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REMEMBERING KASHMIR: ANALYSING THE DIASPORIC IMAGINATION OF AGHA
SHAHID ALI AND SUBHASHKAK

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an analysis of the literary representations of Kashmir in the poetry collections, *The Country without a Post Office* (1991) by Agha Shahid Ali and *The Secrets of Ishbar* (1996) by SubhashKak. Both the poets originally belong to Kashmir and later settled down in America. The paper applies theoretical perspectives on diaspora and states of emotions such as loss, nostalgia, memory and imagination associated with the term. Its purpose is to highlight the different approaches adopted by the poets while depicting similar sentiments of pain and exile. This study reads the nature of exile, the duality of diasporic imagination, and the different poetic styles that have been explored by the poets to represent Kashmir in their respective works.

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INTRODUCTION

The poetry of Kashmiri-American poet, Agha Shahid Ali and SubhashKak together recreate evocative but completely different images of Kashmir, their actual homeland. While the collection, *The Country without a Post Office* (1991) portrays war-torn, melancholic, ravaged images of Kashmir, the poems in *The Secrets of Ishbar* (1966), by SubhashKak revive the boyhood days he spent in the once peaceful valley. The objective of the present paper is to illustrate the differences in the poetic representations of Kashmir by two poets and analyse their cultural memories from diasporic perspectives.

Being exiled

Originally derived from the Jewish experience of exile, the term diaspora is simply understood as "naming of the other people who have been dislocated from their native homeland through movements of migration, immigration or exile" (Brazier, 1). But as some critics argue, diaspora is not any more an "ancient word". It has rather attained a position in "globalist discourse" that has perplexed the "clearly demarcated parameters of geography, national identity and belonging" (Brazier, 1).

SubhashKak and AghaShahid Ali studied and worked in India in the initial years of their lives. Later, they shifted to America and pursued a career in academics. However, the strain of exile is evident in their works. John Case in a write up on Agha Shahid Ali quotes the poet's words on his being "temperamentally" exiled from Kashmir

(Case 2013). Similarly, SubhashKak, in a conversation with poet, UshaAkella also described the ways in which exile was “necessary” for writing poetry (Akella 2013). Kak further explained that unlike other poets who went through a mere “separation” or “tearing apart”, he experienced “a physical exile” from the valley of his forefathers (Akella 2013).

Both Agha Shahid Ali and SubhashKak seem to evoke the notion of exile in the Saidian sense. They exhibit the “unhealable rift forced between a human being and its native place, between the self and its true home” (Said 439). In the poem ‘Exile’, SubhashKak remembers Kashmir through familiar pictures and songs. The poet’s “memory” becomes “hazy” and he remembers his childhood when he had felt the autumn breeze on his skin, seen women grinding grain in giant mortars while he passed by pink lilies and the blue king fisher across the water (Kak 1). Kak also remembers giant *chinar* trees, children who sang from a canal side school and men who would cough while drawing the *hookah*. Sights and sounds of plebeian activities amidst the gorgeous natural setting of Kashmir fills the poet; yet his Saidian sense of exile cannot be purged off since he is aware that the exhilarating experiences of the young past is lost and shadowed by the exilic condition of the present. The poet thus concludes: “the best paradise / is the paradise we are exiled from” (Kak 1). Like SubhashKak, Agha Shahid Ali in the poem, ‘The Last Saffron’ regards Kashmir as singularly worthy of being called a “paradise”. The poet quotes the famous words of King Jahangir, paying tribute to the beauty of Kashmir; “If there is paradise on earth / it is this, it is this, it is this” (Ali 15). In the poem, these words imply the permanent estrangement of the poet from Kashmir not only due to political tumult and destruction but also due to his impending death. In the poem ‘Farewell’, the poet imagines himself as an “exquisite ghost” who is being rowed through “paradise” on the river of hell (Ali 8). The two poets weave very dissimilar images to convey their similar exilic sentiments.

Different strokes

Within their poetic mindscapes, SubhashKak and Agha Shahid Ali mix memory and imagination to recreate the landscape of their homeland. Here, home as AvtarBrah notes, is a “mythic place of desire” and a “place of no-return”, even if it is “possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as a place of, ‘origin’ ” (McLeod 209). Diasporic writers are thus left to live in exile and conjure up a homeland with retained bits of fragmented memory. However, diasporic imagination and memories are not always uniform in nature. Slävožiček, defines the imagination of the diasporic subject as a state of “identification with the image in which we appear likable to ourselves” or with the image representing “what we would like to be” (Mishra 449). This anticipates that different diasporic minds can differently imagine their homeland and thus render very disparate pictures of similar ideas.

In *The Country without a Post Office*, Agha Shahid Ali envisions Kashmir as a “black velvet void” (Ali 3). It is a land where fire engulfs “homes” that have been “set ablaze” by “midnight soldiers” (Ali 11). The river Jhelum flows under the bridge “sometimes with a dismembered body” (Ali 5). In Kashmir, Srinagar is under curfew and it “hunches like a wild cat” and is perennially engulfed in dense fog (Ali 5). There is “no sun” in Kashmir, the snow falls like “ashes” and even the rain does not bring any consolation (Ali 28). It is rather portentous of Gods desolating the land and it pours on the poet like drops of desperation making him silently realise his pain: “Everything is finished, nothing remains” (Ali 26).

On the other, SubhashKak’s imagination rebuilds a Kashmir that is synesthetically animated. Kashmir is alive in the “soft green grass” (Kak 1). It is filled with “scented and zippy air” (Kak 2). The poet enjoyed the snow in Kashmir, while sipping “hot moghal chai and sweet kulchas” (Kak 6). The mornings are bright and filled with sounds of women rustling in the kitchen and to beat the cold, fire is captured in a *kangri* that warms the body. In SubhashKak’s imagination, the waters of the rivers are clear and sometimes “layers of flowers” and sleek shikaras float on its surface (Kak 5). The first snow in Srinagar is a “cause of celebration” and the rainy afternoons at Chashmashahisprings, charms one’s senses (Kak 6).

“Memory is a tricky thing: it picks and chooses what to preserve and what to discard” (Ao 9). Agha Shahid Ali and SubhashKak choose to articulate only certain portions of the memory that preserve their history. The multihued richness that emboldens the poetry of SubhashKak reduces into a bicolour scheme in the work of Agha Shahid Ali. In *The Country without a Post Office*, “smashed golds” seem to symbolise fire and

“petrified reds” seem to signify the blood born out of the violence and inert communication in Kashmir (Ali 20).

SubhashKak writes about a time when communicating and commuting in Kashmir used to be an adventure. He vividly portrays the bus drives to Srinagar, pony rides through Liddar valley, Shikaras on river Vitastawhich Ali calls as Jhelum and the innocent walkson the bridges in the city. But Agha Shahid Ali portrays the manner in whichthe “defunct trains” and the “blue-stuck buses” that “forsook the monsoons” ran through Kashmir and how the city bridges were sites of sheer violence (Ali 59). In Agha Shahid Ali’s work, women whom SubhashKak could see being busy among domestic chores are portrayed asvictims of “mass rapes” in villages and the children who sang songs are dead (Ali 4).

SubhashKakrecalls the unknown “trials” that lay before him, the “terror” that would come to Srinagar and the “terrorists” who would force his family “to bury” the past and “forget the deeds of the ancestors” (Kak 7). Agha Shahid Ali peeks into the mind of such a “terrorist” through the character of Rizwan who dies without realising the futility of militant nationalism. While SubhashKak recollects the joy of the wonderful evenings he spent in the small village of Ishbar and the days he participated in *pooja*, Agha Shahid Ali narrates of times when the Hindus of Kashmir fled from the valley with “gods asleep like children in their arms” and the temples that lay broken with no priest to soak saffron or a devotee to offer a prayer (Ali 12). While SubhashKak makes a subjective participation in the past by describing himself as the ‘I’ who is physically perceptible, Agha Shahid Ali, appears as a phantasmorgic soul weaving oneiric images of Kashmir; sometimes as a “shadow” and sometimes as a “phantom heart” caught in peripatetic journeys form a foreign country to an imaginary homeland (Ali 26).

Diasporic ambivalence

AvtarBrah notes that, “at the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of a journey” and “diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down, about putting roots elsewhere” (Brah 443). A sense of exile is always retained by the diasporic subject and it plays a prime role in determining the scope of the diasporic identity. Further, the exilic connection results in a “fundamental ambivalence” or a “dual ontology” within the identity of the diaspora subject who must look in two directions- towards a “historical cultural identity” and towards the “society of relocation” (Ashcroft et al 23).

Agha Shahid Ali and SubhashKak narrate the loss of their “historical cultural identity” in America which is their “society of relocation”; a public sphere where the poets remember and redefine their homeland through a rich aesthetic sphere. The term historical cultural identity in the present context may be defined as an identity informed by the history and culture a person belongs to. Such a definition helps one to understand the reasons why Agha Shahid Ali adopts patterns of Urdu poetry and writes about particularities of Muslim religious and cultural practices in *The Country without a PostOffice*. It also explains SubhashKak’sportrayal of the rituals and daily life patterns of Kashmiri Hindu Pandits in *The Secrets of Ishbar*.

Agha Shahid Ali narrates his search for a missing friend in an “entombed” mosque and also records the violently disrupted *Muharram* celebrations in Kashmir. The violence also reminds him of holy places such as the *Char-e-Sharif* and *Shah Hamdan* and saints like Sheikh-Noor- Ud- Din and Hindu poets such as LalDed. The mythical stories of *Parvati* and *Shiva* also intersperse the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali; his poems are thus said to be “redolent of the philosophy of ‘Kashmiriyat’ ”; a Kashmiri tradition of thought that blends Hindu and Islamic wisdom (Naik 176).

Further, to explicate the manner in which heidentifies himself with “North Indian Muslim Culture” that is “steeped in Urdu”, he attempts to “*Biryanise*’ English by writing Ghazals (Mehrotra 4). Following Rushdie’s *Chutnification*, Agha Shahid Ali makes his poetry a *mélange* of eastern and western aesthetics. However, unlike Rushdie his intent is not to ridicule but to claim his Kashmiri heritage at a “culturally emotional level” (Shamshie 2005).

The historical-cultural identity of SubhashKak is preserved not through any form of poetic fusion but by several gastronomic delights savoured by his family. Kak meticulously writes about the food prepared by his mother and sisters on special occasions; such as *luchis*, *nadroos* and fries during the *poojas*, the hot lunch and the *sheer* and *kheva chai* on the forty days of Chilaikalan, the “sugared green tea/ with cinnamon,

cardamom and almonds" during "Ishbar evenings" (Kak 12). Common Kashmiri myths of Hindu gods and goddesses such as Krishna, Nachiketa, Urvashi also appear in several poems.

The poetry of Agha Shahid Ali and SubhashKak are an "exploration of ethnicity" (Paranjape 1993). It is for such a reason that Ali has been identified as a man of twice hyphenated identity; being a Kashmiri-American-Kashmiri who seem to have become more conscious of his heritage only after arriving in America (Jain 82). Agha Shahid Ali and SubhashKak present and preserve their ethnic moorings through their poetry and it is not an angry manifestation against any kind of humiliation or discrimination, rather an emotional nostalgic claim to the past. Thus when it rains in Amherst, Agha Shahid Ali is reminded of the rain in Kashmir and to SubhashKak, a journey to the Himalayas is symbolical of his journey to America. Even though America is a land of "plenty" like the Himalayas and provided things necessary to make him feel at home yet his mind desires to go back to Kashmir, a place where he had love, peace and family (Kak 11).

CONCLUSION

The Country without a Post office and *The Secrets of Ishbar* are recollections on Kashmir by two poets; one remembers the violence and the other, the lost beauty and glory of the valley. It is important to critically revisit such cultural representations of Kashmir in the context of the contemporary political conflicts that have engulfed the region. This paper has explored the analytical context in which the emotional, lyrical experiments of two poets can be read. These poetry collections have a unique role to play. While SubhashKak's poems archive the cultural history of the once idyllic Kashmir, Agha Shahid Ali's verse forms aestheticize the politics of power and oppression. They both remember Kashmir by revisiting the different creative spots in their imagination and memory.

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