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AGHA SHAHID ALI AND HIS POETIC RE-CONSTRUCTION OF LOST HOMELAND

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ABSTRACT

Home is not only about the windows, four brick walls and a roof to shelter. It is about elders, history, culture, language, identity and the sense of security. Agha Shahid Ali is considered among those diasporic poets whose poetry forms the ‘Home’ as centre. All the poems seem expressing the emotions about home. The endless pain of losing cultural home is totally immitigable, a poet like Agha Shahid has only way to revisit home that is his creativity of writing poetry so he employs his possible tools of his genius to reframe the home on papers by his creative words. Home for anyone is base of one’s identity, losing it means the inevitability of pain of sorrow which cannot be overcome by medical pills. Ali after travelling to America from Kashmir, the poet sees himself in an alien world where he possesses a luxurious life but the emotional attachment to home seems dominating his poetic expressions. He has often tried to de-alienate himself with host place but any human can hardly be capable to forget his roots so is the poet. After self-exile Ali could only imagine his home it is less possible for him to return. One cannot escape the emotions which entangle on to the bitter realities of life and one reality for the poet is his ‘emotional homesickness’. Being so far in America, he is still a Kashmir-beyond-geography, the physical distance from home triggers his creative imagination to recreate the home for the acquisition of sense of consolation, which is hardly a permanent cure for the pain. The poetic volumes like *The Country Without a Post Office* and *The Half-inch Himalayas* are Ali’s main works, where he seems fitting himself in Salman Rushdie’s theory of *Imaginary Homelands*. The poet employs his imagination to reconstruct the lost homeland and for this he takes full use of memory to traverse through the histories and geographies of it. The impact of physical distance triggers him to bring home on the papers. The paper tries to connect Ali’s reconstruction of home with the Salman Rushdie’s *Imaginary Homelands* which lets him to bring forth the poetic expressions with the mix of cultural history, geography, nostalgia etc.

**Keywords:** Agha Shahid Ali, Re-construction, Home, Memory, Imagination, Salman Rushdie etc.

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## INTRODUCTION

Poetry is a powerful tool of expression; it is a creative and a unique way to disseminate the ideas and emotions through the proper placement and selection of words. It is quite natural; the kind of sensibility of person keeps dominating the words of expression. A poet always speaks out his perspectives, observations along with the real-life experiences besides this he cannot escape himself from the emotions. The emotions naturally keep embracing the expressions by which a reader gets also the idea about his personal life.

Agha Shahid Ali is a Kashmiri-born American poet who with his brilliant poetics expressions enriched with the oriental beauty. He maintained his oriental cultural identity in his poetry which made him one of the favourite poets of America. *The Country Without a Post Office* is one his best works where the poet shares his emotional association with homeland Kashmir. He speaks his sorrow out of the physical separation and tries to console himself by turning nostalgic about it. He uses his memory and imagination to recreate the home and traverses through the history and culture to feel at home. His poetry is very much responsible for the global recognition of Kashmir because before him, there was no other Kashmiri-writer writing in English who could let the world know about it. In simple words, we can see Ali's poetry plays the main role bridging the Kashmir with rest of the world. It is all due to the creative genius of Agha Shahid Ali. The Americans became aware about the cultural heritage, history and ancestry of the Valley of Kashmir, which is the original home of the poet. *The Country Without a Post Office* is a poetic document of lamentations, which mourn the poet's inaccessibility of home. The poet depicts the fate of the Kashmiri people after the volatile situations since 1990's and as a Kashmiri he is himself afflicted with separation and the volatile conditions present there. Ali could see his home in pictures and imagination, this entanglement is spoken in a very elegiac mood. The destitution for the poet is that he sees home in pictures and feels home shrinking in size. Ali is one of his poems 'Postcard from Kashmir' mourns over his fate of being so far from home, now he can see only its pictures like non-Kashmiris do. This is the height and intensity of his pain which is expressed in the poem which reads:

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,  
My home a neat four by six inches.  
I always loved neatness. Now I hold  
The half-inch Himalayas in my hand. (Veiled Suite, 29)

Memory and imagination has the great importance for the poet in terms of the re-creation of his ideal home. There is no other way for retrieving the lost cultural identity so the poet drives his imagination to overcome his homelessness. Ali decorates his imaginary homeland by reviving the history and the remembrance of his childhood he spent there. Meenakshi Mukherjee states: when an expatriate writer goes back to the memories of his childhood to write...the impossibility of return assumes both temporal and spatial dimensions" (Mukherjee 72).

Memory for Ali is a treasure from which a writer chooses things to speak about his roots and culture. The distance could not conquer the emotions regarding one's home and such emotions naturally come out through words so does Ali. The home is a beloved for the poet and his undying love can be traced from his *The Country Without Post Office*, *The Half-inch Himalayas* etc. The feeling of impossibility of return doubles the intensity of pain, which the poet tries to pacify by engaging himself with his imaginary homeland. For Luis Bunuel, one of the famous filmmakers mentions in his book *My Last Sigh* that

Life without memory is no life at all, just as intelligence without the possibility of expression is not really an intelligence. Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action, without it we are nothing (Sigh, 15).

Ali derives the sentiments and coherence from the contours of memory and fits them in his imagination to relieve himself. While spending the major part of life in America, he seems revisiting memories to find himself while being physically in an alien land. He seems finding his existence, creates a *Rushidian* home which somehow

mends his fractured identity. The poet in poetry is constantly trying to prove himself a Kashmiri-Indian identity. Zutshi in her book *Kashmir's Contested Parts* states:

The interaction between idea of Kashmir as a sacred space that exists beyond quantifiable temporality and a political territory located within historical time continued to define the subsequent narrations of Kashmiri Past (Zutshi 71).

Salman Rushdie is very much clear about the sensibility of a writer who is far away from home like Ali, whose poetry is the evidence of his alienation, sense of loss, feelings of return. The creation of imaginary homelands is not a deliberate thing to do rather it naturally comes in one's expressions which cannot be throttled anyway. Reviving the past keeps connect the poet with home and time and dominates his present and finally compels him to reconstruct home by imagination. Ali interlocks the memories and histories together and tells the world where he is actually and where he should be in true sense. He leaves the imprints of original identity in his poetry to let the readers be familiar about roots of the poet. Ali seems following Salman Rushdie's concern about home, when he tries to recapture his own home through memory and imagination. Rushdie States:

Exiles or immigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to return, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt...our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias if the mind (I.H 429).

Returning home turns a dream in exile and there is hardly any possibility of its coming true. It is the love which makes the poet to mourn, whatever he writes around it, it is all out of love towards it. America is a place where the poet fetches every luxury and lives a life of ease but the lack inside is invisible, prompts the poet to be an engineer to recreate the lost home and utilises his imagination to retrieve what is lost. The poetic expressions of Ali indicate his continuous search for the cure of alienation, loss and homelessness which ultimately offers him an alternative to create imaginary homeland, The Kashmir of mind. The emotional entanglement of it finds its way to imagination to bring the homely feeling. To dream about return is also an element of imagination which offers the poet a momentary ease. Agha Shahid Ali seems conversing his homeland like lover converses with his beloved, He reads as

This is home. And this is the closest

I'll ever be at home. When I return (TVS 29).

*The Country without a Post Office* is passport to revisit the home, Ali poetic re-construction of homeland mainly reflects in the book. Home is beloved and the poet himself a lover, who constantly makes the imaginary conversations with his beloved home. He shares the tales of his sorrow due being so distant from it. The fate is that the poet can only memorize, imagine and mourn as a result the poet meets the mood so elegiac. Salman Rushdie states:

The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains; fragmentation made trivial things seems like symbols, and the mundane acquired numerous qualities (I.H 429).

Thus the poet succeeds to bringing his imaginary home on the papers and his poetic genius makes him an engineer to reconstruct cultural home, Kashmir which is similar to the imaginary homeland of Salman Rushdie.

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