

Agha Shahid Ali- Internationally Acclaimed Indian Poet Lesser Known in his Own Homeland

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Abstract: *An unsung genius that shone bright in the firmament of Indian English poetry, Agha Shahid Ali (4 February, 1949– 08 December, 2001), celebrated Kashmiri-American poet who won over massive popularity in the United States, ironically remains largely unnoticed in his own country. Ali, born in New Delhi in 1949 and raised in Kashmir, was a celebrated Kashmiri American Muslim poet of Indian descent. He emigrated to the United States for higher education where he also embarked on a successful career and settled permanently. A poet, academician, exponent of ghazal form in literature- one who wore many other hats, Ali inexplicably continues to remain little known in India.*

While we commemorate a galaxy of Indian English poets that also encompass expats of Indian origin, Agha Shahid Ali, a diasporic poet with roots in India, undoubtedly deserves far greater recognition and awareness about his works and genius. He has articulated his perception, feelings and imagination evocatively about his homeland, Kashmir in his works. He endured a deep sense of devastation, displacement and loss as his native motherland Kashmir had been in turmoil.

A deep sense of love for his motherland and unfathomable grief caused by the destruction engulfing Kashmir recurs in several poems he penned. This, along with reflections over the fact that he deserved far greater recognition and popularity in India, are the central premises of this paper.

Further, this paper appreciates three prominent poems that Ali penned, viz.

- 'The Country Without a Post Office'
- 'Postcard from Kashmir' and
- 'Farewell'

which convey diverse themes revolving around his love for Kashmir, the pain overwhelming his heart as he witnessed the icy hands of devastation pervading his native land and his secular outlook.

Keywords: Agha Shahid Ali, Obscurity, Kashmir, Oblivion, Exile

I. INTRODUCTION

When an internationally acclaimed poet voices his pain and suffering because his homeland is ravaged by terrorism, violence and devastation, it is anticipated that he'll be heard in his country. However, for some inexplicable reason, the poet not only goes largely unheard but it also not a familiar name in his country, it's bound to make anyone wonder what is wrong with his native land.

While Agha Shahid Ali has exhibited versatility in themes and styles in his works, Indian critics have also largely overlooked his works and eminence. In fact, he gained fame in India after he received international distinction. Stalwarts like Amitav Gosh, Noam Chomsky and Edward Said appreciated his works and thought highly of his art. Yet, his name is mentioned in very few Indian anthologies, while he figures liberally in numerous American and International anthologies including the Harold Bloom's and The Norton Anthology of Poetry.¹

Ali was a Kashmiri American poet who belonged to Kashmir, which added more layers to his exotic, multifaceted identity.² However, this fact has been overlooked by the Indian critics, which seems to have played a significant role in his name remaining in obscurity among the readers in his own homeland. Ali produced his finest verse that recount the turmoil afflicting his native land.

He expressed his deep-seated pain, dismay and fear on seeing Kashmir in grave danger. It would be no exaggeration to say that in his own way, he served his native land, Kashmir, in his capacity as a diasporic poet could. He articulated his love, pain and fears for his beloved land with utmost versatility and depth at the global platform. And yet, for reasons unbeknownst, his name, fame and acclaim have remained cloaked in oblivion in his own country.

Whether it's a mere glimpse or a contemplative deep diving one plunges into while reading Ali's poems on Kashmir, one is sure to be overwhelmed by the sheer effect it creates. Distinguished poetic works like 'The Country Without a Post Office', 'Postcard from Kashmir' and 'Farewell', which the researcher has taken up for this paper, may be regarded as a prototype of what Ali's expressions exemplified in several other works in his poetry collections.

Early Life in Kashmir and Initial Footsteps- Phases that Mentored Ali's Genius and Love for Kashmir

Agha Shahid Ali spent his early life and formative years in Kashmir. Ali, a native of Kashmir, was a Kashmiri American poet of Indian descent with roots in Afghanistan. He was born in New Delhi in 1949 in an eminent and highly educated family from Srinagar. In due course of time, upon receiving formal college and university education in India, he emigrated to the United States. He grew up in his motherland, Kashmir, secured an MA from the University of Delhi, an MA and PhD from Pennsylvania State University, and an MFA from the University of Arizona in 1985.³

He pursued further education and also commenced an active academic career in the United States, and eventually settled there permanently. He wrote many poetry collections, a critical work on literary criticism, a translation, and edited a book too.⁴

Another aspect about Ali and his art worthy of appreciation is the versatility and progressiveness in his upbringing. It equipped him with knowledge of three languages, including English in which he wrote, and also helped him excel in expressions of cross-cultural themes.

Ali produced nine collections of poems, which recount migration, nostalgia, conflict and loss of the glorious past. His poems also recount crumbling landscapes, alienation and diasporic imagination besides giving a glimpse into violations of human rights in Kashmir.

Kashmir is his homeland, the nucleus, focal point of his life and world. He experiences a relentless urge and yearns for the beauty and distinctiveness of his land. He is conscious of the political unrest between India and Pakistan, the agonising reality of war and dispute between both the countries over ownership of Kashmir. It created a sense of agony, uprootedness and trauma in Ali's heart, which is reflected in several poems he wrote.

Momentous changes started taking place in Kashmir in the closing decade of the twentieth century. These changes echo abundantly in Ali's works, a literary voice that was heard loud and clear globally but somehow people in his own country eluded. Ali took it upon himself to assert the rights of Kashmiri people like no other literary figure did, through his works.⁵

Kashmir- the Paradise on Earth that Ali Strived hard to Save

Since ancient era, Kashmir is known as the Paradise on Earth. How can one overlook the mesmerising natural beauty of Kashmir, celebrated as the paradise on earth? Since ancient times, Kashmir has been the muse of many a poet, writer and painter, and subject of the most enchanting quotes, lyrics and poetic dedications. Apart from that, Kashmir was a land where people Hindus and Muslims lived in harmony and shared feelings of love, brotherhood and equality.

Lamentably, it was destined not to be, and Kashmir turned in to a warzone where violence, terrorism, political discord and communal disturbance shattered its identity. With both India and Pakistan staking claim to Kashmir as their own, Kashmiris have been bearing the brunt enormously.⁶

Many natives of the state were compelled to leave their beautiful homeland due to insufferable terrorism, socio-economic conditions and perils. It turned the inhabitants of Kashmir into refugees in constant search for peace, safety to life, and their identity.

Ali found his calling in dedicating the essence of his art to the cause of Kashmir through his verses by expressing a sense of loss, yearning and feelings of estrangement and exile. He embarked on the vehicle of language, customs, glimpses and also ghazal in most of his poems to attain his purpose. His voice became a literary vehicle that took up the cause of the rights of Kashmiri people by composing the finest lyrics and thoughts in their service.

Ali's Kashmir Poems-a Representative Glimpse into the Prevailing Reality in Kashmir

When one's homeland is ravaged by violence, terrorism and destruction, it is natural for its people to feel horrified and anguished. Seeing Kashmir entrenched in turmoil and helplessly watch it burn and wither pained Ali deeply, which is reflected in his poems such as The Country without a Post Office.

Discussed below are the three poems of Ali that convey his views, fears and hopes about his beloved land, Kashmir, effectively.

The Country without a Post Office

Regarded as one of the finest literary works on Kashmir, The Country without a Post Office was initially published as Kashmir without a Post Office. It is dedicated to his friend and fellow American poet James Merrill. The title of the poem is inspired by an incident that took place in 1990, when Kashmir protested against Indian rule, which led to violent clashes, loss of lives, destruction, mass rapes and unimaginable horrors.

As a result, for seven months, postal mail delivery services were suspended in Kashmir. The poem recounts a friend of the poet's father watching the post office from his house as heaps of letters were piling up there. One day, he decided to go to the post office to take a look at the letters. When he picked up a letter from one of the piles, he saw that it was sent by Ali's father and addressed to him.⁷

In the poem, Ali takes on the role of the speaker who talks to his friend as he shares his views. The poem begins with lines that haunt and expose the horrors swamping Kashmir:

Again I've returned to this country
where a minaret has been entombed.

Someone soaks the wicks of clay lamps
in mustard oil, each night climbs its steps

The narrator returns to a country, Kashmir, where a "minaret has been entombed." The opening lines aptly sum up the grave reality that was causing destruction at a mass scale in Kashmir. Dilapidated towers of mosques, broken stairs and lights, unlit earthen lamps, ruined houses, fire incessantly engulfing homes, stamps on postcards being wiped out by the rain are some of the ruthless symbolic images mentioned in the poem.

The sheer helplessness, loss of hope and fear of losing one's life at any moment in the midst of enforced communication breakdown highlight the pain and desolation that the poet experienced in a foreign land. Nevertheless, he does see a ray of hope and believes that one day, the situation will improve and the people of Kashmir will find the peace, harmony and stability that they seek.

The poem is filled with recurrent words and phrases engulfed in evocative images of yearning and pain that Ali endured on seeing the quandary of his beloved land from afar. Structure wise, the poem employs repetition and association instead of straightforward narrative logic, which echoes the convolutions afflicting him.

Postcard from Kashmir

Postcard from Kashmir is another moving poem that Ali wrote which nears the image of a postcard as a metaphor for memories he cherished. His lines:

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

highlight how the rich heritage of Kashmir has shrunk due to the political conflict and mindless destruction pervading the Paradise on Earth. A sense of exile distressing his heart and a feeling of displacement are associated with the physical distance between him and his homeland.

The poet's emotional attachment to Kashmir, cherished by him in what seems like an exile to him, is ironically reduced to mere news from home.⁸ It seems he is struggling to accept the reality, of nostalgia. However, he does not refer to a

sense of exile that he felt in the conventional sense; he wasn't forced to leave his homeland, therefore it is actually a sense of displacement he experiences.⁹

The Country without a Post Office and Farewell with Kashmir as their central theme effectively explore Ali's feelings of exile, nostalgia and grief Ali felt.¹⁰

Farewell

Farewell is a realistic representation of the horrifying sufferings that Hindus in Kashmir endured, which Ali depicts through the exodus of Kashmiri Pundits. Ali is overcome with extreme distress as people of his native land became refugees and suffered immensely.

The poem is in the form of a letter written by a Kashmiri Muslim to a Kashmiri Pandit. Kashmiri Pandits were compelled to leave Kashmir after the armed insurgency reared its fatal head and crushed into pieces love, peace and harmony that existed among the Hindus and Muslims. The poem sums up Ali's anguish in unforgettable words "They make desolation and call it a peace".

In the poem, a Kashmiri Muslim tells his Kashmiri Hindu friend that "when you left even the stones were buried". The poet further gives the example of an ibex in the poem to drive home his point. He states when this feathered animal rubs itself against a rock, no one gathers its fleece, but only a weaver does as he is familiar with its value and can make use of it. Further, in the poem Kashmiri Muslim also tells his Hindu friend that "in your absence you polished me into the Enemy"¹¹

Several other images and symbolic expressions recur in the poem that portray the tragedy being faced by Hindus as well as Muslims in Kashmir. He wants to tell the Kashmiri Pundits that they will not be forgotten, no matter what happens. He exposes the complexities and inexcusable human rights violations afflicting Kashmir through his works. The poem is considered as a powerful expression of angst that a Kashmiri in exile felt as he watched sanity slipping by.

II. CONCLUSION

Regarded as one of the greatest poets to rise out of Kashmir, Agha Shahid Ali made a mark internationally with his poignant, stunning and honest representation of his native land Kashmir through his verses. He depicted themes of loss, displacement and exile that afflicted his heart due to the pessimistically grave situation in his state. He may have migrated to the United States during a decisive phase in his life, but he missed his beloved Kashmir terribly for as long as he lived.

Ali attained great acclaim and popularity living in the United States not just for writing extensively about his homeland but for quality and finesse in his expressiveness, versatility and style. He exuded contentment in using complex and demanding set metrical forms used across the world such as, among others, the Italian canzone and sestina, the French villanelle, the Urdu/Persian ghazal for which he attained great altitudes of fame.¹²

Despite the achievement he made internationally, he remains unknown to many back home, even though he dedicated his art to his beloved native land. He was admired immensely for his unswerving commitment to love for his homeland in foreign shores but by very few in his own motherland. Regrettably, majority of the people are not even aware of Ali's divinity and devotion.¹³

It is natural to contemplate how different things can be if a poet's voice addressing a burning issue like devastation in Kashmir is heard. One may also be tempted to think about causes behind obscurity of a poet like Agha Shahid Ali in his own homeland even offshore, though he's proven himself to be a poet par excellence.

Perhaps we failed to recognize his genius, concern and longing for Kashmir that continue to inspire and resonate with readers around the world. Setting this wrong in order is indeed the need of the hour so that voices that courageously address critical issues are heard and not stifled.

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