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry is explicit of the ambivalence present in the concept of ‘Home’ , culture , the presence of ‘Home’ at ‘Exile’ in the mental plane and above all attachment as with roots in an anonymous absent ‘previous occupant’ , at exile . The absence of ‘Home’ as ‘Loss’ is

realized and lived by the poet at different levels – physical , mental , spacio-temporal . To regain the poet reverts and restructures the generalized dialogues of Home/Exile and attempts an elimination of the physicality by casting the 'other's' shadow . In embracing the 'other' as - 'self' , his comfort zone , his place of belonging , he breaks the signifier-signified relation of 'Home' and 'Exile' and presents home in an essentialist way . His Nation/Home is “a soul , a spiritual principle” and so he emerges ultimately through his poetry as the resident of no physical land .

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