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Agha Shahid Ali and Transnational Poetry: An Overview

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Abstract:

Twentieth century poetry in English suffers from a lack of proper nomenclature. Competing nationalities and identities often jostle together under the rubric of modern poetry. While terms like postcoloniality, hybridization etc have provided convenient tools of understanding of contemporary poetry, new paradigms are required to appreciate the development of English poetry in the face of a fast-paced globalization and unprecedented mobility across cultures. The contemporary English poet whether Western or otherwise is aware of the shifting nature of such terms as identity, nationalism and culture. In such a scenario it becomes imperative to redefine and revisit the potential and scope of modern poetry to articulate a new poetics.

Agha Shahid Ali- in his fascinating blend of discourses provides an excellent example of what critics are currently calling Transnationalism or transnational poetry. His cross-cultural allegiances and inheritances make him a compound poet whose poetic imagination is largely transnational, “a nation-crossing force that exceeds the limits of the territorial”. This paper will attempt to locate Agha Shahid’s poetry within the purview of a transnational aesthetics and re-examine the notion of space, regionalism, diaspora with reference to his poetry. Examining the empowering effects of a multi-ethnic poetic identity, the paper will try to posit his poetry as a paradigm shift in English poetry to a futuristic, innovative aesthetics signaling a new era in the theory and practice of contemporary English poetry.

Keywords: Modern English Poetry, Nation, Transnationalism, Agha Shahid Ali, deterritorialization, liminality.

Generically speaking, it is poetry in English that has consistently yielded itself to the demands and re-adaptations required in the face of an increasingly modernized and globalized world. As cultures increasingly coincide and collide, contemporary poetry has kept pace with the challenges posed by such a situation. The poetic idiom has travelled remarkably, embracing a wide array of issues stemming from such concepts as colonization, mass migrations, diaspora and travel, making room constantly for redefinitions and reformulations. There is a consequent dynamism and creative energy that defines most poetry written in English today. Writing from an acute sense of cultural dislocation, poets are increasingly retorting by challenging the singular, restricting definitions of such notions as home, territorialization and nation. Postulating a new idea of home, contemporary poetry rejects conceptualizations of home as territorially

bound and geographically fixed as anachronistic in a world defined by fluidity and movement. It is perhaps such a transnational energy that defines most English poetry written today. Drawing on their multiple cultural heritages, poets speak more than one tongue- literally, emotionally and psychologically. Consequently, this has resulted in a diversification of the field making earlier categorizations purely on the basis of nation and space seems parochial. The poet has become a compound figure, and conceives the poetic imagination as transnational, "a nation-crossing force that exceeds the limits of the of the territorial norm".(Ramazani,2009:3)Poetry whether written in Britain, America, or the Indian subcontinent can no longer be read or understood in exclusively territorial or nationalistic paradigms. Multi- ethnic, multi-spatial and multi-cultural, the English muse has never more hybrid as is evidenced by its ever widening canvas. From Black British poetry, South Asian American diaspora, Carribean creolization, a distinct cross-over is perceptible .Jahan Ramazani makes it clear :

From Eliot and Sterling Brown to Brathwaite, Muldoon, and Grace Nichols, cross-cultural poems cannot be reduced to lyric homogeneity: instead they switch codes between dialect and standard, cross between the oral and the literary; interanimate foreign and indigenous genres, span distances among far-flung locales, frame discourses within one another, and indigenize borrowed forms to serve antithetical ends. Because poetic compression demands that discrepant idioms and sound scapes ,tropes and subgenres, be forced together with intensity, poetry-pressured and fractured by this convergence- allows us to examine at close hand how global modernity's cross-cultural vectors sometimes fuse, sometimes jangle, sometimes vertiginously counterpoint one another. Bringing poetry into critical conversations about globalization can thus help focus attention on the creolized texture of transnational experience as it is formally and imaginatively embodied.(Ramazani,2009:4)

In the absence of a single representative poetic model, plurality has flourished and English poetry now accommodates the transformations resulting from cultural crossovers. Derek Walcott calls it the darkening of English, sometimes also referred to as the blackening of Britain-Agha Shahid may have called it the Urduization of English. There is a perceptible creative energy that defines this field as poets writing from varying positionalities and contexts make the terrain of poetry a site of both negotiation as well as contestation between nativist assertion and metropolitan influence. Replacing standardization and uniformity, such endeavors have inevitably resulted in the rise of distinct, poetic *idiolects*.

Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001)in his poetry exemplifies as perhaps no other contemporary poet-the transcultural and transnational identities that animate his work. Although the poetry sometimes lends itself to easy categorizations as exile, diaspora, there is a subterranean force that goes beyond borders and embraces the boundaries of human longing, dissolving postcolonial categorizations, carving poetry out of an immaterial rather than a geographic exile. Michael Fischer suggests that Ali "reminds us that the exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional;" the constant is that one's deeply-felt desire for home will forever

be frustrated. A structure that is both ruptured and ongoing would therefore truly constitute the poetic subject.

Agha Shahid Ali's poetry-written at the tail end of the twentieth century provides a fascinating example of the ways in which a distinct poetic idiom is born out the poet's multiple allegiances. As a modern diasporic - the contemporary poet invokes more than one literary tradition, resulting in multiple spaces and fluid intersections between identities. The poetry thus becomes a witness as well as a site for opposition as well as reconciliation between the poet's multiple literary cum cultural inheritances. Abandoning a fixed posture, the poet persona of an Agha Shahid Ali poem is often a liminally positioned figure watching, commenting, keenly aware that he can never be whole, but possesses only scraps of his own presence of his own absence, in the literal as well as metaphorical sense. The poetic identity is as a result constructed out of the poet's manipulation of the malleable nature of his own compound self. His approach to his subject matter is far from an obligatory desire to affirm a fixed cultural code but a desire to enmesh the idea of home, exile, his literary heritages, cosmopolitanism in a single poetic idiom. Shahid allows for a critique of conventional conceptualizations of place as a closed and stable site of human attachment. Recreating an imaginative simultaneity of time and place, history, geography intermingle. Clearly the poetry recognizes no territorial or temporal limitations but is a triumph of the poetic imagination's ability to reconcile and cohabit differing spaces. Critics identify this as a trans-hemispheric and cross-period approach. Through sheer linguistic virtuosity, Ali brings biography, the trauma of Kashmir, the American landscape, quotidian details from his life in Kashmir and America, Begum Akhter, the lament at Karbala etc into a single poetic universe. Perhaps Agha Shahid Ali's most crucial intervention in the development of English poetry is the sheer expanse that he gave to this genre stretching it beyond its traditional canvas. The pluralization of the English poetic form in order to accommodate his multiple cultural heritages could well be identified as his signature style.

Drawing on his multiple cultural locations- Shahid's poetry is haunted by traces of a multicultural memory that celebrates heterogeneity and difference even as it aims at a literary syncretism unparalleled in English poetry. An unmistakable American idiom, the rhythm of Urdu, his personal sense of loss intermingle in a hyper imaginative space.

In his debut anthology *Bone Sculpture*, Ali articulates this sense of self-division

“ A language must measure upto one's native dust/Divided between two cultures, I spoke a language foreign even to my ears”

Or

I belong to a country/

you cannot look for on maps, in books, movies.

They call this my alien language/ I am a dealer in words/ that mix cultures/and leave me rootless.

Whether he is mapping the American landscape in *A Nostalgist's Map of America* or reimagining the lost muslim urdu culture of Delhi in *The Halfinch Himalayas*, a sense of ambivalence and unbelonging unsettles any notion of a fixed stable space that the poet inhabits. In fact the poetic voice is filled with its own sense of vacuity and fragility. One also notices that most of the poems to do with Kashmir also stress the irreversible hiatus between consciousness and place, between home and unhoming. Left without the certitude of identitarian stance, the poet transforms the idea of home to include all his cultural baggage to bear upon a particular event. His poetry negates the idea of home as fixed and territorially based and the sole receptacle of one's identity. In keeping with contemporary critical postulations about home, the poet is moving between multiple present homes, wherein the very idea of home is bound up with movement so much so that movement itself constitutes home. Consequently, even the poems on Kashmir are endowed with a surreal aura without the celebration of either arrival or consummation. Rajeev S Patke comments

Ali's poetry is more eloquent about the cost in pain rather than the fulfillment of translation. The vocabulary of loss has many synonyms...it is always already too late to rescue the cities of the imaginary homeland. The poet lives in a world of ruins ...reacts in a stunned way to the ruins of the dream of nation. Likewise Ali comes to the valley of Kashmir with a sense of historical belatedness.(Patke,2009: 234-235)

Inhabiting an imaginary rather than fixed space, Shahidin variably posits himself as the traveler in poems like - I Dream I am the only passenger on flight 423 to Srinagar, I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight, Farewell, Postcard from Kashmir etc.

Most of his poems dramatize the idea of being en route and never really arriving. Deferral inevitably becomes a dominant metaphor in most of the poetry. A fractured sense of identity ruptures any notion of a mononationalistic concept of culture. The poet persona is consistently in a liminal position, the nomad, the witness, his favourite epithet for himself. As a Kashmiri writing within the adopted American milieu, Shahid

“ locates his geographic displacement and transcultural alienation into a poetics of dissonance and defamiliarization , and this hybrid and strange-making art also defies the national literary genealogies into which it is often pressed”. (Ramazani,2009: 25)

A Nostalgist's Map of America was already described by James Merrill as “ mercurial and many faceted”. Taking travel poetry to an altogether different level, the poet weaves multiple landscapes disrupting linearity and spatiality to reinvent the nostalgist's America. A prominent feature of contemporary poetry, critics identify this as a geo-political

oscillation, an imaginative back and forth between discrepant topographies. Moving beyond a local horizon, Ali's regionalism whether American or Kashmiri therefore to be understood as a porous entity, where the local, the non-local, are enmeshed to serve a syncretism that accommodates a ingenious intertextuality between remote places, texts and languages individualities. Blurring the distinction between traditional binaries as deterritorialization and reterritorialization, he invents a new position with which to reclaim-what in diasporic poet's is called-his scattered inheritances. Space earlier lauded as a defining feature of postcolonial poetry can no longer be treated in singular terms. The space of Agha Shahid's poetry is neither local nor global but a translocation, a placeless free floating phenomenon. Verbally dexterous, it enables transactions across specific times and places.

"Lenox Hill", Shahid's elegy for his mother provides a typical example of his synthesizing ability to recreate from fragments. Written from his mother's death bed in Lenox hill the hospital in Amherst, America, the poem spans both time and space to reconfigure loss in simultaneity of experiences. Ramazani comments

Shahid's "writing home"—a language act which allows the protagonist to reestablish comforting contact with the mother both a matriarchal figure and a mother tongue: Yet the comfort is dissipated as in most modern elegies towards a more expansive notion of grief to include a crossing over of the boundaries of space and culture, grief, love and anger, the search for and thwarting of consolation, commemorative and anti-commemorative impulses"

Shahid moulds his poetic idiom:

The Hun so loved the cry, one falling elephant's

He wished to hear it again. At dawn, my mother

Heard, in her hospital-dream of elephants,

Sirens wail through Manhattan like elephants

Forced off Pir Panjal's rock cliffs in Kashmir

What we're dealing with in this poem is not a literally mappable phenomenon, but with what becomes part of "of a whole new psychic geography". Personal loss, Kashmiri Nationalism, The Huns, Krishna, James Merrill all become part of the hyper-imaginative elegiac space of the poem. The space of the poem is at once given as well as recreated. Going by norm it is a conditioned literary space of the elegy, but is also a *free space* where the poet's imagination commingles the objective and the subjective.

Interestingly, both *A Nostalgist's Map of America* and *A Country Without a Post Office*, built on the notion of respective closed territorial boundaries, destabilize any concept of a single, representative thought process. If loss is the governing motif in these anthologies, the loss, in his characteristic manner is multiplied by intersecting it with various other spaces and positions. Rajeev Patke remarks that Shahid made himself into a laureate of loss but comments on Shahid's tendency to inhabit more than one imaginary space:

By drowning his Kashmir in the pool of many losses, the poet pluralizes loss. All specific losses metamorphose into a language of pure loss. Ali's poems liberate loss into the pool of languages, from Urdu to English, from Kashmir to Amherst. The sharing across languages and cultures does not diminish the loss, but makes it participate in a wider mourning. (Patke, 2009: 236)

In a desire to make poetry more symptomatic of his own multiple allegiances, Agha Shahid gifted the American academy the Eastern poetic form of the Ghazal. By making poets who swore by free verse adhere to the technical demands of the ghazal, a formal unity based on rhyme and refrain and prosody, Ali is at once paying a debt to the language of loss, Arabic, Persian or Urdu, as well as providing a space which allows for literary, cultural and linguistic cohabitation. The Ghazal either exoticised or othered, now finds itself modernized in the hands of mainstream English poets like John Hollander, Anne Finch, Paul Muldoon, Adrienne Rich who now echo Hafiz, Ghalib and Faiz. This is poetic syncretism, a transnational aesthetic where English lends itself to nativist assertion and the ghazal, now rewritten, recomposed, reimagined opens up new possibilities for linguistic and cultural transmissions. In his ironic, playful manner Agha Shahid says he found it "tantalizing to strike a playful pose of Third-World arrogance, laced with a muslim snobbery". (Ali, 2000: 2). In more pedantic terminology, such an attempt is identified as an effort made by "third world cultural entrepreneurs tampering and tinkering with alien forms to create new ones responsive to their experience."

The English ghazal written in America may or may not have a future but this signals the dialogic frame initiated by Agha Shahid. Such cultural cross over enliven the modernist idiom of contemporary poetry as well as modernize a traditional eastern poetic mode.

As English increasingly becomes post-national, Transnational literary theory has a clear role to play because of the growing interchange between cultures that makes an over insistence on binary models of Norm and periphery look out of place. As literature manifests a deepening enmeshment of the local and the global, transnational literary criticism could perhaps do justice to the idea of twenty first century English poetry which can no longer be seen as "the product of one nation and one nation alone, analyzable within its confines".

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