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Exile, Memory, and Identity in Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry

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Abstract

Agha Shahid Ali, a well-known Kashmiri-American poet, holds a notable place in modern English poetry for his influential treatment of exile, memory, loss, and cultural identity. His poetry is deeply rooted in Kashmir, and so far, it also extends across enormous spaces of migration, diaspora, and emotional displacement. The present research paper examines carefully chosen poetic works by Agha Shahid Ali, focusing on exile, memory, and identity. The poetic works discoursed comprise "Postcard from Kashmir," "The Country Without a Post Office," "I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight," "Even the Rain," "Tonight," and "Lenox Hill." This research paper argues that Ali's poetry does not portray exile merely as physical separation from the homeland. It displays exile as an emotive, social, linguistic, and historical scenario. 'Memory' is considered a significant medium through which the poet restructures Kashmir, family, love, and loss. 'Identity' in Agha Shahid Ali's poetry is not static or singular. It is formed by several places, languages, traditions, and practices of departure. His implementation of the ghazal form, mournful tone, intertextual references, and broken images makes his poetry a distinctive expression of postmodern sensibility. His poetic creation gathers together personal sorrow and shared suffering. Hence, his poems can be read as lyrical documents of shift, cultural memory, and diasporic identity. The present research study suggests that Agha Shahid Ali alters personal loss into a collective poetic experience through the diction of exile, memory, and belonging.

Keywords: Exile, memory, identity, diaspora, ghazal, loss, displacement.

Introduction

Agha Shahid Ali was a Kashmiri-American poet, translator, and teacher. He was born in New Delhi on 4th February 1949 and grew up in Kashmir. He studied at the University of Kashmir and the

University of Delhi, and later continued his higher education in the United States. Further, he completed his doctoral degree from Pennsylvania State University and an MFA (Master of Fine Arts) from the University of Arizona. His literary identity is evident in his movement between Kashmir, India, and America. This movement intensely formed his poetic imagination. He wrote in English, but his poetry carries the emotional and cultural weight of Kashmir, Urdu-Persian literary traditions, Islamic imagery, Hindu references, Western literary allusions, and diasporic experience.

Ali's key poetry collections include *'The Half-Inch Himalayas'*, *'A Nostalgist's Map of America'*, *'The Country Without a Post Office'*, *'Rooms Are Never Finished'*, and *'Call Me Ishmael Tonight'*. His posthumous collection, *'The Veiled Suite'*, brings together poems from across his poetic career. Poetry Foundation notes that his work reflects several ethnic and cultural influences and that *'Rooms Are Never Finished'* was a finalist for the 2001 National Book Award. He is also remembered for adapting the ghazal form into English poetry with gravity and elegance. His edited volume *'Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English'* helped establish the ghazal as a recognised form in contemporary American poetry.

This research paper highlights the interconnected ideas of exile, memory, and identity in Ali's selected poems. These three concepts are central to understanding his poetic world. Kashmir appears in his poetry as a geographical place, a wounded homeland, an emotional archive, and a site of cultural memory. In his poems, the speaker often looks back at Kashmir from a distance. This distance creates yearning, nostalgia, mourning, and self-questioning. Simultaneously, Ali's poetry does not diminish identity to a single nation, religion, or language. His identity remains plural, multifaceted, and flexible. He writes as a Kashmiri, as a South Asian, as an American poet, and as a poet of the ghazal tradition. This plurality makes his poetry specifically significant for postcolonial and diasporic literary studies.

Meaning of Exile, Memory, and Identity

'Exile' denotes the condition of being detached from one's homeland, either physically, emotionally, politically, or culturally. In literature, exile is not only a matter of geographical distance; it also signifies loss, estrangement, nostalgia, and the longing to return. *'Memory'* is the act of recalling the past, but in poetry, it becomes more than personal remembrance. It becomes an inventive process through which the poet recreates people, places, sentiments, and historical experiences. *'Identity'* means one's sense of self, shaped by language, culture, religion, nation, history, family, and personal understanding. In Agha Shahid Ali's poetry, these three ideas are closely interconnected. In short, exile produces desire; memory preserves the lost homeland; and identity is formed through the incessant negotiation between absence and belonging.

Exile in Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry

Exile is one of the foremost and striking themes in Agha Shahid Ali's poetry. His speakers in his poems are often placed far from their native land. This distance is not merely a physical departure. It emerges as a condition of emotional and cultural homelessness. In the poem *"Postcard from Kashmir,"* the poet receives a postcard representing Kashmir. The poem opens with the striking line, *"Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox."* This minor image indicates a huge emotional burden. Kashmir, once a living homeland, is reduced to a printed picture. The line *"my home is a neat four by six inches"* underscores that exile reduces the homeland to an object that can be held but not truly possessed.

The poem displays that exile varies the poet's relationship with his native place. The speaker can see Kashmir, but only through an image. The postcard provides him access to home, yet it also reminds him that he is away from it. The declaration, *"This is home,"* is instantly bothered by the aching recognition that this image may be *"the closest"* he will ever be to home. This poem focuses on exile as a condition in which the homeland emerges as beautiful, detached, and remote. It also displays that memory can portray the lost place. The speaker confesses that when he comes back, the colours may not be so bright and the river may not be so fresh. Therefore, exile generates both desire and distortion.

In the poem "*The Country Without a Post Office*," exile is more collective and political. This poem is linked with the violence and communication collapse in Kashmir. The poem's title recommends a land where communication has failed. A country without a post office is one where letters do not reach their destinations, addresses lose meaning, and people are detached from one another. The phrase, which occurs in the poem, "*the land of doomed addresses*," strongly expresses this condition. The postal image becomes a metaphor for exile within the homeland itself. People may physically live in Kashmir, but they are exiled from safety, communication, and ordinary life.

The poem also extends the meaning of exile. It is not only the poet who is away from Kashmir; Kashmir itself seems exiled from the world. Its suffering is unnoticed, its messages are unreached, and its departed remain unappreciated. The poem's scenario is connected with the political turmoil/suffering in Kashmir and the suspension of postal services during the conflict. With the help of this image, the poet alters a local historical condition into a widespread symbol of parting. Exile becomes a state of silence and isolation.

In the poem, "*I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight*," exile is shown through remoteness, vision, and agony. The title itself implies that Kashmir is observed from the outside. The speaker is in New Delhi, but he travels to Kashmir in his imagination. The act of observation becomes emotionally stimulating. Kashmir is not simply observed; it is grieved. The line "*Don't tell my father I have died*" denotes the distress, sorrow, and broken communication generated by violence. The voice seems both intimate and public simultaneously. It may belong to one person, but it also signifies many silenced and suppressed lives.

The poet's exile is therefore multifaceted. It contains voluntary migration, diasporic distance, political loss, and emotional departure. He presents exile not as a single event but also as an ongoing condition. His speakers of the poems live between places. They represent Kashmir in memory, but they cannot come back to an unchanged homeland. As a result, his poetry becomes deeply melancholic.

Memory in Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry

Memory is also a striking theme in Agha Shahid Ali's poetic method. His poetic creations often initiate with an object, a place, a voice, or an image, and then move into remembrance. The poem "*Postcard from Kashmir*" focuses on the postcard as a trigger for memory. It brings Kashmir into the speaker's existing state, but only as an image. The "*half-inch Himalayas*" imply that memory diminishes the homeland. It conserves the image, but it cannot preserve the full certainty of lived experience. The poem concludes with the idea that memory may become "*a little / out of focus*." In short, this is a very significant statement. It displays that memory is not exact. It is emotional, selective, and sometimes unbalanced.

The image of the photographic "*negative*" in the poem is also meaningful. A negative is not a lost picture. It contains an image, but it is still unformed. In the same way, the poet's memory of Kashmir remains unfinished. It exists, but is not fully restorable. The homeland lasts in memory, but it also transforms within memory. Therefore, Ali's poetry often interchanges between lucidity and ambiguity.

"*Even the Rain*" is another poem in which memory seems through reappearance, grief, and the ghazal form. The poem has the refrain "*even the rain*," which creates a musical effect. The line "*Memory's brought even the rain*" gives memory a dynamic role. It brings back weather, feeling, loss, and existence. Rain seems more than a natural image. It becomes an image of sadness and homecoming. The recurring phrase also suggests that memory returns again and again, like rain.

The poet's ghazals often make use of repetition to dramatize memory. In the ghazal form, each couplet may appear independent, yet the refrain makes unity. This ghazal form outfits the poet's themes/central ideas because exile itself is fragmented, while memory tries to create continuity. In the poem "*Tonight*," the recurring word "*tonight*" creates an atmosphere of desire and waiting. The poem

implements the traditional ghazal pattern, but the poet writes it in English. Thus, it becomes an act of cultural memory. He considers and reforms an Indo-Persian-Urdu poetic form within a novel linguistic setting.

Memory in the poem "*Lenox Hill*" is personal and melancholic. The poem is linked with the death of the poet's mother. Here, memory becomes a form of lamentation. The mother's existence is remembered through emotional and cultural links. The poem links personal sorrow with spiritual and cultural images. The poet's memory of his mother is inseparable from his memories of Kashmir, language, and faith. Personal and cultural loss combine in the poem.

"*The Country Without a Post Office*," memory carries a collective form. The poem recalls a damaged form of Kashmir. It accounts for the atmosphere of fear, silence, and shattered communication. The unreached letters become symbols of broken memory. A letter is normally a carrier of private history and emotional linking. When letters do not reach, memory itself is hindered. Yet the poem preserves what history and politics may delete. In this manner, Agha Shahid Ali's poetry becomes a collection of memories.

Identity in Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry

The notion of identity in Ali's poetry is not permanent. It is plural and fluctuating. He is from Kashmir, but he also writes his literary works from America. He uses English, but his poetry remembers the cultural worlds of Urdu, Persian, Arabic, and Kashmiri. He uses free verse, but also the ghazal form. His poetic identity is thus formed through exchanges among languages, traditions, and geographies.

The poet connected identity with homeland in the poem "*Postcard from Kashmir*." The speaker recognizes Kashmir as "*home*," but this home exists only through a postcard. This creates a crisis of identity. If home is detached, changed, and perhaps distant, the self also becomes unsettled. The speaker's identity depends on memory, but memory is "*out of focus*." The poem, therefore, suggests that diasporic identity is shaped by imperfect memory.

In the poem "*The Country Without a Post Office*," identity is associated with collective grief. The poet does not speak only as a discrete exile. He expresses as someone who carries the agony of a wounded society. The fragmented postal system becomes a symbol of shattered civic and cultural identity. Addresses are "*doomed*" because the social order that gives them meaning has collapsed. People seem difficult to trace, contact, or defend. In such a scenario, identity becomes helpless.

The poet's use of the ghazal also contributes to his identity. The ghazal is usually associated with desire, separation, love, loss, and spiritual longing. By composing ghazals in English, Ali generates a hybrid poetic identity. He does not leave tradition, but he does not simply replicate it either. He reforms it in a new literary setting. This is especially visible in "*Tonight*" and "*Even the Rain*." The poet's identity emerges through this formal negotiation between East and West.

Ali's identity is also deeply connected with Kashmir. However, he does not present Kashmir in a simple romantic way. Kashmir is beautiful, but it is also wounded. It is remembered through rivers, mountains, cities, letters, soldiers, grief, and absence. This double vision shapes the poet's self. He is attached to Kashmir, yet he knows that memory may idealize it. He mourns Kashmir, yet he also transforms it into poetry.

Exile, Memory, and Identity: A Combined Reading

The strength of Ali's poetry lies in the way exile, memory, and identity work together. Exile creates separation. Memory responds to that separation. Identity is shaped through the struggle between loss and remembrance. In "*Postcard from Kashmir*," this relationship is clearly visible. The poet is away from home, the postcard revives memory, and the speaker's identity is tied to a place that is both present and absent.

In "The Country Without a Post Office," exile is political and collective, memory becomes documentary, and identity becomes communal. The poem speaks for a place where communication has collapsed. Yet, by writing the poem, Ali restores communication at the level of art. The poem becomes the letter that reaches the world.

In "Even the Rain," memory is lyrical and repetitive. The refrain creates a rhythm of return. Exile is not directly described, but it is felt through longing and absence. Identity emerges through the poet's use of the ghazal form. The poem suggests that the self survives through repetition, remembrance, and poetic address.

In "Lenox Hill," exile and memory become personal. The death of the mother deepens the poet's sense of loss. The mother is not only a family figure; she is also connected with cultural belonging. Her death intensifies the poet's exile from origin, family, and emotional security. Thus, personal grief becomes part of the wider structure of exile.

Ali's selected poems show that identity is never simple for the diasporic poet. It is made through fragments: a postcard, a letter, a refrain, a city, a river, a mother, a lost homeland, and a remembered language. These fragments do not produce confusion alone. They produce poetic richness. Ali's poetry turns fragmentation into beauty.

Conclusion

Agha Shahid Ali's poetry provides a thoughtful exploration of exile, memory, and identity. His poetic creations show that exile is not merely physical separation from homeland. It is also emotional distance, cultural dislocation, political loss, and spiritual homelessness. Memory becomes the poet's method of preserving what exile threatens to destroy. However, memory in Ali's poetry is not always clear or complete. It is often blurred, selective, painful, and unfinished. Identity emerges from this tension between loss and remembrance.

In the selected poems, Kashmir functions as a homeland, a memory, a wound, and a poetic landscape. In "Postcard from Kashmir," the homeland is reduced to an image, yet it retains deep emotional power. In "The Country Without a Post Office," Kashmir becomes a space of broken communication and collective suffering. In "Even the Rain" and "Tonight," the ghazal form allows Ali to express longing and separation with lyrical intensity. In "Lenox Hill," personal grief becomes inseparable from cultural memory.

Ali's poetry is important because it brings together personal emotion and historical crisis. His voice is lyrical, elegiac, and culturally layered. He writes from exile, but he does not write only about absence. He transforms absence into art. Through memory, he reconstructs lost places and lost relationships. Through language, he creates a plural identity that belongs to Kashmir, South Asia, America, and the larger world of poetry. Therefore, Agha Shahid Ali's selected poems remain highly significant for the study of exile, memory, diaspora, and contemporary English poetry.

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