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The Everlasting Sorrow and Grief in the Selected Poems of Ali and Darwish

Dr. Liaqat Nazir
Assistant Professor,
Dept. of English,
Taibah University,
K.S.A.
Mirliyaqat101@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1883-1008

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Abstract:

The theme of sorrow and grief is central in the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali and Mahmoud Darwish. Their verses pulse with longing for lost homelands and fractured identities, capturing the ache of exile and the struggle to belong. This paper examines how "everlasting sorrow and grief" functions as a dominant poetic and theoretical force in their works. Drawing on Edward Said's understanding of exile as irreparable loss, Homi K. Bhabha's notion of cultural hybridity, and Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma, it argues that sorrow in their poetry is deeply integral, shaping form, imagery, and voice. Their poetry reconnects grief into a space where memory is preserved, identity is negotiated, and defiance is articulated. "Everlasting sorrow and grief" serves as a lens through which the complex realities of conflict and political instability are revisited and reinterpreted. Through close textual analysis, the study shows that their poetry operates as both a witness and an archive, and as a bridge to continuity and strength.

Keywords: Grief, Sorrow, Loss, Identity, Witness, Memory.

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Introduction

Agha Shahid Ali and Mahmoud Darwish are two major poets in the Resistance Literature and Diaspora literature. However, a critical examination of their literary contributions reveals that the recurring conflicts and ensuing violence that engulfed their respective homelands deeply shaped their creative expressions. Agha Shahid Ali, though known as an American English-language poet of Kashmiri origin, demonstrates a practice of self-exile that calls into question his poetic authenticity. Born in New Delhi in 1949 and raised in Srinagar, his migration to the U.S. and subsequent popularity in American literary circles suggest a voice that is at times more acceptable to Western sensibilities than truly hostile toward colonial or imperial constructions. His celebrated works—such as *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997) and *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001)—are a fusion of multiple ethnic influences, but this stylistic hybridity risks diluting the urgency of Kashmiri suffering into elegant, aestheticised lamentation with political overtures.

Mahmoud Darwish, by contrast, symbolises the exiled Palestinian voice with an unwavering confrontation of dispossession. Born in al-Birwa in 1941 and displaced during the 1948 Nakba, his life and poetry were undeniably bound to the trauma of occupation and exile. His literary work connects a tension between intimate testimony and a poetic universalism that can render the political struggle into abstracted human suffering.

Both poets share a deep sense of sorrow and loss, but critically, their voices rise beyond personal grief to explore the profound ties between homeland and identity. Through their poetry, they do not simply mourn; they invite the reader into a space where artistic expression becomes a form of witness. Their poetry transforms grief into a rich aesthetic experience, one that compels us to feel the beauty of their lament while never forgetting the humanitarian tragedies that gave it birth. In this way, each poem balances the weight of political and ethical responsibility with the elegance of art.

In this paper, we delved into their famous poems that vividly depict their places and the pain of their people, which continue to be at the centre of the humanitarian crisis.

Sorrow and Grief in the Selected Poems of Agha Shahid Ali

The famous American poet and critic T. S. Eliot offers a representative view:

> The essential advantage of a poet is not to have a beautiful world with which to deal; it is to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness: to see the boredom and the horror and the glory. (Eliot 2010**)**

Agha Shaid Ali superbly deals with this; he inherits the beautiful world of Kashmir, often called “Paradise on Earth", but his poetry seeks to settle on that aesthetic surface. By doing this, he magnifies grief beyond the individual and turns it into something collective. Bruce King (2001) 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 the poem "*Postcard from Kashmir"*, he shrinks the "giant" beauty of the Himalayas into a "neat four by six inches," acknowledging that the idealised beauty is "overexposed" and distinct from the raw, painful reality of the homeland. The eponymous poem from *The Half-inch Himalayas* is all about his beloved Kashmir, that have now shrunk to a picture postcard dropped in his mailbox. He used to open and read it repeatedly like a passionate lover far from home waiting for any good news, but Kashmir remained reeling under the indefinite curfew.

> Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,
> My home a neat four by six inches.
> I always loved neatness. Now I hold
> The half-inch Himalayas in my hand.
> This is home. And this is the closet
> I‘ll ever be at home”

(Ali, *Postcard from Kashmir 1-6)*

Ali, in this poem, shows how memories and pictures redeem for being in the homeland. Here, the reference is to a postcard that shows his understanding of his homeland, which has become shallow and incomplete over the years due to the ongoing conflict. The poet unifies personal losses with the world's losses and narrates his nostalgia for a lost Kashmiri youth who is daily consumed by the ongoing conflict. It is evident in his chase for Irfan when he says in "*The Blessed Word: A Prologue*".

> We shall meet again, in Srinagar," I want to answer Irfan. But such a promise?
> I make it in Mandelstam's velvet dark, in the black velvet Void"

(Ali, *The Blessed Word: A Prologue* 2000, 3)

Ali occasionally implants human characters to portray the death and destructions plagued both the places once known as the centre of peace. The real characters bear such a metaphorical subjectivity that it becomes almost impossible to synonymise them with living beings. However, it's ideal to locate them as metaphors for a condition that the poetic manifestation of "being" renders the historical loss and sense of alienation. Ali calls himself Kashmiri-American-Poet, and according to a critic, Ali reveals that American is not the end of his identity, nor the destination of his being. Placed as it is between the two hyphens, the 'American' implies that from his position in America, Ali can understand the kind of Kashmiri he was before his arrival here and the Kashmir he has become on U.S soil. Cleverly, he suggests that America take him back to Kashmir. (Arjun,1993,796-807)

In the poem "*I dream I am the only Passenger on Flight 423 to Srinagar",* which appeared in the volume of *The Country Without Post Office*, the poet invokes the spirit of Sheikh Noor-ud-din, the revered saint in Kashmir whose shrine was gutted down in a month-long siege that ended with the fierce gun battle in the early 1990's. Ali, in his fantasy, sits beside the saint as the plane touches down at the Srinagar airport:

The landing gear roars, we touch the ashen tarmac
He holds my hand, speechless to tell me if
Those smashed gold flying past petrified
Reds are autumn's late crimsoned spillage
Rushing with wings down the mountainside
Or flames clinging to a touched village.

(Ali, *I dream I am the only Passenger on Flight 423 to Srinagar 66-71)*

Dr Suriya Hussain, a well-known critic, writes that in Ali's collection of poems, *The Country Without Post Office,* people feel totally obsessed by the voices of Kashmiri people who appear quite pure and resonant like a mountain stream. The beautiful, tanned, weather-beaten faces and people's unhurried gait with their angry voices are maintaining their dignity in the hour of sorrow and peace. The poems are meant for the common suffering people of Kashmir. Ali, quoting Suriya's remarks, "felt more the rumbling volcano of revolutionary struggle in the Kashmiri people. He wished the people to be the masters of their own lives". (Dr. Suraiya Hussain,2001)

He uses the metaphors and images in the poem *Karbala* to express the personal sorrow first when his mother died and was accompanying her coffin to Kashmir as per her last wish to be buried there. The grief caused by the death of his mother and then the violence-ridden Kashmir outweighs his personal loss. The poem is a blend of history, poetry, and politics, but it ends on a gloomy and sorrowful note. Like other poems in the anthology, it too narrates the haunted and desolate picture of the valley. Ali, throughout his poetry, pleads the tragic loss of his mother, friends, beloved Kashmir and his poetic sensibilities were fashioned with the themes of gloom, alienation and loss. In his odyssey figuring his homeland, he himself became one of the images and once broke down in an interview with his close friend when he expressed his last wish "I would like to go back to Kashmir to die." (Gosh)

The sudden migration of Kashmiri Pandits from the valley pushed Ali into the deep territory of grief and sorrow because they were part of the centuries-old, rich culture of Kashmir. The whole poem of '*Farewell'* is an appalling evocation of conflict and its dreadful fallout in Kashmir. It is a captivating letter of complaint to others (Kashmiri Pandits) in which the poet feels sorrow and mourns their migration. The migration of Pandits from the valley turns out to be a nightmare that haunts him wherever he goes. He often talked about this tragic incident of Kashmir's history in conversations and in his poetry. The poet suggests that if only the polarised halves of the indigenous and migrant identity could merge, the world would be a very different and difficult place to live:

If only somehow you could have been mine,
What would not have been possible in the world?

(Ali, *Farewell,* 175)

In fact, the poem '*I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight'* published in the collection of *The Country Without a Post Office* shows again his explicit and intense sorrow over the gruesome massacres of innocent people that took place in Srinagar city during the 1990's. Ali talks about Rizwan, the victim, one among many who face the same destiny of death in Kashmir. The theatre of fear in which all the Kashmiri youth are still living is represented by the character of Rizwan. Who is hounded, begs for his life and repeatedly proclaims his innocence, but death becomes his fate.

"Rizwan, it's you, Rizwan, it's you," I cry out
as he steps closer, the sleeves of his pheran torn...
"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,

(Ali, *I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight,p 178*)

Everlasting Grief and Sorrow in the Selected Poems of Mahmoud Darwish

Mahmoud Darwish is not only a prominent name in the literary canon of Arab poetry but also a crusader who not only became the voice but also participated in the Palestinian people's effort to articulate a conscious identity out of the oppression they experienced since 1948. His entire poetic collection has raised a local tragedy to the level of a universal one, which the world can't afford to ignore. Many other scholars like Assmaa Naguib (2012), while endorsing the argument that Darwish is "the most articulate voice of Palestine" and acknowledging his reputation as a poet of national resistance, maintain that "the strength of Darwish's poetry lies [rather] in its ability to wed the political and the personal in such a way that attains universal resonance… His personal experiences of exile and occupation were translated into languages that at times expressed universal anguish and agony, and at others universal hope and optimism" (paragraph 6).

The poem *"Be String Water to My Guitar*" depicts this ongoing orchestrated human tragedy of Palestinians in this way. When he writes:

> Time turns around in vain to save my past
> From a moment that gives birth to history
> Of my exile in the others and in myself.
>
> *(The Adam of Two Edens,* 2000, p. 66)

Here in this poem, the poet voices his pain for the Palestinians who feeling estrangement and face a severe identity crisis. The real tragedy, as Darwish exclaims, is not that the poet feels attached to his own culture, which first constitutes one's identity, nor does he feel of any other culture. But the inhuman treatment and barbaric restrictions imposed upon their people forces

the poet to express his deep desire in his poetic production, which is replete with sorrow and grief. He writes in the following lines:

Who am I after this exodus? I have a rock

that carries my name over hills that overlook what has come

and gone…seven hundred years guide my funeral behind the city walls…

(Translated by Fady Joudah *Be String Water to My Guitar,*3-6)

The captivating images of his homeland and the juxtaposition with the unfolding human tragedy and his personal sorrows and separation often catalyse his resolve to fight for the people and the land. Darwish was more of a realistic poet than an idealistic one. He replaced the surreal images, symbols and intertextuality to narrate the sombre tale of his people more universally. He writes:

Through prison chinks I met the eyes

of an orange tree & the sea & wide horizon locked

in embrace. If at night the blackness of grief grows

deep, my comfort is the night's beauty, the hair of my Beloved.

(Darwish 2003, 49)

The images like orange trees, the sea and the horizon, and the long night like the untied hair of the beloved show how once the abode of peace and prosperity has been mercilessly turned into a concentration camp by the forceful occupation. In *'A Poem which is Not Green, from My Country,'* he assures his people that the sorrows of swallow will end and in the state of forced silence she never forgets the song:

It will sing it will cry out

When my country's olive trees blossom

When the sky's rains wash away

The spots of consumption, the thorns of fate!

(Darwish 2003- 21)

Memorable details such as the colour of the sky, the scent of olive blossoms, and the bird song give him a voice 'to affirm their existence in a world that negated them and their rights' (Farsakh 2009, 102). The lyrics of Mahmoud Darwish are more devotional and personify his eternal love for the lost land. The poem, '*A Lover from Palestine',* is written in free verse and takes the readers to those frontiers of imagination where people and land become inseparable entities.

I saw you in all the salt & sand of the sea.
You were as beautiful as the earth
as children
as Arabian jasmine.

(Darwish 2003, 64)

Darwish transforms his lost homeland into an expression of love whose unforgettable images shape his sense of home. Whenever the poet remembers the different shades of Palestinian nature, such as water sources, stone hills, fields of wheat, winds, and storms, make him sorrowed and nostalgia in exile. Darwish, in his prose *work Memory for Forgetfulness (1995),* explains how, being in exile as well as the people inside the occupied territory, it's imperative to maintain the rhythm of life during raining bombs and bullets.

He uses such a narrative style with dramatic monologues to portray his effort to be alive among the people who are most vulnerable to death and destruction in their apartments. Darwish, throughout his poetry of protest, associates his siege with the historical Hiroshima Day. He describes the day in this way: The sky of Beirut is a huge dome made of dark sheet metal…A Hiroshima sky…What would I write if I were to go up to the roof of a tall building…these six letters: B-E-I-R-U-T' (86). It seems that if Hiroshima had been somewhere in the United States of America, which was decimated from the world map on 6 August 1945.

The poem *"Weeping",* which appeared in his collection of poems *"Olive Leaves",* consists of five short stanzas and is overshadowed by the themes of pain and sorrow. In the poem, the poet ponders the meaning of "weeping" and tries to interpret its causes through self-introspection. He compares both the stanzas and the various levels of sorrow that emerge from the poem. The poem begins as follows:

It is not over the loss of a person I love
Not over a memory of a figurine, I broke
Not for grieving over a child I buried
I weep!

(1-10, "Weeping",)

The last stanza in the poem is sort of a declaration and humble submission: "*I weep*", and all the main reasons are mentioned that are worth crying and painful. The poet did experience these tragedies that struck in his personal life and the collective level as a Palestinian after terror and trauma plagued his land.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali and Mahmoud Darwish reveals that sorrow and grief are not temporary emotional responses but enduring conditions shaped by history, memory, and identity. Both poets transform personal loss and political trauma into a continuous poetic presence, where grief does not seek resolution but remains active and evolving. In Ali's work, everlasting sorrow is portrayed through self-imposed exile, nostalgia, and intimate loss of people and paradise, underlining the pain of separation from homeland and loved ones. His fragmented forms and repeated imagery suggest that grief is recurring and uncontrolled. Darwish similarly portrays grief as both personal and collective, rooted in the Palestinian experience but also reflecting universal themes of forced displacement,

dispossession, belonging, and helplessness. Both poets elevate grief beyond lamentation, preserving it through memory, ensuring it remains a defining element of identity and artistic expression.

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