

Echoes of Exile: Remembrance, Loss and Resistance in the Select Poems of Agha Shahid Ali

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Abstract:

This paper explores the possibilities of witnessing from exile in a postcolonial context in Agha Shahid Ali's select poems. The study draws on recent scholarship in affect theory and transnational poetics. His tripartite identity, as a Kashmiri-Indian-American poet, creates a rhizomatic hybrid space, at once diasporically estranged and viscerally anchored to his ravaged homeland. In an era marked by contemporary crises, the 2019 abrogation of Article 370, which has deepened Kashmir's cultural erasure, alongside the exclusion of dissenting voices from university syllabi, Ali's work assumes heightened significance. The poems in the selected anthologies, *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997) and *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001), do not fix the rupture between past and present, but rather widen it by making it into a chronic wound which, through memory, history, and grief, continually passes from generation to generation. Ali treats language as an occupied territory. Ali refuses narrative closure and weaving multilingual echoes throughout his verse. He, throughout his poetry, refigures exile as perpetual witnessing. Through the lens of Carolyn Forché's concept of "Poetry of Witness," the paper argues that Ali's poetry documents the suffering of the Kashmiri people and presents an alternative history of their struggles.

Keywords: Exile, Imaginary Homeland, Occupied Language, Poetry of Witness, Postcolonial Nostalgia.

Introduction

This paper explores the possibilities of witnessing from exile in a postcolonial context in Agha Shahid Ali's select poems from his anthologies *The Country Without a Post Office* (2009) and *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2009). Since the independence of India in 1947, Kashmir has been a contested land. Amid ongoing Kashmir conflicts—intensified by the 2019 revocation of autonomy and 2023 curricular censorship, Ali's poetry embodies displacement, cultural erosion, and trauma. His poetry portrays Kashmir as a layered entity of memory and devastation. By portraying Kashmir as more than a geographical entity, infusing it with layers of personal memory, history, and loss, Ali juxtaposes its idyllic past with the devastation wrought by violence. His work resonates with themes of alienation, nostalgia, and identity crisis, offering a poignant critique of the hollow proclamations of peace amidst persistent desolation.

Through the lens of Carolyn Forché's concept of "Poetry of Witness," the paper argues that Ali's poetry documents the suffering of the Kashmiri people and presents an alternative history of their struggles. Drawing on his cultural hybridity as a Kashmiri-American Muslim, Ali employs traditional forms, such as the ghazal, to express personal grief, political dissent, and cultural nostalgia. Poems such as "The Blessed Word: A Prologue" and "Farewell" depict vivid imagery of a paradise lost. In contrast, the long poem "Amherst to Kashmir" interweaves themes of personal loss with the collective alienation of the Kashmiri diaspora.

Through his powerful imagery, he juxtaposes the current state of once pristine Kashmir, with its widespread destruction, starkly contrasting with its earlier perception of the land as a heaven on earth. Ali refers to Kashmir's historical beauty, which inspired the Sufi poet, Amir Khusrao of Delhi to write the famous verses: "Agar firdous bar roo-e-zameen Hameen ast-o hameen ast-o hameen ast" (Bṛhaspati 14), encapsulating the deep contrast between the idyllic

beauty and the ruinous fate. In his poem “Farewell” (from *The Country Without a Post Office*, 1997), Agha Shahid Ali poignantly critiques the hollow rhetoric of political figures who claim to have restored peace to the land, yet in reality “They make a desolation and call it peace,” a line that echoes Tacitus to underscore the violence masked as resolution (*The Veiled Suite* 176). The line captures the essence of Ali’s poetry, alluding to the times when peace is declared, leaving behind the heaven on earth, a place ridden with ashes and barrenness, devoid of life and vitality. Ali used this expression in his poem “The Last Saffron,” where he translates it as “If there is a paradise on earth, it is this, it is this, it is this” (183).

Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001), the inheritor of three distinct cultures, was a Kashmiri American Muslim and established himself as an American poet writing in English, who was “imbued with ... permutations of Hindu, Muslim and Western cultures” (Benvenuto 267). Critic Bruce King remarked that Ali’s poetry swirls around insecurity and “obsessions [with] ... memory, death, history, family ancestors, nostalgia for a past he never knew, dreams, Hindu ceremonies, friendships, and self-consciousness about being a poet” (12). Ali recognised “a proclivity to mourn historical loss was an inescapable part of his temperament” (Benvenuto 266). However, he refused to “embrace the role of victim that could so easily have been his” (Ghosh 318).

Due to his hybrid identity, Ali belongs to many worlds. After immigrating to the US, he still feels connected to his Kashmiri roots. Just as Mahmoud Darwish refers to himself as a “present absent alien” (Jaggi n.pag), Ali identifies himself as an absent presence of the “previous occupant” (*The Veiled Suite* 63). He writes:

From a half-torn horoscope I learn

His sign: Aquarius, just like me.

...

Yes, Aquarians are vain.
 And no anthems on their lips they travel
 Great distances. (63)

His poetry is often called “anthems from Exilepuri,” in which India is both absent and present at once (Menon 173). Defining the condition of an exile writer, Salman Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands* (1991) writes: “It may be that writers in my position, exiles, or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into a pillar of salt” (10). The shuttling back and forth between past and present, driven by memory and imagination, constitutes the central axis of Agha Shahid Ali’s poetics. It functions as the primary mechanism for attempting to reclaim the irretrievable, be it the lost homeland of Kashmir, personal histories, or cultural continuity amid exile and violence.

The Imaginary Homeland and Refusal of Closure

Ali radically redefines the very possibilities of witnessing from exile. He writes from a position that is simultaneously diasporic, yet deeply connected to his homeland, Kashmir. Ali masterfully fuses his Muslim identity, syncretic Kashmiri traditions (encompassing Hindu, Sufi, and Buddhist elements), and American influences into a richly hybrid poetics. His voice carries deep grief for irretrievable personal and collective losses while articulating resolute political beliefs that condemn violence and erasure in Kashmir. Like Nelly Sachs, Holocaust poet, and Mahmoud Darwish, Palestinian poet, who moved from pain towards healing or hope, Ali does not offer any closure. His idea of Kashmir is never fully realised as he keeps on reimagining it. His homeland remains an “imaginary homeland” that causes deep pain precisely because it is imaginary and not real. Through his poem, Ali redefines witnessing from exile by refusing closure,

widening the rupture between past/present into a chronic wound, and turning occupied language into resistance.

The poems in the selected anthologies, *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997) and *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001), do not fix the rupture between past and present, but rather widen it by making it into a chronic wound which, through memory, history, and grief, continually passes from generation to generation. For instance, the maternal elegy in *Rooms Are Never Finished* does not offer any solace but rather expands the mother's grief to represent Kashmir's never-ending pain and suffering.

Poetry of Witness and Documenting Violence

Ali's poetic world is expansive, embracing varied themes from personal elegy and cultural fusion to historical violence and exile, yet much of his verse functions as poetry of witness, testifying unflinchingly to erasure, suffering, and the imperative of memory in the face of state-inflicted desolation. The paper argues that Ali's poetry functions as "Poetry of Witness," a term coined and popularised by the American poet Carolyn Forché (*Against Forgetting* 29). Forché uses the term "poetry of witness" to describe works by poets who have personally experienced, or directly confronted, war, violence, oppression, exile, or other forms of historical extremity, transforming their encounters into poetic testimony that serves as evidence of atrocity. Their collective voice establishes an 'alternative history' which is a manifestation of the pain and suffering of the people subjected to inhumanity perpetrated by the state agencies. Ali writes similarly and gives a kind of matter-of-fact account of the happenings in his beloved land, Kashmir. He records such happenings in the poem, "The Blessed Word: A Prologue" (2009) which is a part of the anthology, *The Country Without a Post Office*: "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 . . ." (173). It was the heaps of unattended letters that gave birth to the collection.

Ali uses poetry as a vehicle to reflect on the loss of land, people, and cultures, and portrays Kashmir as a disturbed place which has a long history of atrocities, "constant subjugation, mass rapes, curfews and tortures in army camps" (Rath 150). Ali uses such traumatic images to illuminate "the real image of a place that was once termed 'the blessed land' or 'paradise on earth'" (150). In "After the August Wedding in Lahore, Pakistan," Ali depicts an army brigadier who casually recounts the torture of Kashmiri boys, how they "break so quickly" and are made to "sing" on the rack, during a wedding celebration. This offhand narration powerfully exposes the brigadier's shamelessness, callous insensitivity, and utter inhumanity, framing state-perpetrated violence as routine conversation rather than atrocity. Capturing this cold detachment and callous attitude, Ali writes, "A brigadier says, *the boys of Kashmir / break so quickly, we make their bodies sing / on the rack, till no song is left to sing*" (*The Veiled Suite* 241).

Amidst the chaos of conflict, Ali's poetic imagination retreats to a prelapsarian Kashmir, evoking the calm serenity of the Jhelum River, the reflective stillness of Dal Lake, the towering mountains, and the pristine natural beauty that once epitomised the region's identity. The situation has completely changed now. He pictorialises a "naked boy screaming", "Emptied Srinagar" and "Kashmir is burning" (*The Veiled Suite* 174-179). He portrays present Kashmir as: "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... while the Jhelum flows under them, sometimes with a dismembered body (173-174).

Ali alludes to Kashmir as "an untitled poem" in his prose poem, "The Blessed Word: A Prologue" (2009). He calls it a place "where you leave home in the warning, you never know if

you'll return" (172). Kashmir forms the centre of Ali's poetic world. In all his work, Ali remembers and mourns the loss of his beloved Kashmir. Mansi Mehra remarks, "His poetry is like a canvas on which he draws an imaginary painting of his homeland through bruised and besieged" (120). While describing the beauty and identity of his land, he raises questions about the political unrest between India and Pakistan. Srinagar has become a place where "Guns shoot stars in the sky" (*The Veiled Suite* 172). Ali critiques the political policies that underlie the plight of the people in the poem "Death Row" (2009). He writes:

Someone else in this world has been mentioning you,
gathering news, itemising your lives
for a file, you'll never see. He already knows
in which incarnation you won't find what you will
again, lose in this one. (229)

The passage evokes a sense of invasive surveillance and existential despair. This portrayal vividly depicts an omnipresent figure who covertly maintains records of every life without the subjects' knowledge or consent, powerfully symbolizing the complete loss of privacy and individual autonomy in a surveilled society, where personal existence is reduced to monitored entries in an unseen ledger of power. The reference is a poignant commentary on the inescapable nature of human suffering and of the individual powerlessness in the face of such forces.

Occupied Language and Multilingual Resistance

Due to the layered identity of Kashmir, many cultures have affected the identity of Kashmir, and even its name has been misunderstood and perceived in myriad ways. Ali reflects

upon those complexities, and to capture different facets or nuances of the region, he provides eighteen different ways to spell Kashmir:

Let me cry out in that void, say it as I can. I write on that void: Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir, Cashmir, Cashmire, Kashmere, Cachemire, Cushmeer, Cachmiere, Cašmir. Or Cauchemar in a sea of stories? Or: Kacmir, Kaschemir, Kasmere, Kachmire, Kasmir. Kerseymere? (170)

These variations are not just phonological variations of the name of the land but also represent a range of linguistic, historical and cultural perspectives, evoking multiple associations resonating with various people. By incorporating the French word “Cauchemar” (nightmare), Ali suggests the profound suffering and ongoing conflict that define Kashmir’s history, encapsulating how the once-idyllic homeland has become a site of unrelieved trauma, erasure, and nightmare-like desolation. The word, symbolically the land itself, undertakes its journey from being “Kashmir” to “Kerseymere,” introducing a new dimension and symbolising a culmination or complete transformation of the previous forms. Ali attempts to excavate a rich cultural and historical past by tracing the history associated with the names. Names transcend simple labels, serving as deep repositories of identity, cultural heritage, and social dynamics. They embody personal, familial, and cultural meanings, profoundly influencing self-perception while shaping external judgments and interpersonal relations.

The phrase ‘Without a Post Office’ embedded in the title of the anthology, *The Country Without a Post Office*, refers to the failure of communication from the land, ultimately leading to no connection with the outside world. The volume becomes a litany of pain and longing for Ali’s childhood days spent in the peaceful valley of Kashmir. It also draws attention to the helplessness of natives who wish to reach the outside world and tell their stories, but fail. The phrase also

characterises Kashmir as a troubled land struggling with a lack of identity amidst ongoing chaos. Nida Sajid in “The Transnational Cartography of Agha Shahid Ali’s Poetry” (2012) describes Ali’s poetry as a provocative invitation for a visit without a passport to ‘the county without a post office’ where Ali hopes that the “entire map of the lost will be candled” and that the “deaf worlds across continents” would hear once again the pain of a land destroyed by violence (*The Veiled Suite* 50-51).

In his poem, “Farewell” (2009), through the line, “if only somehow you could have been mine, what wouldn't / have happened in this world,” Ali bemoans the departure of Kashmiri Pandits and bids them farewell, reflecting a sense of loss and longing for the unity, richness and cultural diversity that once prevailed in Kashmir (177). Capturing the intersection of memory, history, and the physical reality of Kashmir, Ali writes, “In the lake the arms of temples and mosques are locked in each other’s reflections” (176). Ali’s poetry highlights that it is not just about the physical absence of a community but also about the deep cultural, historical and emotional void left behind after their departure. He underscores a profound impact of displacement on the cultural fabric of Kashmir and, in a broader sense, on communal and cultural harmony. Commenting on the loss, he writes:

At a certain point, I lost track of you.

You needed me. You needed to perfect me:

In your absence, you polished me into the Enemy.

Your history gets in the way of my memory. (176-177)

Adopting a universal perspective, Ali includes all participants in a resonant conversation through the pronouns “I” and “you,” which may signify history dialoguing with memory, the speaker addressing those who have shared similar suffering, or the poet inviting the reader into an inclusive

space of witness, thus extending personal exile and grief into a collective, transhistorical encounter. Addressing the interplay between history and memory, Nishat Zaidi remarks that Ali, despite his own displacement and the personal displacement he endures, empathetically connects and articulates the pain of his people. It naturally leads to the poet consistently empathising and reconstituting the sufferings of his motherland, despite his own displacement. He, therefore, experiences a metaphysical anguish for his homeland, Kashmir-the land of paradise, going through a period of political turmoil. The poet feels as though he is “being rowed” through paradise on a river of hell (*Makers* 61-62).

The first poem of the anthology “The Blessed Word: A Prologue” (2009) draws a parallel between the chaos and restlessness of Kashmir and that of Russia. He begins the poem by citing Osip Mandelstam, a Russian Poet who was sent into internal exile by Stalin’s regime and later died in a prison camp, away from his beloved city, Petersburg. Mandelstam also expressed a yearning for his lost homeland, Petersburg, renamed Leningrad after Vladimir Lenin’s death. Ali invokes Mandelstam, “We shall meet again in Petersburg/ as though we had buried the sun there,” reflecting a profound sense of grief at the loss and also hope for” (*The Veiled Suite* 171). The reference underscores a common sense of nostalgia for their respective homelands, which were changed forever by political upheavals. The imagery of burying the sun conveys a feeling of profound grief over the immutable nature of disruption. This longing also conveys a desire to reconnect with the lost past, despite the disturbance. Both poets transcend the geographical boundaries imposed by political and cultural configurations, exploring themes that resonate across the world’s regions.

Drawing a parallel between the nostalgia and loss, Ali writes: “He reinvents Petersburg (I, Srinagar), an imaginary homeland, filling it, closing it, shutting himself (myself) in it. For there is

the blessed word with no meaning, there are flowers that will never die, roses that will never fall, a night in which Mandelstam is not afraid and needs no pass” (*The Veiled Suite* 172). In an attempt to reach readers across the world, Ali expands his concept of ‘home’ by transcending boundaries and takes his readers to Petersburg, which shares a fate similar to that of Kashmir. The entire volume expands the very idea of “home,” which in Ali’s poetry appears not as a specified nation or bounded territory but as “an imaginary homeland” (Rushdie 10). Ali, like Mandelstam, pursues the blessed word, which is the memory of home, which Ali not only seeks for himself but also for his fellow Kashmiris in their difficult times. However, due to the challenging distance between himself and his home in Kashmir, he sees only glimmers of it and writes: “The rubble of downtown Srinagar stares at me from the Times” (173).

Karbala as Metaphor: Personal and Collective Martyrdom

Ali does not merely borrow the ghazal, a form traditionally devoted to love and longing, but repurposes it to document violence and loss. For instance, in “The Blessed Word: A Prologue” (2009), Karbala appears not as metaphor but as the coexistence of two events on the same ontological plane: the martyrdom of Hussain and that of Kashmiri youth. This combining of various forms does not make his work a pastiche, a mere decorative and playful collage of various forms; rather, Ali is fusing them under strong pressure to assimilate the unassimilable to address the pain and dislocated, pulverised lives of Kashmiris. In creating a hybrid, inimitable form that evades categorization as Eastern or Western, traditional or modern, Agha Shahid Ali establishes a poetics of the eternally displaced, a poetry that can only inhabit and articulate itself from the site of ruin. Unlike those five poets, who endure violence in situ, Ali witnesses Kashmir’s suffering from places like Amherst and Brooklyn. Ali, like Agamben’s contemporary, the one who

“perceives the darkness” of his time, witnesses from a distance, producing hyper-clarity (“What is the Contemporary?” 53).

Another important aspect of Ali’s poetry is that for Ali, language is itself an occupied territory. In “The Blessed Word: A Prologue,” Agha Shahid Ali enumerates eighteen variant spellings of “Kashmir” to mirror the region's eighteenfold history of colonisation, each iteration marking layers of conquest, displacement, and cultural erasure. He then invokes English as a resilient medium, one able to carry the mournful cadences of Urdu and articulate the deep Arabic pain of exile, thereby enabling the ghazal form to express the untranslatable anguish of his homeland. By doing so, Ali uses the coloniser’s language to testify against the coloniser. He forces the English language to bear the unbearable weight of a paradise that exists only in memory, not in reality, which is an ultimate act of resistance.

In “Karbala as Metaphor in the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali” (2007), Nishat Zaidi argues that Ali uses the metaphor to communicate his own “hyphenated existence, his personal pain (the death of his mother), his experience of exile, a communal loss caused by political apathy (strife stricken Kashmir), and the universal phenomenon of pain” (154). The idiom from the Orient, drawn from Persian, Arabic, and Urdu poetic heritage, is masterfully interwoven across all of Ali’s collections, highlighting his vital engagement as a modern poet with the complexities and turmoil of the contemporary world.

The last anthology of poems published while Agha Shahid Ali was alive was *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2009), which encapsulates his distinctive style and encompasses the full spectrum of his poetic subjects. The profound personal grief of the death of his mother is central to the collection, extending metaphorically to represent the anguish and pain of separation from his homeland. The anguish and suffering of Kashmir’s people are elliptically mirrored in the trials

faced by oppressed communities across the globe, transforming Ali's intimate pain into a universal lament. This fusion of personal voice and thematic depth is powerfully enriched by his recurring engagement with Karbala, which serves as a profound symbol of lost homeland and the enduring weight of collective memory.

In literature, the metaphor serves as a powerful symbol of enduring suffering for one's belief. Ali uses this metaphor to express the shared human experiences of pain and loss, evoking the theme of struggle in personal and political realms. Nishat Zaidi characterises Ali's deployment of the Karbala metaphor as a central symbol embodying exile, homelessness, pain, grief, and profound loss, serving as a vehicle for his expression of faith in love amid the injustices inflicted on Kashmir. Zaidi writes: "Although Islam exerts a powerful influence throughout the poetic oeuvre of Agha Shahid Ali, it reaches its high point in this volume, where the metaphor of Karbala and Imam Hussain's martyrdom in Karbala becomes a culmination of all that has always concerned Agha Shahid Ali" (*Makers* 64-65).

In "Karbala: A History of the 'House of Sorrow'" (2009), Agha Shahid Ali draws a striking comparison between the martyrdom of Imam Hussain and the crucifixion of Jesus, weaving together themes of divine sacrifice, unjust suffering, and eternal remembrance across religious traditions. He writes: "For just as Jesus went to Jerusalem to die on the cross," and Hussain "went to Karbala to accept the passion that had been meant for him from the beginning of time" (*The Veiled Suite* 250). Zaidi argues that Ali blends two different cultures and faiths to make the readers:

Active participants in the decoding of a metaphor. The target of Agha Shahid Ali (mainly English and American), being unfamiliar with Karbala and its significance for the Muslim Psyche, it was imperative for him to connect it to them He begins the story of Karbala with Jesus's lament over the future death of Hussain

and draws a parallel between the ritualistic memorialising of Hussain in Muharram by Shi'as with the 'Calvary' in Christianity. ("Karbala as a Metaphor"159)

In his poem "Zainab's Lament in Damascus" (2009), Ali poignantly amplifies the lamentations of Zainab, sister of Imam Hussain, transforming her sorrow into an enduring cry against tyranny and oblivion. Zainab narrates the heart-rending incident of his brother's brutal death on the battlefield. The grand narrative of Zainab is drawn parallel to the terror-stricken Kashmir and Ali's mother's death. The motif of Karbala resonates his exilic sensibility, his mother's for his lost homeland and Zainab's sorrow and agony at the loss of the lives of the people who fought in the battle.

The poem, "Lenox Hill" (2009), serves as a prologue to the anthology *Rooms are Never Finished*. He masterfully intertwines the intimate grief of losing his mother with the collective pain of Kashmir. By doing this, he blurs the boundaries between personal and historical trauma. He mourns the death of his mother, who died after surgery at the Lenox Hill Hospital just a year ago, before he died of the same disease. Ali writes:

For compared to my grief for you, what are those
of Kashmir,
and what (I close the ledger) are the griefs of the universe
when I remember you—beyond all accounting—
O my mother? (249)

Ali begins the poem with a personal memory and gradually fuses it with the historical memory of a tyrant king, Mihiragula, who, as the legend goes, was pleased at hearing an elephant's cry as it fell from a mountain cliff that he would command more elephants to be killed by throwing them off the cliff.

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:
 The soldiers, so ruled, had rushed the elephants. (247)

Mihiragula took refuge in Kashmir and later turned into a tyrant by usurping the throne of his benefactor. By invoking the legend of a tyrant, Ali draws parallels between his mother's death and the broader suffering of Kashmir. Ali juxtaposes the image of the hospital bed and the rock cliffs of Pir Panjal, underscoring the inevitability of the presence of loss and grief in the life of an individual. In doing so, the poem becomes a poignant meditation on the ubiquity of suffering, reflecting the relationship between individual and collective memory.

Exiled from his homeland, Ali discovered that distance itself intensified his longing for rooted belonging in Kashmir. Through masterful craft, he maps the fractured, uncharted regions of his own identity. In his poetry, Ali commits unwaveringly to amplifying marginalised voices, confronting the traumas of Kashmir while extending his gaze to other global sites ravaged by war and violence. Even amidst unrelenting suffering, his verses reveal redemptive facets of exile, prompting a searching interrogation of the illusory construct we call "home." The first of these is a moral dimension. In *If This is a Man* (2000), Primo Levi urges those "who live safe in your warm houses" to remember the displaced and unfortunate victims of Nazi concentration camps and warns them not to feel too complacent in their abodes, as reality can suddenly change. One can become a refugee in the blink of an eye (24). This phenomenon resonates with Agamben's verdict of the modern world in *Homo Sacer* (1998), where he contends that in the modern political landscape, it

has become common for a sovereign (the one who holds more power than others) to create exceptions by normalising their reasons. Consequently, the boundary between the bare life (*zoē*) of ordinary people and their political existence (*bios*) dissolves into indistinction, exposing them to the perpetual risk of being stripped down to mere survival (*Homo Sacer* 4). When these practices are normalised, the boundary between those shielded by law and those abandoned by it dissolves into indistinction. The result is a pervasive vulnerability: anyone may at any moment be stripped of protection and exposed to exclusion. In this ruthless world, where the potential of being reduced to a refugee looms over everyone, the notion of being secured in one's homeland becomes an illusion.

Exile's Moral Dimension and Universal Witnessing

In exile, Ali manages to empathise with the loss experienced by distant strangers. His tribute to figures like Mandelstam, who was persecuted by the Soviet Regime, shows a deep understanding of the precariousness of life and the moral responsibility to remember and honour those who have stripped down to mere "bare life." Subsequently, Ali manages to stand against the sovereign power that seeks to render such lives invisible or meaningless.

Ali's intricate blending of personal and political narratives, steeped in the traditions of European, Urdu, Arabic, and Persian poetry, enriches his exploration of exile and identity. This paper examines how Ali's poetic form and language shape his narrative of loss, positioning his work as an anthem of resilience amidst displacement. His portrayal of societal and historical trauma, such as reckless youth, oppressed people, communal conflict and violence, highlights the role his verses play in addressing the issues. Far from merely lamenting dreadful and cherished pasts, Ali immerses himself in the themes of mourning, lamentation, and personal as well as

collective trauma, propelled by his acute sensitivity to the sufferings of Kashmir's people. He offers a multidimensional view of the impact of violence on human life and provides a contemplative response to such themes.

In conclusion, the exploration of Agha Shahid Ali's poetry reveals a profound interplay of memory, loss, and the intricate dynamics of displacement. His works, particularly *The Country Without a Post Office* and *Rooms Are Never Finished*, serve as poignant articulations of personal and collective trauma. Drawing from the socio-political realities of Kashmir, Ali transforms the local into the universal, making his poetry resonate with broader human experiences of longing, exile, and resilience. His profound mastery of classical forms like the ghazal, fused with haunting imagery and lyrical elegance, builds his place as a poet of witness and remembrance. Ultimately, Ali's poetry is a testament to the enduring power of art to confront historical silences and affirm the necessity of cultural memory in the face of erasure and exile.

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