

## If There Is a Poet, It Is This, It Is This: Aga Shahid Ali - *Chronicler of Pain*

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The passing away of Aga Shahid Ali in 2001 was a collective loss to Kashmir- the most eloquent Kashmiri-English poet, a writer of unmatched elegance and virtuosity, a chronicler of pain- his poetry is the very stuff of beauty, loss and redemption. His death deprived Kashmir of one of its most potent cultural voices, a voice that would have done more good than any Track 1 or Track 11 effort. His poetry touches subliminal heights in its gut response to the devastation of his land.

Shahid can favorably be compared with other “Regional” writers from around the globe who shot into prominence especially after the de-recognition of normative Western/Standardized versions of culture and language. What these writers share is a rootedness in place and native landscape. Seamus Heaney from Ireland, Derek Walcott from the Caribbean and Mahmoud Derwish from Palestine are other poets whose art is surcharged with the politics of their native countries. Although Shahid’s devotion to form and literary finesse is evident in the poetry and his transnationalism or “hyphenated identity” a defining feature of his canon, volumes like *The Half-Inch Himalayas* and *The Country Without a Post office* are wedded to the politically volatile nature of his native Kashmir. Through these poems, Shahid gives a scathing yet beautiful account of the trauma/nightmare of the 90’s Kashmir when the “blood-dimmed tide” of a violent history submerged the paradise into death and destruction. Clair Chambers is too of a similar opinion :

“Shahid had a striking and firm commitment to literary aesthetics, and he is often analyzed in relation to form. While this is undoubtedly important, and his efforts to popularize the *ghazal* form in the English language have been particularly effective...Instead, I want to foreground Shahid’s political message, which has sometimes been posthumously soft-pedalled by critics”

Perhaps the term rooted cosmopolitan best describes Shahid: he writes from far off America where he lives but is never far from home. Nostalgia is a weak word – his attachment is something far stronger than that- it is a vicarious participation in a tormented phase of his land’s history, an urgency to narrate the saga of violence that has become endemic to Kashmir. It is an exile that nourishes passion for the homeland. The poet tells the story of his

tormented land in a way that only a poet can- through a breathtaking use of language. Kashmir becomes the imaginary homeland recreated by the poet-in-exile. The attachment to Kashmir-the homeland-is poignantly summed up in the poem *Postcard from Kashmir*: The “country of the mind”, cherished in exile, is ironically reduced to “news” from home:

**“Kashmir sinks into my mailbox/ my home a neat four by six inches.”**

The pangs of separation from home are rendered thus:

***“This is home/ And this is the closest /I’ll ever be to home.***

The distinctness of Kashmir- the topographical otherness- translates into a refusal to comply with the “Indian” version of weather. Agha Shahid sets up Kashmir as a “natural” opposition to the inclusive politics of the Indian state. This separateness from “The Season of the Plains” is etched beautifully in the poem of the same name.

***“In Kashmir, where the year/has four clear seasons” whereas “...the plains of Lucknow” [wherein] “the clouds gather for that invisible blue god”***

and the final climactic statement:

***“The Monsoons never cross the mountains into Kashmir”.***

Agha Shahid’s poetry will also be remembered for its elegiac tribute to Kashmir- the lost and ravaged homeland. The notion of a ravished, violent desecration runs throughout: Shahid mixes terrifying images of innocence and beauty now blood stained and brutal. This fusion of past and present, now and then often results in a hallucinatory simultaneity of experiencing- a poetic technique that may well be his signature style. The numbing 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).”

Agha Shahid Ali is one of the writers that Ghosh cites as exemplifying this use of the motif of a lost utopia, which trope is easily apparent in close readings of many of the individual poems in *The Country Without a Post Office*.

*The Country without a Post office* is a poet’s testimony to the turbulent 90’s period when armed insurgency against India started. The violence, the suffering and the pain are rendered in the blood and gut imagery painting the “blood-dimmed tide”, in Yeatsian terminology, as the terrible landscape of that phase of Kashmir’s history is brought to life. The poet, votary of his land, juggles with various cadences of his lacerated native land:

***“Let me cry out in that void, say it as I can.***

***I write on that void: Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir, Cashmir, Cashmire, Kashmere...”***

Ali aligns himself with other poets who write with a similar sense of dispossession and political uncertainty. He names the Russian/Polish poet Osip Mandelstam with whom he shares an affinity of preoccupations:

“He reinvents Petersburg ( I, Srinagar), an imaginary homeland, filling it, closing it, shutting (myself) in it”. Landscape becomes mindscape which in turn becomes memoryscape. Ali paints the torn cityscape of his vivid imagination and Srinagar of the nineties is conjured in its most devastating moments:

***“Srinagar was under curfew/The identity pass may or may not have helped in the crackdown. Son after son- never to return from the night of torture-was taken away.***

***“Srinagar hunches like a wild cat: lonely sentries, wretched in bunkers at the city’s bridges, far from their homes in the plains, licensed to kill.”***

Agha Shahid illustrates the “nightmare of history” and his poetry becomes all-too reminiscent of the horror of disappearances, torture killings and numb stillness that so characterize those lethal years.

**“...while Jhelum flows under them; sometimes with a dismembered body. On Zero Bridge the jeeps rush by...”**

Any Kashmiri, or Srinagarite, recognizes the city’s landmarks, once free and unfettered, now turned into a battleground. What is significant is that unlike Basharat Peer who is a live witness to the upheavals of his native land and (who incidentally takes the title of his brilliant memoir *Curfewed Night* from Agha Shahid Ali’s poem *I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight* In fact, looked at this way, Kashmiri-English writing owes its genesis to Shahid, who is a clear literary/psychological model for younger writers like Peer and Mirza Waheed, providing for strong intertextual links between the trio) Agha Shahid reconstructs the ravished home purely from memory and the media:

**“But the reports are true...mass rapes in the villages, towns left in at me from the Times.”** One poem in particular, *I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight* is a scathing yet tragic enactment of those countless youth who entered the notorious interrogation centre at Gupkar road, never to return again:

**“From Zero Bridge/a shadow chased by searchlights is running away to find its body”.**  
**...Drippings from a suspended burning tire /are falling on the back of a prisoner/the naked boy screaming , “I know nothing.”** The surreal meeting with the victim Rizwan makes one speechless with emotion:

**“Don’t tell my father I have died”,** he says. **“and I follow him through blood on the road/and hundreds of pairs of shoes the mourners /left behind, as they ran from the funeral,victims of the firing.”** The deft allusion to the funeral procession of Moulvi Farooq weaves in the death of Rizwan with those countless, nameless others who were killed during the funeral. This great poem mixes nightmare, elegy and historical fact with a unmatched finesse. Yet at the bottom lies a commitment to tell the story of Kashmir- once paradise now brutalized by violence and death. The reader sees the tragedy of Kashmir unfold in this brilliant poem in which **“the homes set ablaze by midnight soldiers/Kashmir is burning”** or the exodus of the Kashmiri Pandit community as they **“[remove] statues from temples”** and **“disappear on the road to the plains, clutching the gods.”**

There are other memorable poems in this anthology-mesmerizing in their ability to articulate the “terrible Beauty” of Kashmir’s violent history. *I Dream I Am the Only Passenger on Flight 423 to Srinagar* is a spell-binding poem in which the poet mixes memory of Begum Akhtar’s death, the siege of Hazratbal in 1994, Lal Ded’s famous encounter with Sheikh Noor-ud-Din and the burning of his shrine at Charar-e-sharif. Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry is a receptacle of history, poetry, politics- a rare combination since “political poems” often become propagandist or factional. His poems, exquisite in their use of language: the stunning metaphors, the miraculous juxtapositions and the blend of the real with the surreal, remain poems and don’t degenerate into sloganeering. He is the Master-Poet of Kashmir, a votary who immortalizes the beloved in rare imaginative gems called poems.