



LOST MEMORY OR DREAMS OF FUTURE: THE DIALECTICS OF AGHA SHAHID ALI'S SELECT POEMS

Dr. FATIMA NOORI

Assistant professor

Department of English, Jagat Taran Girls' PG College, University of Allahabad
Fulbright-Nehru Doctoral Fellow 2015-16

[Email:fatimanooriu@gmail.com](mailto:fatimanooriu@gmail.com)



Dr. FATIMA NOORI

ABSTRACT

As a modern and a voluntary migrant from India to the US, Agha Shahid Ali did not face the customary despairs of the diaspora. Rather, he considered himself as a beneficiary of three cultures— Urdu, Hindi and English. His poetry is both a celebration of the cultural amalgamation and a yearning for the opportunities lost. The dialectics of the presence and absence germinates from this unique physical and psychological position of the poet. Through his poetry, Shahid Ali tries to make up for the loss of home and homeland as well as the languages and cultures. Shahid Ali was an Eliot student and an ardent reader of the Romantic poet Shelley and the Urdu poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz. From these three grand figures, he derived much of his early poetics; the longing and the loss, the rebellion and the historicity. Home, languages, histories, and cultures remain his primary concern till his last volume, but they are manifested in different manners and at different levels during the subsequent phases of his poetic life. The present paper tries to read Shahid Ali's poetry through the lens of a psychological bias— telescopic effect, to grasp the interrelatedness of the Derridean concepts of presence and absence and understand the emergence of the poetic craft using dreams and memories.

Keywords: dreams, memories, absence, presence, telescopic effect, psychological bias

Article information
Received:06/10/2021
Accepted: 26/10/2021
Published online:05/11/2021
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.8.4.52](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.8.4.52)

The early poetry of the Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2000) engages with the dialectics of the dreams and memory, the absence and the presence. The poetry of Shahid Ali shuffles between these two conditions; the presence, may mean the present time, the home and the memory of home, while the absence is the feeling of loss and longing and at several times, an imagination to fill up that loss. This imagination complicates the dialectics. Shahid's memory is an intricate space moving to and fro, 'mixing memory with desires' loaded with forward and backward telescopic effects. The telescopic effect is a psychological bias where events from the past are imagined to have taken place either further in time (backward telescoping) or at a more recent time (forward telescoping). The present paper tries to understand the repeated use of memory trails and dreams that feature as a regular motif in Shahid's poetry through which he tries to placate his nostalgia and his sense of displacement. The dreams are Shahid's tools to address the absent, thus, bringing the absent into

present. The memories are a recollection of the present which is now a past and hence an absence. This tension and the collision between the past and the present or between the dreams and the memories are played to a high tune, hence creating a dialectics of the presence and the absence.

Agha Shahid Ali moved to the US somewhere around 1975 and came out with his third volume of poetry in the year 1986 which carries his experiences from the past ten years of moving to the US from New Delhi and settling in the new land. These experiences are woven in a string to composed a poetics of loss, longing, nostalgia and belonging. The present engagement is with a selection of poems from this volume where the poet glides from dream to memory and back to weave in a fabric of experience which encompasses the past and present as one long continuum.

The poem 'A Lost Memory of Delhi' (*The Veiled Suite*, pg. 30-31) is explicitly created as a memory trail though it may also be read as a dream with a broken sequence of images. The telescopic effect in action, the poet imagines a time he was not born—this 'memory' is mostly constructed out of pictures from family albums, family heirlooms, artifacts, anecdotes and hinges itself on the fantasy of the poet. Shahid was impressed with the Romantics especially Shelley who influence in terms of both imagination as well as rebellion, can be traced in many of his early poems. The poet imagines his young parents as a newly-wedded couple indulgent in the leisure of love. He draws a clear picture of the father who looks much younger than the poet is at the time of writing the poem. The mother is dressed in a bright colorful brocade— the image is drawn from the post-independence sartorial culture. The unique north Indian fabric remains an expensive gift, especially to young brides as part of their wedding trousseau worn on all important occasions. There is also an interesting mention of the silver-dust parting her hair—again a tradition that was prevalent among Indian Muslim women but lost its appeal post 1980s. She is also adorned as a married woman with expensive clothes, and ornaments. Fusing the aural and the visual, the poet creates an exquisite surreal image:

The bells of her anklets are distant
like the sound of china from
teashops being lit up with lanterns
and the stars are coming out
ringing with tongues of glass' (lines 13-18).

The memory stream cuts off to find the parents walking into their house. The poet recognizes this house from his family albums, the lamp that lights the rooms has been in the attic broken. The physical world set before him like a stage; the poet now spells out his real objective—the desire to be with his young parents, to meet them in the glory of their youth. This longing of the poet is a repeated motif in many of his poems where the desire to live in the past—speak to the past and re-imagine himself in the history to an altered/ alternative equation is expressed. More often, Shahid's poetry is about these tender dreams that remain unfulfilled. The poet's craft evolves slowly when he dwells on the absences in his dreams or reveries to experience a fulfillment that was denied in real life.

It is ironically the night of his conception— 'the night of my being' (29) but the parents are obviously unaware of the future son's peek in the past— 'for them the night is quiet' (28). The poet here is a seer and a witness— a role that Shahid blooms to maturity in his later poems.

The poem has a kinesthetic appeal—bus, bicycle, moving inside a house, strolling by the Yamuna, calling out to the parents, knocking, show an active, intense longing and a desperate restlessness. The assemblage of urban modalities, artifacts and trinkets conjures up that 'third space' like a cinematographic cut; the different sets given one after the other move like a smooth camera depicting the progression of life.

The poems move from being imagistic to surrealistic and back and forth. It is a delicate fusion of the concrete, the real, the hazy, and the blurred— memories strung together in a hazy daydream. The cacophony of the letter 'k' in "I knock, keep knocking... (27) slowly slides into the 'drowning out the tongue of stars' (33) ending the dream with no final closure, no full stops. The memory is dried out with no conclusive statement at the realization of the incapability of the poet to cut across time. It is a personal setback to the poet when the parents

do not respond to their son from future. The shattering of romance is a regular trope of the Romantics as well as the nineteenth century Urdu poetry that Shahid Ali was so fond of. Poets are embodiments of desires— of love, of glory, of adventure or sometimes unconventional ones, like meeting the parents in far-off lands. For Shahid, poetry is an expression of those desires or— since they almost always remain unfulfilled, an expression of the absence.

There is, perhaps, an unconscious desire of the poet to reach out to a parent poet here— Charles Lamb. In a poignant inversion of the structure of Lamb's famous essay 'Dream Children' (pub. 1823), where his little children hear stories about Lamb's grandmother and brother, are indulgent simultaneously in their infantile charms, but escape into oblivion when an awareness ascends about their parentage and their inception; Shahid's parents are 'drowned in the night' of his 'being'. The yearning Shahid has for his parents while they were young and newly-wedded— is an absence that connects him at a fundamental level with the poet of eighteenth century. The connection with the past cannot be established, nor can a future be built on mere imagination. Though they lack Lamb's pathos and brilliance, Shahid's poems are still delicate and ingenious.

An antithesis to the above-mentioned poem is 'A Monsoon Note on Old Age' (pg. 46); the future where the poet is a 'tired eunuch/ aware only of an absence'. The windows are not portals of a vision of the future or a glorious past but are prison bars that hold him within. Monsoon offers no promise of blossoms but are barred with shriveling of the skin and the sweat. This distress of the monsoon experienced in old age is in sharp contrast to the youthfulness of the season mentioned in an earlier poem 'Seasons of the Plain' (pg. 44-5). While the monsoon of the young days (of the mother) was a profusion of songs, love notes and pangs of separation from the beloved, the old age is doomed with the absence of love and partner; it is a direct contrast to the children 'soaking in utter summer', not with the fulfillment of the youthful yearnings.

This is fifty years later: I
 Sit across myself, folded in
 Monsoon sweat, my skin
 Shriveled, a tired eunuch... (1-4)

The poem is a lament of an absence that the poet imagines himself experiencing 'fifty years later'; he has to make-do with only the photograph of the (perhaps) lost love, with the shuffling of the stars, watching the rains pour no good, silently 'dusting death's far-off country' (12-13). Created out of diction like 'shriveled', 'eunuch', 'prison' and 'overexpose', the poem projects the sense of utter depravity and dejection, the poet imagines himself into. "Aware only of an absence" (5), the poet is a classic Eliotian '*Gerontion*' (pub. 1920). The fifty-year old, seems to have the knowledge that past and history "gives with such supple confusions/ That the giving famishes the craving" (39-40) and that history "deceives with whispering ambitions, / Guides us by vanities". (36-7)

The shuffling of the presence and absence occurs once more in the poem 'Survivor' (pg. 72) where Shahid's imagination takes him to his parents in his homeland in Kashmir. He constructs a life in Kashmir had he been present in Kashmir. This is triggered by a desire to return to the homeland— the poet fashions himself as a resident of the house—someone not settled abroad but living a different life at home in Kashmir. The pastiche of images construes the hum-drum of everyday living—inhaling summer's coriander from fridge, listening to the news on radio about abandoned search for mountain-climbers, answering the mails, wearing home-knit cardigans while relating tales of absence. There is a hide-n-seek game on with the past and an imaginary/alternative present. The home is a major preoccupation with Shahid Ali and is constantly concretized and re-made in his early American poems. Majority of these poems were written as a part of the MFA dissertation; hence, they were composed during Ali's settling in US from 1975 to 1985. This construction of alternate life scenarios continues throughout the poetic journey— "I Dream I Return to Tucson in the Monsoons" (*A Nostalgist's Map of America*, 117), "I See Chile in my Rearview Mirror" (161), "I Dream I am the Only Passenger..." (*The Country Without a Post-Office*, 184), "I See Kashmir from New Delhi" (178), "I Dream I am at the Ghat of the Only World" (*Rooms Are Never Finished*, 313). Besides these, most of the poems from the volume *The Country Without a Post Office* (1999) are a play of the memory and history—their basic ingredients drawn

from letters received by the poet from home, anecdotes, news reports, periodical published by various activists' groups in Kashmir during the 1990s turmoil.

Another poem from *The Half-Inch Himalayas* that can be discussed in the same bracket of loss/absence/memory/presence— is "I Dream it is Afternoon when I return to Delhi" (pg. 74). This one delves into another imaginary journey of the poet returning to Delhi from the US after a long hiatus of ten years. In the poem, shards of memory are picked up by the poet from the point he left. There are stark recollections of people he lived with and places he lived in and left behind. The dream tries to gather its momentum from those memories. But here too, as in the previously discussed poems, communication remains incomplete. The poem plays on the possibility of the forming a connect between the past and present; it hinges on dialogues that start abruptly or remain incomplete. The inability to maintain a smooth dialogue signifies the breakdown of the communication— at a personal level as well as at the temporal level.

The poet is alone at an old site— *Purana Qila*, when he is ushered in a bus at the insistence of a faceless voice. There is a possibility of him being captured but he jumps off the bus before that. He then sights an old friend Sunil who take him to watch the grandiose cinematographic treat *Mughal-e-Azam*, a saga of love and power tussle. But it is only the end of the movie that he gets to watch. Also, the usher tells him his ticket is ten years old and he finds himself devoid of all money, with beggar women weeping for him and offering him their money. In a complex interweave of multiple temporal sequences running simultaneously and trying to communicate with each other, the poet lays bare his desires and his imaginations. For Shahid Ali, the past is never really the past and absences can always be imbued with imagination and dreams. Ali easily travels back to the old cities, old people and the old world and interacts with them as they constantly inform his present. It is the Proustian madeleine as well as the Bergsonian snowball that informs his memory structures. The poetry gets imagist and surrealist in turns and create a distinct flavor blending in the cinematic features as well.

Many of Shahid's poem depict his keen understanding and his passion for the cinema and the camera. His poems have a cinematographic quality to it with distinct cuts, juxtapositions and placements. One of the features of the seventies and eighties Bollywood cinematographic production was the memory trails that moves from point A to B vey smoothly. Another feature was the heroes alter-ego that would talk to him in moments of crisis. The poems discussed here make use of such techniques making poetry-reading an altogether new experience.

Agha Shahid Ali's act of writing is an effort to create a space that is independent of and beyond the temporal dimension. His poems are polysemic places that his readers can visit and experience the culture and history that he belonged to. What makes Shahid extraordinary is that till his last poems, this canvass kept extending its bounds and dimensions.

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