

ISSN: 0976-8165

# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Vol. 7, Issue- 4 [August 2016]

*The Criterion* 

## 7th Year of Open Access

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

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## Cultural Identity in Agha Shahid Ali's *Rooms Are Never Finished*

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### **Abstract:**

Cultural identity refers to a culture that people with common history and ancestry share together. Agha Shahid Ali is known as a Kashmiri-American poet. Ali speaks about the loss of his homeland, Kashmir. The poems express Ali's cultural memories and identity. This paper attempts to trace the quest for cultural identity in Agha Shahid Ali's *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001).

### **Keywords: Culture, identity, Kashmiri-American.**

The term culture refers to a system of beliefs and practices. It also suggests the various practices that structure and regulate the individual and collective lives. Culture includes language, ideas, beliefs, customs, institutions, and works of art, rituals, ceremonies and symbols. An individual's attitudes, values, ideals and beliefs are greatly influenced by the culture or cultures in which he or she lives. Agha Shahid Ali was extensively occupied with the culture of Kashmir. The term identity is a person's conception and expression of their individuality or group affiliations such as national identity and cultural identity. The formation of one's identity occurs through one's identification with his characteristics, values and beliefs.

Ali's poems record his feeling of loss, memories and recollections constituted his identity. He is chosen by his memories of Kashmir. Multiculturalism had formed the texture of his identity. It appreciates cultural diversity and respects the notion of multiple identities at individual, ethnic, religious, national and cultural levels. His close acquaintance with different cultures which make him 'the man of multiple existence'. Daniel Hall 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)

Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001), the initiator of global identity, was raised in the legendary vale of Kashmir in a sophisticated, enlightened and culturally rich Muslim family in Srinagar. He is influenced by Hindu, Islamic and Christian cultures in which he lived. He was a Kashmiri-American poet. He insisted on identifying himself as Kashmiri. Kashmir, paradise on earth, proved to be the constant source of inspiration for his creation. His references are touched with multiple cultural experiences. So, he is known as harbinger of cultural globalization. According to Hena Ahmed,

"Different cultural experiences intersected, overlapped and came together in Shahid's poetry." (Ahmed 35)

*Rooms Are Never Finished* was published in November, 2001. It is an innovative collection which was a finalist for a National Book Award in poetry in 2001. He shows the devastation of Kashmir, his childhood home. He was deeply in love with his homeland. The poems in this volume express Ali's cultural memories and identity.

Agha Shahid Ali became an international figure. His commitment is with the place where he has got the identity. The poems in *Rooms Are Never Finished* illustrate his yearning for his cultural identity as a Kashmiri. Ali recalls the mythic glory of Kashmir in many of the poems in this volume. Ali described himself as "temperamentally exiled" from Kashmir, his homeland (Case, 2013). Cultural identity refers to a culture that people with common history and ancestry share together. It reflects shared historical experiences, bringing about an idea of oneness among different people (Hall 2006). Ali expresses his desire to see himself as a Kashmiri defined by the history and culture of Kashmir.

Memory often plays an important role in finding the poet's identity. The poem *Memory* is related to the identity of a Muslim person, as an Indian. Ali lived and spent his life in Kashmir. He never forgets this cultural identity as a Kashmiri. The historic, the geographical and religious references are closely related to the issue of identity. The references of Kashmir, Krishna, Saints, Gods, and Buddha etc. lead to the cultural identity. The bride in Kashmir is a peculiar phrase belonging to Kashmir itself. Agha Shahid Ali is an epitome of past and memories. The memory is closely related to the identity. Without ghazals, there will be no cultural representation of Muslims. He refers Faiz, Ghazal and Begum Akhtar. Muharram is the identity of the Muslim people. Ali himself was a Muslim. So, he was always keeping his identity alive. He conveys his anguish caused by the devastation of his homeland. He doesn't cut that umbilical cord wherein lies his identity.

The poem *The Call to Prayer* makes his identity clear. However, he is proud of his identity as an Indian. He refers Radha, Krishna and Indian music system. The poem *Ghazal* refers to the identity of a particular ethnic group especially the Christian community. There is the reference of Bible and execution. These references are closely associated with Jesus Christ. So, it becomes the issue of identity.

The poem *Barcelona Airport* opens with an epigraph.

"Are you carrying anything that could be dangerous for the  
other passengers? (The Veiled Suite 284)

The present line leads us to his residence in Kashmir which was affected by terrorists' activities. The references of Andalusia, Mediterranean, Atlantic, Catalan Sky, Pandemonium, Iblis, Heaven, Hell and Earth etc. are deserved to be the identity issues. His poetry reflects his Muslim, Hindu and Western heritage. Ali laments the loss of Hindu culture.

The poem *Ghazal* is full of references related to cultural identity. We think that the identity cannot be hidden. The words used in this poem by Ali deal with his

identity. Urdu and Hindi are in his blood. He uses the word *Yaar* which is actually a Hindi word. He refers to his close friend, James Merrill - one of America's best known poets. He tells something about the own self. There are a number of references which indicate his identity. He speaks about Muslim ethnic group. The opening line reads,

‘In Jerusalem a dead phone’s dialed by exiles.  
You learn your strange fate: You were exiled by exiles.’

(The Veiled Suite 297)

So, these lines indicate delicate sense of his attachment to a particular group and how he was expelled by the time itself from his own country i.e. Kashmir, India. His close relationship with the other world is part of his cultural identity.

The poem *Ghalib’s Ghazal* belongs to a particular ethnic group. The word Ghazal has become the cultural phenomenon. It is closely associated with the Muslim people and it has become the identity of their ethnic group. Here, ethnicity and identity cannot be separated. The images like Ghalib, Saqi, Abraham, Ashes, roses, nights, lights, places etc. make this poem more effective. Probably, they lead us again to the Kashmir itself. *The Fourth Day*, the title itself refers to the day where the Muslim people mark the end of the first active period of the mourning.

The poem *Eleven Stars over Andalusia* also depicts the phenomenon related to identity. His wide experiences, voracious reading has converted into the rich references. There are references to Eqbal Ahmed, Ghalib, Begum Akhtar, Zero Bridge, Chinar, Bulbul, Hafiz etc. These words are associated with his cultural identity as a Kashmiri. All his references are really mesmerizing and enticing. He is trying to create an effect i.e. uniform effect. Different identities make Agha Shahid Ali a culturally very rich poet. Kashmir left a deep influence on Ali.

The last poem this collection *Rooms Are Never Finished* is *I Dream I am at the Ghat of the Only World*. He uses the words like Gulistan, Firdausi, Khayyam, Khuda Hafiz, Kashmiries, Mohammad etc. They are used in Muslim community. Muslim people used the word Khuda Hafiz to say good bye. The history, the traditions, the culture all these things make a tremendous effect here on the cultural identity of the poet.

In a conversation with Amitav Ghosh, He clears his final wish -

"I would like to back to Kashmir to die." (Ghosh 124)

It clearly indicates his love for Kashmir. Ali deals with Hindu, Muslim and Christian culture in his poems. It may be argued that multiculturalism has formed the texture of his identity. His poems in *Rooms Are Never Finished* attempts to prove his cultural identity as a Kashmiri.

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