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## THE LAST SAFFRON: KASHMIR THROUGH THE POETRY OF AGHA SHAHID ALI

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### ABSTRACT

*Kashmir witnessed a very disturbing political situation for last two decades attracting the attention of many literary personalities toward the suffering caused by the turmoil. Kashmiri society saw a disturbance of traditional social fabric by the departure of the Kashmiri Pandits. This situation had a great appeal to one of the famous Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali and he painted a Kashmir suffering in violence and its social fabric disturbed. This paper aims at analyzing the image that his poetry is carrying within it of violence, bloodshed, empty homes, unattended temples, deserted roads, even a scaring ambience at home. Poetry immortalizes everything it touches; same is true with the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali. He reflects the society of Kashmir from the most humane perspective.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Kashmir, suffering, turmoil, social fabric, Kashmiri Pandits.*

### INTRODUCTION

Agha Shahid Ali is known as Kashmiri-American poet, a renowned teacher in America, was born in New Delhi and studied in Srinagar and at Delhi University. Later he moved to the United States of America to pursue Ph.D. in English from Pennsylvania State University in 1984 and an M.F.A. in creative writing at the University of Arizona in 1985. He wrote many books, translated Urdu Ghazals in English and edited a book on T. S. Eliot. He received the Guggenheim and Ingram-Merrill fellowships and a Puschart Prize. In 2001, Ali was finalized for the National Book Award for his collection *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001).

Kashmir had a prominent place in his life, and the political condition in the 1990s made a strong impact on him. And the outcome is fiercely beautiful collection of poems *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997). Ali portrays suffering of the people of Kashmir through a series of heart wrenching images in his poetry—a woman bereaving who has lost her loved

one, men roaming around looking for their loved ones, the shadows of young boys pleading the poet not to tell their fathers that they are dead. Poet succinctly sketches a dance of death in paradise colored in the red of blood. This paper aims at evaluating the imagery of violence Ali portrays in his poems, a close critical analysis of his poems is attempted to unveil the suffering the lay beneath the lines of poems.

### ALI AND KASHMIR TURMOIL

Agha Shahid Ali's Kashmir is like "an untitled poem," as he calls it in poem *The Blessed Word*, a place where "when you leave home in the morning, you never know if you'll return". Everything is unsure like the title of the poem, Kashmir in his poetry is a place where one should not promise to meet again. Mansi Mehra argues that "his poetry is like a canvas on which he draws an imaginary painting of his homeland though bruised and besieged" (121). In his prose poem *The Blessed Word* Ali portrays Srinagar a place where "Guns shoot stars in the sky." The portrayal of violence is such brutal and intense that the guns range upto the

stars in the sky. The stars appearing in the night are vulnerable, at the risk of being shot dead. The portrayal is similar that of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's novel *A Grain of Wheat* where Mugo recalls how Gitogo, who was both deaf and dumb, was shot dead during the Mau Mau Movement. The expressions "Ishmael be executed," "Srinagar under curfew," "Identity pass," "crackdown," "the night of the torture" from the poem *The Blessed Word* accentuate the picture of a violence ridden Kashmir.

Ali's poetry is deeply involved in Kashmir situation as Amitav Ghosh has observed that "the steady deterioration of political situation in Kashmir – violence and counter-violence – had a powerful effect on him. In time it became one of the central subjects of his work: indeed it could be said that it was in the writings of Kashmir that he created his finest work" (12). Shahid was a committed but apolitical writer who thought it is the prime duty of a writer to represent the really in its objectivity. He has been heard expressing the view that "if you are from a difficult place and that all you have to write about then you should stop writing. You have to respect your art, your form – that is just as important as you write about" (qtd. in Gosh 13). But the irony of situation that Shahid wrote so beautifully when he wrote about Kashmir. The situation that emerged after the break of militancy found a voice in his poetry and Shahid's poetry is the voice of a bard singing for communal harmony. Not Surprisingly, Agha Shahid Ali's abiding themes were Kashmir, exile, loneliness, love-and longing, always longing.

Shahid's poem *Farewell* is a great complement to Hindu Muslim harmony in Kashmir and "narrates the woeful tale of his native soil" (Sharma 219). The poem is assumed to be a letter from a Kashmiri Muslim to a Kashmiri Pandit who left the valley after the outbreak of armed insurgency, and the former laments, "at a certain point I lost track of you." The loss has created a collective trauma in majority community that poem is portraying. The poet is so anguished that everything seems to be ruined, destroyed and destruction has been forced on this place where "even stones were buried." "Ali's poetry attempts to register the complexity of this region, in terms both of its social and natural dimension" (Judith 8). Kashmiri Pandits have been an inseparable and intrinsic part of Kashmiri culture; rather one must admit that Pandits have been an intellectual portion of Kashmiri tradition and culture. "Shahid craves for his homeland, of his ancestors" (Parveen 4), adopting a nostalgic tone and says:

When the ibex rubs itself against the rocks, who collects  
its fallen fleece from the slopes?

O Weaver whose seams perfectly vanish, who weighs the  
hairs on the jeweler's balance? (5-8)

The gone Kashmiri Pandits have been compared with the ibex and their memories with fleece of ibex, for Shahid which is worth of weighing in the jeweler's balance. Certainly, he means those memories are not less than jewelry.

Agha Shahid Ali's Kashmir is "the city from where no news can come" and "now so invisible in the curfewed night" "as they ran from the funeral." Shahid uses this extremely eerie and scaring images of Kashmir in his poem *I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight*. His Kashmir is highly militarized where bunkers are found on every corner, and portrays the image of search lights and a boys escaping from it:

a shadow chased by search lights is running  
away to find its body. On the edge  
of the Cantonment where Gupkar Road ends,  
it shrinks almost nothing, (7-10)

Shahid draws a vivid word portrayal of "Interrogation," "burning tire," "the back of a prisoner," and "the naked boy screaming, 'I know nothing.'" Professor Javeria says that Agha Shahid Ali "talks about torture, disappearances, killings, and whatever happened in the dead silence of nights across Gupkar- the posh military area in Srinagar or in the cold mountain valleys. He speaks of pain, anguish, longing, internal conflict, frustration but also of optimism and hope" (1). One agrees with the observation that "Shahid Ali's poetry functions as an appropriation of the meeting point of the suffering" (Raj 68).

Mehra observes that Agha Shahid Ali "finds the culture, ethos, beauty of his beloved homeland being ripped, there are movements in his poetry which show his inability to comprehend the face of his homeland, which has now changed into a place" (120), and Nishat Zaidi adds, "where shrines which were once revered by masses, are now being turned into ashes. Curfew and gunfire have replaced the melodious springs and saffron farms" (qtd. in Mehra 120). But Shahid had a great love for Kashmir and wishes to "die, in autumn, in Kashmir" and he goes on to say in the poem *The Last Saffron*:

I will look for any sign of blood  
In the captions under the photos of boys,  
Those who by inches –after the April flood—  
Were killed in the flute water, (9-12)

Shahid talks about the saffron fields of Pampore and Shalimar *ghats*, former is the place where saffron grows and later is the world famous Mughal Garden situated near Dal Lake. But all the places have been deprived of heavenly traits, and Shahid notices a ghostly skeleton of these places. Amitav Ghosh argues that "Kashmir's current plight represented for him the

failure of the emancipatory promise of nationhood and the extinction of the pluralistic ideal that had been so dear to intellectuals of his father's generation" (14). "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" (Mishra 4).

Muhammad Safi Khan says that "emotion excited by deep sense of loss is fundamentally more poetic. Loss versified sorrow for having lost something precious to be drowned in sorrow" (cited in Mishra 3). "The return of appropriate words would articulate a desire to return to a particular time, place, and/or culture" argues Woodland (252), the first line of *The Last Saffron*—"I will die, in autumn, in Kashmir"—foregrounds the poets wish to return and die in Kashmir. The extent of violence was so intense for Ali that saffron is identical to "gold from the burned fields of Pampore". Ali yearns for a perpetual peace in Kashmir, the blooming saffron flowers. Ali portrays a nostalgic mantle image of Pampore, the saffron town of Kashmir, where he imaginarily gathers the flowers of saffron. The flowers of saffron symbolize the flowers of peace and "his poetry is the very stuff of beauty, loss and redemption" (Maqbool 1). But Ali's "Kashmir" lingers in violence and on the brink of war.

Sharma rightly observes that "Agha Shahid Ali appears emotionally bound to his roots" (204); *A Pastoral* is emotionally charged poem that talks about the "stories rumored in branches." During the turmoil in Kashmir many people disappeared, they have not been traced to this day, and often there were rumors about there being dead, or a rumor of their dead body left on the road. As was common in Kashmir then that people who had been abducted, their dead bodies were left on the roadside at the night and people only discovered them when sun came up in the morning. A sadistic voice in the poem announces that "my death, at the mosque gate/ in the massacre" at the time of the "Call to Prayer." The poem repeats the words like blood, death, cemetery, graves and broken city. However, the line that strikes the most in this poem, "the dust still uneasy on the hurried graves/ with no names" sends a shiver down the spine.

*The Country Without a Post Office* is a poem of grim serenity, a lonely voice, a ghost like figure in the night under the poor light which "soaks the wicks of clay lumps/ in mustard oil" to light properly. This ghostly figure thinks about empty houses, and those so many people who "fled, ran away/ and became refugees there in the plains." This country that sans the post office no messages can be sent to those who left and neither can one receive any message from them. Roshni Sharma opines that the "absence of 'Post Office' from a country symbolizes the concealing of a

person's existence from the world" (217). The silence in this country is so perpetual and eerie it seems even the muezzin is dead; no Call to Prayer is heard. This ghostly figure is engulfed in the confusion and concern about those who left with "feeling of rapture and fragmentation" (Mehra 122). The speaker throughout the poem is concerned about his lost friend whether being alive. The speaker in the poem has "Phantom heart" asked to "pray" "be faithful" and bear the "pain." And the poem ends at embarrassingly bold note, "mad heart be brave;" Amitav Gosh argues that he "knew of no one else who would even conceive of publishing a line like" this (2). The unsent letters on both sides are "a shrine of words." Similarly, the poem *The Floating Post Office* is preoccupied with "word" and "letters", repeatedly used throughout the poem.

Agha Shahid Ali "always felt the historical sensibility related to the condition of Kashmir. His poetry is the record of social history in which not his grief but the grief of the whole Kashmir comes collectively. Sometime not the history of Kashmir only but forgotten historical figures come metaphorically into his descriptions" (Mishra 3). Mehra points out that "the poet raises his voice of protest against political repression, as well as ignorance on the part of the government but the main focus is on the plight of innocent people dying in the valley" (122). It is futile to debate whether Ali was a Kashmiri-nationalist poet as few people have argued about it, however, it is more simple and clear that Ali wanted and gave voice to suppressed people who have been silenced by gun and high military presence. He was concerned with the plight of ordinary Kashmiris who suffered in the war torn state, therefore, he highlighted the atrocities and acts of violence suffered by common people. Ali's poetry is an "elegiac tribute to Kashmir as a 'Paradise Lost'" (Khurshid 2), and an amalgamation of images of innocence, beauty and violence.

While Agha Shahid Ali lived all his life in America "the trouble back home in Kashmir pained Ali immensely and he did what all a poet could—compose and create beautiful poetry" (Noori 4124). Amitav Gosh while recalling the cherished moments spent with Shahid says in his essay *The Ghat of the Only World* that "current plight represented for him the failure of the emancipatory promise of nationhood and the extinction of the pluralistic ideal that had been so dear to intellectuals of his father's generation" (14). "The pain can be excruciating as the exiled, cut off from familiar culture and landscape, as well as from families and associates, lives in a state of dislocation and dispossession," writes Sarah Wetzel-Fishman a poet and essayist, in a review of *Veiled Suite* (2009) and adds that "newness that Agha Shahid Ali created emerged from the chaos of Kashmir."

Kashmir “in Ali’s works often takes the form of a remembered or imagined homeland that is not a recognized nation and has been continuously suffering warfare. Instead of being ‘collaborative’ or ‘competing’ with the world, the home in his poems epitomizes the world’s traumatic history and ongoing present” (Mai 26-27). “My first key opens the door” says Shahid in his prose poem *Return to Harmony 3* and goes on to lament, “I pick up the dead phone, its number exiled from its instrument, a refugee among the forlorn numbers in some angry office on Exchange Road.” Exchange Road is a busy street in the heart of Srinagar, Lalchowk, there is certainly no rush there, and all offices situated there seem to be in solemn and angry disposition. Caleb Agnew points out that “his forms assemble the pieces of an elegiac poetics around exile, in which return to the absent homeland is repeatedly denied through the repetition of naming, as the incessant turn to ‘Kashmir’ loses its symbolic valence in favor of an incantatory resonance, foregrounding the loss of each invocation.” And Woodland argues that Shahid’s poetry “remains strongly marked by a thematics of nostalgia and return and does not explicitly acknowledge the gaps that divide” it (250).

## CONCLUSION

Shahid wrote most beautiful poetry while poeticizing violence and horror which took place in Kashmir, as pointed out by Amitav Ghosh, but is never a pessimistic poet, neither his stand in poetry was a political one. “Shahid’s main contributions to contemporary poetry was a joyful embrace of writing in poetic form while simultaneously being free from the political and artistic baggage that might ordinary be seen to come from such as aesthetic allegiance” (Kazim Ali 5). His poems are compassionate, full of human heart longing for a place “spread across broken nations” and “O! Forever/ and forever it should last,” as Shahid wishes in *Ghazal*. Agha Shahid Ali was a harbinger of peaceful Kashmir with Shalimar Garden and Zaberwan in its full beauty, Jhelum with emerald water and houseboats with shining lights at evening.

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