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A THEMATIC COMPARISON IN THE POETRY OF SEAMUS HEANEY AND  
AGHA SHAHID ALI

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ABSTRACT

The present study is a triumph to bring forth the delineation of ideas and impacts of childhood reminiscences and experiences of migration on the poetic stance of an Irish poet Seamus Heaney and a Kashmiri originated American poet Agha Shahid Ali. Seamus Heaney and Agha Shahid Ali belong to culturally, linguistically and geographically different nations, in their works some common themes are found, like they have dealt with the themes of the problems of common people and they have also focused on the miseries and sufferings of a common man because of failure of political setup. Though these themes are very dominant in the works of both these poets, but there is another issue which deserves attention in the works of both these poets and that is they both belong to those geographical locations which are world famous for their beauty and there is an important effect of the environment of these particular locations on world ecology.

**Key Words:** Themes, Sense of belonging, Social, Political, Depiction of Nature.

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INTRODUCTION

Poetry is a record of past, present and future because it has an element of continuity which no other art of the world possesses. The greatest treasures of the world presented in poetry by our ancestors were read in past, are read now and our descendants will also go through them. Poetry gives us glimpses into history also. Poetry is considered to be the art of creation. Just as God has created the world, the poet presents a new world of imagination, where things are more comprehensible and beautiful than they ordinarily are. He creates a new universe. Poets have<sup>1</sup> expressed different views about poetry. The fact is that poetry embodies sentiments and animates matter. Incidents and events of past and present are preserved through the power of poetry which would otherwise be forgotten.

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Seamus Justin Heaney widely recognised as one of the major poets of the 20th century was born on 13 April 1939 at Mossbawn, near Castledawson, County Derry. He began his writing career in 1963, publishing under the pseudonym 'Incertus' (Parker 1) in university magazines. A native of Northern Ireland, Heaney was raised in County Derry, and later lived for many years in Dublin. He was the author of over 20 volumes of poetry and criticism, and edited several widely used anthologies. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995 "for works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past" (The Nobel Prize in literature 1995). Heaney taught at Harvard University (1985-2006) and served as the Oxford Professor of Poetry (1989-1994). He died in 2013.

Agha Shahid Ali was born in New Delhi, India on February 4, 1949. He grew up in Kashmir in a highly educated family in Srinagar. He received his education from University of Kashmir, the University of Delhi and later went to America in 1975. He studied further in Pennsylvania State University and the University of Arizona. Being a Kashmiri Muslim, Ali is best known in the U.S. and identified himself as an American poet writing in English. He is the recipient of numerous fellowships and awards and a finalist for the National Book Award, he after completing his studies taught at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Princeton College and in the MFA program at Warren Wilson College. Agha Shahid Ali died on December 8, 2001, in Amherst, Massachusetts.

Both Seamus Heaney and Agha Shahid Ali are considered as modern poets and were well developed and educated. Seamus Heaney was boarding at St. Columb's College in Londonderry on a scholarship. Here he had a very good English teacher and began to love reading, absorbing diverse material, from comic books to great literature. While as Agha Shahid Ali studied in Burriss School in Muncie, Indiana. The Burriss School is affiliated to Ball State University where Ali's father was earning the first Doctorate ever granted by Ball State University as well as the first Doctorate in Education by a Kashmiri. From 1957 until 1961 Heaney studied at Queen's University in Belfast. It was here that he was impressed by the work of Robert Frost and Ted Hughes and so started writing his own poetry, some of which was published in the school's literary magazine. He received a degree in English language and literature with first-class honors and moved on to post-graduate work and attaining a teacher's certificate at St. Joseph's College of Education in Belfast. Ali studied for a B. A. in the Humanities (1968) at the University of Kashmir; he then went to the University of Delhi for a Master's Degree (1970) in English literature and taught there until 1975. Heaney also taught at St. Thomas' Secondary school in Belfast in 1962 and was lecturer in English at St. Joseph's college. From 1961 to 1962, Heaney gained a more extensive understanding of English literature and made his first true venture into studying Irish poetry. Also during this year, he joined a literary group lead by the English writer Philip Hobsbaum, who encouraged and helped Heaney and the other young writers in their efforts. The group provided a much-needed literary oasis for Heaney through 1966, and it was during this time that some of his poems were first published outside the university setting. Shahid Ali earned a Master's Degree in English and wrote a doctoral thesis, which was later published as 'T. S. Eliot as Editor' (1986). Having decided that his interest was primarily in poetry he studied for the Masters in Fine Arts in Creative Writing at the University of Arizona.

Ali was popular as a poet who was able to blend multiple ethnic influences and ideas in both traditional forms and elegant free-verse. His poetry reflects his tri-cultural identity that is Hindu, Muslim, and Western heritages. Ali's poetry revolves around insecurity and obsessions, memory, death, history, family, ancestors, nostalgia for a past he never knew, dreams, Hindu ceremonies, friendships, and self-consciousness about being a poet. His poems are rich in their use of language: the stunning metaphors, the miraculous juxtapositions and the blend of the real with the surreal, remain poems and don't degenerate into sloganeering. He is known as the Master-Poet of Kashmir, who immortalises his beloved Kashmir in imaginative gems called poems. Heaney portrays the intensity of the Irish experience in his works. In his works there are divergent views on politics and religion. Heaney was not merely a central figure in the literary life of Ireland, but in its emotional life, its dream life and its real life. He was also a distinguished member of the international literary community, he brought an attitude of humility to the acts of listening and reading.

**Social and Political Issues**

As a poet from Northern Ireland, Heaney used his work to reflect upon the 'Troubles,' the often-violent political struggles that plagued the country during Heaney's young adulthood. The poet sought to weave the ongoing Irish troubles into a broader historical frame embracing the general human situation in the books *Wintering Out* (1973) and *North* (1975).

I am riding to plague again.  
 Sometimes under a sooty wash  
 From the grate in the burnt-out gable  
 I see the needy in a small pow-wow.  
 What do I say if they wheel out their dead?  
 I'm cauterized, a black stump of home. (Heaney, *Wintering Out* 12)

The poem seems to present quite plainly a tragic, northern Irish scene. While some reviewers criticised Heaney for being an apologist and mythologiser, Morrison suggested that Heaney would never reduce political situations to false simple clarity, and never thought his role should be as a political spokesman. The author "has written poems directly about the Troubles as well as elegies for friends and acquaintances who have died in them; he has tried to discover a historical framework in which to interpret the current unrest; and he has taken on the mantle of public spokesman, someone looked to for comment and guidance," (Morrison 32). "Yet he has also shown signs of deeply resenting this role, defending the right of poets to be private and apolitical, and questioning the extent to which poetry, however 'committed,' can influence the course of history" (32).

In the flat country nearby  
 Where they dug him out,  
 His last gruel of winter seeds  
 Caked in his stomach,  
 Naked except for  
 The cap, noose and girdle  
 I will stand for a long time. (Heaney, *Wintering Out* 5)

*The Tollund Man* is one of the earliest of bog poems in which the indirect approach to political writing of Heaney is evident. Heaney recognises the overwhelming pressures of the poet making an imaginative identification with the full extent of Irish tradition at the same time as he is moved to confront immediate political realities. One of the touchstones of *Preoccupations* reveals the literary and historical perspective which Heaney brings to his understanding of the contemporary conflict: 'How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea / whose action is no stronger than a flower?' That Heaney should turn to Shakespeare in his search for 'befitting emblems of adversity' is an indication of his intense commitment, as a poet, to the refinement of sensibility, to the energy of words, to the structures of living speech.

The threat and the human atrocities due to political unrest that Kashmir saw became the wave of Shahid Ali's poetic expression. Sometimes Ali appears more distressed to see the condition that is reality of Kashmir and he thinks himself more alone in such condition. His loneliness is the outcome of staunch desire to make Kashmir in its prime beauty. He is always alone in the crowd to think about the exploitation in Kashmir that is why he accepts himself as the 'last snowman'.

No, they won't let me out of winter,  
 and I've promised myself,  
 even if I'm the last snowman,  
 that I'll ride into spring  
 on their melting shoulders. (Ali, *The Half Inch Himalyas* 34)

**Depiction of Nature**

Heaney's poetry constantly harks back to childhood memories in the farm 'Mossbawn', permeating the landscape and natural environment of his homeland. This is a major source of inspiration in his works, his *personal helicon*. There is a twofold approach in his respect, that can be found in his works : Nature as text, and text as Nature, i.e. the adoption of elemental symbology as a resource for the characterisation of the

poetic word. Nature as text, or precisely *earthy* nature as text, is a recurrent theme in the poetry of Seamus Heaney, especially at the beginning of his literary career. Critics have emphasised since the publication of his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), the link between the author and his homeland through an outstanding earthy imagery. Seamus Deane states that Heaney's first volumes contain "a remarkably large vocabulary for earth, especially earth in a state of deliquescence, earth mixed with water" (Deane 275). This watery ground, continues Deane, speaks itself with human voice in Heaney's poetic formula. As an attentive recorder of 'earth writing', in the poem 'Gifts of Rain', to give just an example, Heaney writes:

The tawny guttural water  
 spells itself: Moyola  
 is its own score and consort,  
 bedding the locale  
 in the utterance,  
 reed music, an old chanter  
 breathing its mists  
 through vowels and history. (Heaney, *Wintering Out* 15)

Agha Shahid Ali has also given a vivid picture of the importance of streams and rivers and also says that these natural entities are the main sources of energy and if there is any sort of halt in their function the whole world will change into a desert. Ali's book *A Nostalgist's Map of America*, relates a series of travels through landscapes often blurred between his current American home and memories of his boyhood in Kashmir. In *In The Mountains*, Ali describes nature as one of the names of God. In his book *The Half Inch Himalayas*, there are recurrent memories of his childhood in Kashmir and he has also described the landscapes, the mountains, the rivers, the lakes, the springs, the snow, the huts and the crop fields in his poetic collections. In one of his poems *Snow on the Desert*, Ali recollects:

. . . it was, like this turning dark  
 of fog, a moment when only a lost sea  
 can be heard, a time  
 to recollect  
 every shadow, everything the earth was losing,  
 a time to think of everything the earth  
 and I had lost, of all  
 that I would lose,  
 of all that I was losing. (Ali, *A Nostalgist's Map of America* 164)

### Sense of Belonging

In *Preoccupations*, Seamus Heaney's Selected Essays published in 1980, he writes at length about the feeling of belonging to a concrete, physical place. He refers to this sense of belonging in almost religious terms, as a "marriage" between what he calls "the geographical country and the country of the mind," (P 132) between the place itself and the oral inherited culture, the literary culture that one is part of. The local landscape for him takes on a sense of the sacred almost, a "religious force" that is seen or rather sensed as something that is sacramental, instinct with signs, implying a system of reality beyond the visible realities. Thus, the countryside in which Heaney grew up, with its history and folklore and myths, plays an important role in his writing, laying the foundation for what he calls "a marvelous or a magical view of the world" (P 133). The strong sense of belonging to Irish earth is deeply rooted in Heaney's poetics. It is a very early emotional certitude at the base of the process of writing. Seamus Heaney himself includes in his autobiographical essay 'Mossbawn' an interesting anecdote in this respect, in which the young pre-poet experiments a rite of passage in the direct contact with the feminised Irish soil, the controversial 'Mother Earth' who inspires much of his early mythology of regenerative anthropophagi and sacrifice in the 'bog poems' within *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975).

To this day, green, wet corners, flooded wastes, soft rushy bottoms, any place with the invitation of watery ground and tundra vegetation, even glimpsed from a car or a train, possess an immediate and

deeply peaceful attraction. It is as if I am betrothed to them, and I believe my betrothal happened one summer evening, thirty years ago, when another boy and myself stripped to the white country skin and bathed in a moss-hole, treading the liver-thick mud, unsettling a smoky muck off the bottom and coming out smeared and weedy and darkened. We dressed again and went home in our wet clothes, smelling of the ground and the standing pool, somehow initiated (Heaney, *Preoccupations* 19).

As a Kashmiri-American, Agha Shahid Ali wrote eight volumes of poetry. His collections of poetry pervade with loss and grief. The inspiration of his poetry comes from belonging to his Kashmiri scenario, the land to which he had a deep sense of belonging. His early childhood appeared in the post partition era, after Pakistan was carved out from India. Kashmir remained a dispute, an issue about which the whole world was concerned. It is an issue of aspiration of the people who remained on this side of partition line (India) and that part (Pakistan). The desire of the people to merge these two parts and have an independent state of Jammu and Kashmir and the ongoing conflict of people therein, followed by and the anguish, agony, bloodshed and terrorism had prevailed since then and is continue even now. This scenario works like traditional location for arts and creativity. Agha Shahid Ali is one of those poets who are more attached to their home country than their current home. As he says that "my poems have that darker edge of them always. Life has that same balance of different dark and light elements. I like to see that reflect in my work" (Ali 77). Such writers live on the food of nostalgia and longing. They might be related to the place where they live after separation from their real home but the reality is only this that only their bodies live there not the soul. The snowy culture haunted him wherever he went. The spring, winter and the secular world that he lost became utopia for his writing. Often he expressed his compulsion to re-achieve the existence that he lost. He travelled throughout America and saw many consequences about his loss but he always remembered his source culture. At one place he says about unreal locations:

Pennsylvania became, if not home, certainly a home and sometimes in bar at 2:00 am, like so many Americans, I often felt, almost an exile. Night after night, all routes to death opened up, again and again, as the bar closed all over the Pennsylvania the taxi hour of loss. Then some years later, I left for Arizona where it always is yesterday, no day light saving time there and the Sonora desert seems strongly out of time, these locations meant loss. Each of them also means creating rhetoric of loss, the illusion of belonging-to something, to anything that dismal world –roots (Mishra).

In the poetic world of Ali sorrow and loss come together and create his identity. Muhammad Safi Khan says that "emotion excited by deep sense of loss is fundamentally more poetic. Loss versified sorrow versified for having lost something precious to be drowned in sorrow" (Khan 5). In the above discussed sentence we see that both loss and sorrow become synonyms of each other. In such way Ali's poetry is the sorrow of loss. Though he is living in the other location but his heart lies in a particular setting that is Kashmir. The loss that has been coming for so long time is now the metaphorical reality of his poetry. Whatever we read into his poetry are not words only but the synonym of the loss. "It is in the blood. Loss is his beloved, the interior paramour he has willingly embraced and kept faith through the four volumes of the poetry" (Needham 63). He was always in the stream of pain and he kept these streams into his heart. Shahid had ability to hide pain and disclose his pain only to himself, which is only revealed while he pours himself in the forms of words Ali, as sometimes, seems like Keats. Keats was distressed to keep the beauty of the world alive in the Grecian Urn so is Ali always in pain to make his beautiful Kashmir alive in his textual world. His poetic world is like Grecian urn where every spot, whether given by its people or others, echoes to the heart and the mind of the people.

Personal memories from Seamus Heaney's childhood, growing up on a farm in rural Ireland, are central to Heaney's early work. In *Death of a Naturalist* the poet's immediate family figure prominently, for instance, he writes of his father in 'Digging' and 'Follower,' and the death of his young brother, Christopher, in 'Mid Term Break'. There is also a sense almost of embarrassment or apology about the act of writing an undercurrent feeling.

Agha Shahid Ali loved his beloved Kashmir as he loved his mother. These three words –beloved - Kashmir- mother are one for him. He loved his mother because the heritage that he bore on his shoulder was

given by his mother. He always recognises the glimpse of Kashmir into her. As Irfan Hasan, one of Shahid's friend says:

Everyone loves his mother. So did Shahid. But love for his mother was so deep that it won't be possible for him to describe. He nursed her and was always there by her side as if she was 'his own daughter'. Sofia aunt's death was something Shahid could not expect and it greatly disturbed him. He could not come to Kashmir because of it. But he came again to his beloved land alone with Sofia aunty, this time to bury him (Hassan 10).

Agha Shahid Ali wrote poetry in both free verse and traditional forms, experimenting with verse forms such as the sestina and canzone. He is credited with introducing and popularising the Ghazal form in American poetry. Known particularly for his dexterous allusions to European, Urdu, Arabic and Persian literary traditions, Ali's poetry collections revolve around both thematic and cultural poles. The scholar Amardeep Singh has described Ali's style as 'ghazalesque', referring to Ali's frequent use of the form as well as his blending of the "rhythms and forms of the Indo-Islamic tradition with a distinctly American approach to storytelling. Most of his poems are not abstract considerations of love and longing," Singh noted, "but rather concrete accounts of events of personal importance (and sometimes political importance)." Though Ali began publishing in the early 1970s, it was not until *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* (1987) that he received widespread recognition. Bruce King characterised that book as "A surreal world of nightmare, fantasy, incongruity, wild humor, and the grotesque, although the existential anxieties have their source in problems of growing up, leaving home, being a migrant, and the meeting of cultures, the idiom is American and contemporary" (49).

Heaney's poetry is known for its aural beauty and finely wrought textures. Often described as a regional poet, he is also a traditionalist who deliberately gestures back towards the pre modern worlds of William Wordsworth and John Clare. In his intimate reading style, Heaney balances a sense of natural speech with his commitment to musically satisfying order of sounds. This grants full weight to the formal skill that shapes the poems. It gives the impression that we are being confided in by the man whose poetry is distinguished by lyrical beauty and ethical depth. Heaney's work has both a meditative lyricism and an airy velocity. His lines could embody a dark, marshy melancholy, but as often as not they also communicated the wild onrushing joy of being alive. His poetry, which has an epiphanic quality, is suffused with references to pre-Christian myth and that of ancient Greece. His style, linguistically dazzling, is nonetheless lacking in the obscurity that can attend poetic pyrotechnics.

Both the poets have mastery to bring the personal to the universal. The Ghazals of Ali are the testimony to the fact that links poets and listeners through time and tradition. Ali has his own sorrows, that is sorrow of being exiled and living at a place that never accepted him and he also himself was not ready to forget his homeland. He has sorrows of losing his mother that he brought forth in his poetry and his writing has a purgatory effect on readers experiencing same kind of sorrows, they feel one with the poet, hence his appeal becomes universal. Seamus Heaney has a strong sense of self, he was aware of his belonging to a particular place and community and how, he believes this sense of belonging colors his poetic utterance. Heaney holds a view that a poet should maintain his own 'mythos' and preserve a 'purity' of purpose in his devotion to art. The concept of poetry as emanating from the ground he was brought up on and the idea of words as bearers of history and mystery are concerns that have always been central to his work.

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