



REVIEW ARTICLE

Vol.2. 2., 2015

ISSN  
INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

SENSE OF LOSS IN AGHA SHAHID ALI'S 'THE COUNTRY WITHOUT A POST OFFICE

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ABSTRACT

The present paper discusses literature perspectives on diaspora and states of emotions associated with the term i.e. loss, violence, nostalgia, memory, imagination and separation,. Its purpose is to highlight sense of loss in Late Agha Shahid Ali's poetic collection "*The Country Without A Post Office*". In his collection of poems, '*The Country Without A Post Office*', Ali finds that contemporary history has forced him to return to his homeland, not with the ease of a tourist as he would have liked, but as a witness to the savagery visited upon Kashmir since the 1990 uprising against Indian rule. This paper has explored the analytical context of sense of loss in Agha Shahid Ali's work. Ali's poems liberate loss into the pool of languages, from Urdu to English, from Kashmir to Amherst.

**KEY WORDS-** Diasphora, Agha Shahid Ali, Exile

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INTRODUCTION

Exile or Diaspora

Originally the Jewish experience of exile, we can recognize the term diaspora as "naming of the other people who have been dislocated from their native homeland through movements of migration, immigration or exile" (Brazier, 1). There are critics who claims that diaspora is not any more an "ancient word" which has attained a position in "globalist discourse" rather it s the "clearly demarcated parameters of geography, national identity and belonging" (Brazier, 1).

Journey of Agha Shahid Ali as a Diasporic Poet

Agha Shahid Ali is one of the best ever known poets from Valley, born in New Delhi on February 4, 1949 and grew up in Kashmir. He got his education at Kashmir and Delhi University. Agha Shahid Ali chose to be in exile in order to pursue his career. He went to the United States of America to pursue Ph.D in English from Pennsylvania State University in 1984 and a M.F.A. in Poetry at the University of Arizona in 1985. He was the author of eight books of poetry, one work of translation, the editor of an anthology of ghazals, and a book on T.S. Eliot. He earned the Guggenheim and Ingram- Merrill fellowships and a Puschart Prize and was a 2001 finalist for the National Book Award with his collection '*Rooms Are Never Finished*'. Ali originally published his poem '*The Country without a Post Office*' as '*Kashmir without a Post Office*' in the '*Graham House Review*'. Ali revised it and changed its name when he included it in the collection '*The Country Without a Post Office*' in 1997. Readers appreciated his poem '*The Country Without A Post Office*' (1997), as a poignant and nostalgic evocation of not only his lost homeland, but as W.S. Merwin (2002) wrote: "Agha Shahid Ali's Kashmir, in his

poems, is our own lost but inalienable homeland." With the prevalence of war and homelessness in the post cold war era and the increasing displacement of people in time, Agha Shahid Ali's voice represents that of all exiles. A haunting volume, it established his reputation as a poet. However, in the land of dreams he had dreamed about his homeland. He was imaginatively and emotionally preoccupied with Kashmir, which he visited regularly. He fell back on traditional poetic forms to take on the "big subject matter" enabling him to acquire "a certain fullness of voice" as he put it. Carol Muske ( 2002 ) in Dukes of the Los Angeles Times wrote: "What is timeless in these poems is the power of grief – sheer cliffs and drops of despair that he masters and spins into verse with astonishing technical virtuosity."

### Sense of loss

Sense of loss is a complex phenomenon, which is difficult to define in a single statement. As John Keats had said sense of loss originates when a man is full of uncertainties, mysteries and doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. Interpretation of sense of loss includes emotional, artistic, psychological, social and realistic approaches. As per Sigmund Freud, sense of loss is a state of unconsciousness, which passes through various psychological processes. According to The great philosopher and theorist, Friedrich Nietzsche, the skepticism is one of the chief factors, which leads to creation of a state of doubt and ultimately leads to a sense of loss.

### The Country Without A Post Office

In his collection of poems, *'The Country Without A Post Office'*, Ali finds that contemporary history has forced him to return to his homeland, not with the ease of a tourist as he would have liked, but as a witness to the savagery visited upon Kashmir since the 1990 uprising against Indian rule. Ali had portrayed in detail the conflict between Muslim Indian militants and the Indian government over the control of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, violent events flare briefly or suggest themselves in scenes of smoking rubble, the destructions of a fifteenth century Sufi shrine, the murder of a young Norwegian hiker and the burning of the central business district of Srinagar.

In *'The Country without a Post Office'*, 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 the dense fog perennially engulfs the city (Ali 5). There is "no sun" in Kashmir, the snowfalls 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 realize his pain: "Everything is finished, nothing remains" (Ali 26).

This is partly autobiographical and party historical volume, which mingles the historical time of exile of Kashmiri Pandits from the valley and poet's own personal loss of home. Thought of having lost his beautiful country, Kashmir, made him write this volume of poetry. This volume is full of the imagery like bullets, bloodshed, rains of fire and tears, which converted the 'Paradise' into a fatal place. In the title of the poem readers can see Kashmir as post-office, as an archive for letters with doomed addresses. He writes:

Someone soaks the wicks of clay lamps  
In mustard oil, each night climbs its steps  
To read messages scratched on planets.  
His fingerprints cancel blank stamps  
In that archive for letters with doomed  
Addresses, each house buried or empty. (2-8)

The title of the poem is derived from an incident that occurred in 1990, when Kashmir rebelled against Indian rule, which resulted into hundreds of dreadful and brutal deaths, fires, mass rapes of innocent Kashmiri Pandit women, and there was no mail delivered in Kashmir for seven months. A friend of the Ali's father used to watch the post office from his house the mountains of letters piling up high and high with no one picking them up. The 'Post Office' in the title symbolizes a specific identity of a countryman and on the other hand absence of 'Post Office' from a country symbolizes the concealing of person's existence from the world. This fact disturbed Ali and he lamented his anguish throughout the narratives of the poem.

In the poem, I Dream I am the only Passenger on Flight 423 to Srinagar, he blends both spirituality and politics and invoked the spirit of Sheikh Noor-Ud-Din who sits beside him as the plane touches down:

He holds my hand speechless to tell me if  
Those smashed golds flying past those petrified  
Reds are autumn's late crimsoned spillage  
Rushing with wings down the mountainside  
Or flames clinging to a torched village (66-71)

While looking down from the plane, Ali was confused to see the view of burning autumn leaves, was not able to interpret the view. He was indecisive whether he was seeing the burning of beautiful leaves of Chinar or the burning shrine of Sheikh Noor-Ud-Din Noorani at Charar-e-Sherif. Through this imagery, he had shown the poetical overtone superbly merged with spiritual voice. In this incident Ali imagines the destruction of the fifteenth century Sufi shrine by the militants which is again a symbol of loss of peace in his homeland.

In his poem, "I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight" lament on the fading unity between Hindu and Muslim Kashmiris. There were many things in Kashmir which kept them united for years like paisley, saffron, the green threads which both the religion's Hindus and Muslims wear when visiting Sufi shrines. But during the exile of Kashmiri Pandits those green threads and the saffron did not work anymore:

I've tied knot  
With green thread at Shah Hamdan, to be  
United only when the atrocities  
Are stunned by you jeweled return, but no news  
Escapes the curfew, nothing of your shadow,  
And I'm back, five hundred miles, taking off  
My ice, the mountains granite again as I see  
Men coming from those Abodes from snow  
With gods asleep like children in their arms. (52-60)

The line, "At a certain point I lost track of you" from the second poem of the collection, *I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight*, causes an uneasiness as the city of Kashmir was with the dead phone lines, the residents yearning for news; the Post office turned simply dead-letter office with hundreds of canvas bags of undelivered mail. This poem records various atrocities taking place in the intensified altercation between government and the rebels. Ali seemed to evoke the perception of exile in his poems. Edward Said ( 2006 ) mentioned that he exhibit the "unhealable rift forced between a human being and its native place, between the self and its true home" (439). His poetry includes exile and a longing desire for his homeland as he wrote it after his migration. He mediated his being away from his country by recollection and imagination. His exile was self-exile as he has left his country for higher studies but deep down the heart he felt nostalgic for his homeland. Exile is always undesirable state for every human being. He was not able to shed the trauma of having left his homeland forever and the only ways to connect to it was through reminiscences and writing. He strongly desired to go back to his place of childhood and took a stand for Kashmiris and showed their pathetic condition to the whole world through this collection. Ali liberated the loss of his motherland by transferring it to the cross-cultural levels i.e. from Urdu to English and from Kashmir to Amherst. Whole world shared poet's grief and the mourning became wider. Carol Muske ( 2002 ) writes, "Ali's voice possesses this contemporary agelessness. Ali grew up in Kashmir, a citizen of that mountainous country torn apart by violence, its colonial past and present status as a disputed territory..."

In the poem, *The Country Without A Post Office*, Ali writes that even the calls of the muezzin have ceased long ago with muezzin's death. Muezzin is a person who cries five times a day at the minaret. The speaker with its futile search returns to the local minaret as its new keeper. Referring to a country without a post-office is a country without its institutions of faith; the muezzin is the postman of the divine. Poet quoted the incident in the poem:

.....When the muezzin

died, the city was robbed of every call.  
 The houses were swept about like leaves  
 For burning. Now every night we bury  
 Our houses- theirs, the ones left empty. (50-54)

The prayers at the mosques go unanswered and can be compared to letters, which are dead. Muezzin appears in the form of a voice desperately calling to the world outside Kashmir. There is loss of divine places and peace in his land. Ali had visited his homeland without a passport through his writings by rejuvenating memories where he invited the whole world to hear the laments of his once beautiful land torn apart by communal and state violence. He wanted the indifferent people of the world to come united and listen to their cries:

Entire map of the lost will be candled  
 Deaf world across continents (50-51)

When Kashmir was undergoing the wave of violence, which traumatized the harmony of Kashmir, everything that was covered by media was just a piece of news. The news consistently covered and aired was just listened and not heard seriously by other parts of the country and the world. It was this volume of Ali and his sudden uproar to reach out to the world and narrate the woeful tale of his native soil from which the world has been regrettably over and done. In the prologue to this collection, Ali had talked very clearly that how the seeds of conflict and misrule were sown in his land from the older times. He had talked about the long period of their oppression by different oppressors from time to time. Even in the modern age, the people of Kashmir have no access to basic human rights, democracy, and freedom of speech. But poet and the people of the Kashmir are still very hopeful that one day everything will return to normal and they are looking forward a new dawn to come soon. Ali was successful in connecting his readers emotionally with his homeland and his last lines of the poem *The Country Without A Post Office* undoubtedly bring tears to the eyes of the readers, which says:

I've found a prisoner's letter to a lover-  
 One begins: "These words may never reach you."  
 Another ends: "The skin dissolves in dew  
 Without your touch." And I want to answer:  
 I want to live forever. What else can I say?  
 It rains as I write, this Mad heart, be brave. (91-96)

## CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the analytical context of sense of loss in Agha Shahid Ali's work. Ali's poems liberate loss into the pool of languages, from Urdu to English, from Kashmir to Amherst. The sharing across languages and cultures does not diminish the loss, but it makes it participate in a wider mourning. That is the peculiar gift of Ali's diasporic writing. The translator recreating his losses in another tongue, in other places, among other peoples. In the words of John Ashbery, Agha Shahid Ali's poems are "translucent elegies 'for the city that is leaving forever' (Srinagar) from one of its sons, who also happens to be one of America's finest younger poets." In focusing on the tragedy of his homeland, he was able to create a persona that has great resonance in our time. "Few poets in this country have such a voice or such a topic," notes Hayden Carruth.

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