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Aga Shahid Ali as a Daisporic Poet

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to study the diasporic dimension of Indian diasporic writer late Aga Shahid Ali who emigrated from Kashmir to America. Aga Shahid Ali narrates the loss of his homeland due to enforced migration and reexhibit the original exilic resonance of diasporic experience. In his poetic collection 'the country without a post office', the poet articulates diasporic experience of exile, loss, pain and creates possibilities of Kashmiri diaspora in America.

Key words: Aga Shahid Ali, The country without a post office, Diaspora.

Diaspora:-

Exile or Diaspora is a broad theme and has been widely discussed in literature. Indeed, William Safran calls it an academic growth industry. In the context of literature, the theme of exile is often marked by a divided loyalty towards both the host country and the homeland. Many theorists believe that through physical spacing can be necessary to produce a sense of homelessness and nostalgia, yet one does not need to be physically removed from the homeland in order to be exiled; one may feel exiled in one's land if it is felt that indigenous culture has been attenuated by foreign influence. Edward Said opines, 'Exile is fundamentally tied to the notion of intellection. It refers to those who are resistant to set notions as against those who conform. Basically the term Diaspora refers to the work of exiles and expatriates and all those who have experienced unsettlement and dislocation at the political, existential or metaphorical levels and Diaspora literature involves an idea of a homeland, a place from where the displacement occurs. Avtar Brah writes that the term Diaspora, embodies a notion of centre, a locus, a home from which the dispersion occurs. In fact, at the heart of the notion of Diaspora is the image of journey which essentially is about settling down, about putting roots elsewhere (Brah 443).

Aga Shahid Ali as a Diasporic writer:

Aga Shahid Ali was born in 1949, the son of distinguished and highly educated family of Kashmir. He attended university of Kashmir, University of Delhi as well as Pennsylvania state university and university of Arizona. Though a Kashmiri Muslim, Ali is best known in the U.S and is identified more as an American poet writing in English and he, himself considered himself to be 'a triple exile' from Kashmir, India and United States.

Aga Shahid Ali chose to be in exile in order to pursue his career. He went to the United States of America to pursue PhD in English and later took up various research and teaching positions. However, in the land of dreams he had dreams about his homeland. Shahid is chased by his memories of Kashmir and a surrealist account of incidents and landscapes is found abundantly in his poetry.

From Zero Bridge

A shadow chased by search lights is running

is running away to find its body. On the edge of cantonment,

Where Gupkar road ends shrink almost into nothing.

Among the handful of post independence Indian poets to have gained international recognition as a writer of greater originality and technical accomplishments to find in such exile if not his true home, a safe house. Ali went on to find such moments of transformation, even in the heart of historical upheaval, throughout "the country without a post office", where the motherland is itself dissolving. In the first of two volumes that form the peak of his achievement, the poet envisions the devastation of his homeland, moving from the realm of personal to an expansive poetry that maintains an integrity of feeling in the midst of political violence and integrity.

He explored in his poetry how readily expatriation could come to feel like exile. But as his collected poems. "The veiled suite" makes clear, he worked hard to find in such exile if not his true home, a safe haven. 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 breath taking 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, 'Post Card 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 the home

And this is the closest

I'll ever be to home

The collection of poems titled, 'The country without a Post Office' (1997) emerged in response to the plight of Kashmir, his beloved homeland ravaged by strife. Although his earlier work was mostly free – verse, the turmoil in his homeland Kashmir and his experiences visiting there each summer compelled him to write in more strict forms as a way to better contain the emotions and to take on the big subject matter of the conflict. It is clearly evident from his book, "Rooms are never finished" that in most of the poems, Shahid conveys his anguish on the devastation of his homeland. Aga Shahid Ali was noted as a poet uniquely able to blend multiple ethnic influences and ideas in both traditional forms and elegant free verse. His poetry reflects his Muslim, Hindu and western heritage. In 'Contemporary Poets' critic Bruce King 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". In his poems, the desire to recover the historical – cultural identity is not due to any racial or cultural alienation faced by the poet in America but rather by an exilic detachment forced upon him by the tumultuous conditions of his homeland. Aga Shahid Ali's poetry can best be termed an elaboration of the sub-continent's mixed history. He draws from the rich cultural

resources of the country of his birth, where plurality, compositeness and eclecticism mark cultural pattern, he says,

‘The point is you are a universe, you are the product of immense historical forces. There is the Muslim in me, there is the Hindu in me, there is the Western in me.

In 1997 ,Shahid published his” Ghazal 1” through which it can be easily sensed the speakers agony and pain while he is repeating the word” exile “ many times.

In Jerusalem a dead phone’s dialed by exiles

You learn your strange fate: you were exiled by exiles

You open the heart to list unborn galaxies

And,

Don’t shut that folder when Earth is filled by Exiles.

The repetition of the word exile suggests the agony of the speaker in a way that puts him into a mood of loss and disintegration. The poet says,

By the Hudson lies Kashmir, brought Palestine

Tell me who’s tonight the physician of sick pearls?

Only you as you sit ,Desert Child, by Exile.

Avtar Brah writes that the term diaspora embodies a notion of center, a locus, a home from where the dispersion occurs. In fact, at the heart of the notion of Diaspora is the image of journey which essentially is about settling down, about putting roots elsewhere. Aga Shahid Ali has journeyed from Kashmir to America yet when, he sees the rain in Amherst, he is reminded of the rain in Kashmir. Within the safe confines of America, through dreams and visions, the broken images of his imaginary haunt him. However, one might observe that Agha Shahid Ali was not banished from Kashmir and he could return at his will. To such an observation that poet would reply that though he is not technically exiled yet he is ‘Temperamentally exiled’ from Kashmir.

In ‘The country without a post office’, Aga Shahid Ali introduces three ghazals. The concluding lines of one such ghazal explains the psychology of his work.

They ask me to tell what Shahid means. Listen: It means ‘The Beloved in Persian, witness in Arabic.

The above couplet exhibits diasporic feeling of Aga Shahid Ali: being away from Kashmir, he has escaped violence and realized the plight of religions in Kashmir and like Ishmael, who after being marooned in Arabia, became the founder of Islam, the poet too in America, founded a belief imbibing Islamic, Christian and Hindu traditions. The idea of home portrayed in his work, “Post Card from Kashmir” is questioned, but never clearly answered. At one moment, it is believed that home is Kashmir from which he suffers a physical exile. But if

he were to return, the poem explains, that feeling of exile would still remain. It is more even than a profound emotional exile from family or childhood.

If “‘Rooms are never finished is the work of hyphenated America; it’s of a new kind; an exile more than an immigrant from whom English is not British or American but the international language and whose imagination is supple and cultivated enough to draw on different cultures simultaneously. However, as a poet of Kashmir’s struggle for dignity, Shahid paid his tributes and condolence to its martyr’s and upheld their innocence and says.

Freedom’s terrible thirst, flooding Kashmir
is bringing love to its tormented glass
Strangers who will inherit this last night
of the past? Of what shall I not sing and sing?

And also, ‘In the country without post office ’the poet remembers Kashmir as ‘Black velvet void’ where gunshots light up the sky and only blood and fire embolden the life of the ordinary people (Ali 3). Aga Shahid Ali weaves the story of loss amidst the society of relocation; a public. Sphere, where the poet imagines his home through such aesthetic sphere on which his diasporic mind rendered imaginary portrait of Kashmir .The Ghazal is one such mode through which Shahid Ali expresses his longing for Kashmir.”Rooms are never Finished”{2001} similarly yokes political and personal tragedy, again with a long poem as its focal point .Ali uses a line from Emily Dickinson as a title for “Amherst to Kashmir”,a poem that explores his grief and his own continued sense of exile from his home and culture. Thus, the poetry of Shahid epitomizes the historical period of post-colonial writers who suffered literal dislocation through self –exile .His mind wavered between an emotional attachment to left behind home and a desire to make homology to a supposed new home .He recollects several traditional customs , ceremonies as well as images of childhood and boyhood .These memories kept so much imposing themselves on his inner thinking that he attempted to reconstruct them in his verses using English language so that he could make a bond between two worlds.

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