

Agha Shahid Ali and His Penetrating Voice Echoing Unheard Kashmir.

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***Abstract:** Agha Shahid Ali was born in New Delhi on Feb 4, 1949. He grew up in Kashmir, returned to New Delhi to complete his MA in DU. He authored several collections of poetry: Bone Sculpture, In Memory of Begum Akhtar and Other Poems, The Half- Inch Himalayas, A Walk Through the Yellow Pages, A Nostalgist's Map of America, The Beloved Witness : Selected Poems, The Country Without a Post office etc. Like many of the greatest contemporary writers, it is not easy to define Shahid's nationality. He has a transgeographical background as a Kashmiri, Indian and American. The young Shahid went through phases of demonstrating belief in both Christianity and Hinduism and his liberal family was liberal about this. The Country Without a Post Office portrays many of the atrocities like rapes, curfews, tortures, imprisonments, murders, custodial deaths by the Indian forces as a mark of retaliation to the beginning of new phase of insurgency in Kashmir in early 90's.*

Keywords: Agha Shahid Ali, Penetrating Voice, Echoing Unheard Kashmir.

I Introduction:

Agha Shahid Ali, the great Kashmiri-American modern poet is bestowed to thematise the sense of loss and longing. Although he sojourned in Kashmir for a very small time, yet he has a deep sense of belonging to this land only; in New Delhi and America he found himself an . In his early youth some circumstances took him away from his motherland that made a trauma on his psyche. Nevertheless, his immigration was a delectable experience. He succeeded in blending himself with new cultural, social and psychological environment. But he was a silent sufferer. There was always the feeling of nostalgia, a sense of loss and anxiety stitched to the core of his heart. He was a citizen of the United States but his seldom visits to Kashmir and the frequent contacts with his friends and relatives kept him always conscious of the miserable life of Kashmir.

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So the way Shahid has delineated the wars, bloodshed, devastation, muddle, chaos and confusion that dominated the Kashmir of 90's, has never been portrayed by any writer who witnessed the situation as such. As in his masterpiece, *The Country Without a Post Office*, he provides with a handful of recurring phrases, images and epithets, where each word even the title of the collection itself is a poem. In one of his great poems, "I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight", the imagination caught by the poet astonishes one and the art of unveiling those mysterious, heart aching and unheard happenings of Kashmir is worth praising. Events in Kashmir are described from different points of view in order to shed broad light on Kashmir situation. For example, the death of a young innocent Kashmir at the hands of Indian security forces is related from the perspective of family members, friends and the narrator. Certain

images are repeated several times in the text. Basharat Peer's great memoir, *Curfewed Nights*, with myriads of inspiring and heart rending tragedies doesn't melt one as much as these lines of Shahid:

*The naked boy screaming, I know
nothing*

Or

Don't tell my father I have died

or

*I won't tell your father you have
died, Rizwan.*

but where has your shadow fallen

(p.178/179)

The poem invites an intertextual reading by taking as its epigraph the lines of Yeats's "Easter 16". Like Yeats the poet expresses his profound anxiety about nation's future and the poet's role in it.

Shahid's mother's death because of malignant tumour that consumed the poet's too later, the death of his alter ego Begum Akhter, the ideal singer and the separation from his homeland which was utterly in conflagration that time made a sad confluence of all ruthless situations in his life. This all accumulated in his soul and inflicted an incurable wound on his psyche. For Shahid immigration is synonymous with rootlessness and homelessness. Shahid suffered much being an exile. He says, "I am not an exile technically, because I haven't been kicked out of any place, but temperamentally I would say I'm an exile because it has an emotional resonance, the term exile does. The ability to inhabit several historical and national backgrounds simultaneously makes up the exilic temperament a lot". It is only Shahid who can say that the dark mountains which envelope Kashmir, have been turned into glass. He is the only poet who successfully resurrected the dead Kashmir in the

Western culture by his medium of communication, English, which is the language of the globe. Shahid's exile in real sense made him an exquisite artist and through his undying art he revived his memories. The exile is productive for the writers as observed by Eaglaton. Shahid's love for his roots and a sense of longing, becoming and belonging impelled him to build an imaginary homeland from the fragments of memories of his native land. About Shahid's religion some critics express doubtful notions, but his true religion was humanism. He was no bigot or fundamentalist. He was a friend, of friends, brother of brothers and a lover of mankind. Shahid was himself the love, a feeling for Kashmir that made him everything-rebellion. As Geoffrey Chaucer, the father of English poetry says: *Amor vincit omnia*, that is 'love conquers all'. So Shahid being love conquered everything to prove the pristine innocence and beauty of his valley being an expatriate writer. Shahid's writings presented concerns of what Edward Said, calls, "not only of geographical distinction but also a whole sense of interests". Being an exile, refuge and immigrant he explored new ways of belonging and of his broken identity. To Keat's definition of a real poet, Shahid was obviously so:

The poet is a sage, a humanist, physician to all men

Home in Ali's poems often takes the form of a reverberate or imagined homeland_ the country without a post office that is not a recognised nation and has been continuously suffering. Ali's compassionate cosmopolitanism in *The Country Without a Post Office* emphasises the possibility and importance of multiple concern The poem's concern for a war- torn home extends to many other locations around the world. The poems in the collection delineate Kashmir as a devastated land and more importantly, a place linked to other locations also struggling for peace and hope . As a writer he had a great experience of migration, the pain and piognance of motherland. He reinvented home more successfully than Salman Rushdie, Lakshmi Gill, Yasmeen Gonerative, Vikram Seth or R.K Ramanaujan. Shahid's poetry acts as a bridge connecting England and Kashmir. India acts a strong pillar to this bridge (as a cause). Shahid as an exile always sought an emphatic assertion of identity and centrality that he somehow lost somewhere. His extraordinary love and affection with the birthplace is beautifully expressed in his poem, " Postcard From Kashmir". The pang of pain that he lulled inside his heart gave ultimately birth to an immortal art. As he writes:

***Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox
my home a neat four by six inches***

Or

***This is home and this is the closest
I'll ever be to home
(p.29)***

The speaker is denationalised and finds himself without identity. He attempts to link an old home that is no longer home to a new home that never feels quite like home. He regrets three torments: the regret of ever having left home ; the rejection of feeling an outsider, and the struggle of coming to terms with the changes that would have inevitably occurred in his absence. He is harshly awakened to the reality of his displacement from home as he sees that all that is left of Kashmir heritage is 4/6" which is now only depiction of it .

Shahid is a poet of Kashmir and we must celebrate him royally and measure the quintessential significance of his poetry. Unfortunately, majority of the people are ignorant of his divinity and dedication . So he is easy for us to decode as far as our personal gamut of experience and cognitive potency is concerned. In his demotic language he portrays artistically and imaginatively the havoc and dishevelment of his country (Kashmir) that gives a sudden jolt to a sensitive reader. As in the poem, " I See Kashmir From New Delhi at Midnight ,he says:

From Zero Bridge

***a shadow chased by searchlights is running
away to find its body. On the edge
of the cantonment, where Gupkar road ends
it shrinks almost into nothing ,..***

Or

***The shadow slips out, beckons console me
and somehow there, across five hundred miles
I am sheened in moonlight, in emptied Srinagar
but without any assurance for him.***

(p.178)

The lost identity of exilic figure is depicted through shadow which has lost the body it identifies itself with. The searchlights further emphasise the idea of quest for regaining the sense of self. The torture in prison and the removal of clothes is in a broader sense an invasion on the privacy of the individual. Physically Shahid lived elsewhere, but his heart always throbbed in Kashmir sharing the sufferings and adversities of his native land." The Last Saffron" is one such poem that gives us a testimony of his deep love for Kashmir. A few lines of the poem begin thus:

***I will die in autumn in Kashmir'
and the shadowed routine of each vein
will almost be news, the blood censored
for the Saffron Sun and The Times of Rain
will be sold in black, then destroyed,
invisibly at zero taxi stand.***

(p.181)

Kashmir is gushing through his veins. Kashmir is his orientation. As he delightfully out of deep love plays with the word Kashmir as:

***Let me cry out in that void, say it as I can. I write
on that void: Kashmir, kaschmir, Cashmere,
Qashmir, Cashmir, Cashmire, Cashmere,
Cachemire, Cushmeer, Cachmiere, Casmir. Or***

*Cauchemar in a sea of stories? Or: Kacmir,
Kaschemir, Kasmere,/ Kaschmire, Kasmir.
Kerseymere?
(p.171)*

Shahid's voice for Kashmir is, of course, passionate but the mood is mingled always with the ennui and melancholy. It brings tears into the eyes. The intense emotion and the burning imagination when shaken together by the poet put forth an extraordinary art creation. Shahid was a great master of poetic diction and the forms of penning down the beautiful thoughts together with the help of metaphysical unbounded imagination. As Amitabh Ghosh, his friend, praises his poetry as "lyrical and fiercely disciplined, engaged and yet deeply inward". The poetic symbolism and the poetic diction he has employed to make dumb Kashmir's voice penetrating, makes him truly a real gem. Agha's nostalgia is an uncontrollable emotion, a soaring desire and a groping ache for the valley whose love was buried in his heart, in his veins, in his mind and now in his verses. Kashmir, whose malaise deprived him of the felicity and the serenity but evoked in him the heavenly and immortal art which transcends all the barriers of time and place. Shahid uses mythology common to

Muslims, Jews and Christians. He takes up the Miltonic theme of Paradise Lost, and many of his poems deal with a Kashmiri's return, after many years away, to the paradise of his childhood, only to find that it has been irrevocably damaged. A frequent contrast is made between the heaven of memory and the present day hell.

III Conclusion:

Agha is certainly a celebrity in the United States but it is yet unfortunately the poor Kashmir, where he has been sunk into oblivion. Where his love and art is nearly ignored and not appreciated at all. All Kashmiris should be fan of him that even unlettered men should hail him and utter his lines unanimously, especially the lines he wrote for Kashmir—his native land, the paradise and the hell of 90's. Indeed Shahid's penetrating voice echoed an unheard Kashmir. He began as an immigrant poet, but when he died, he was a poet of international fame. He is one of the many resistant poets like Edward Syed, Iqbal Ali, Mahmood Darwesh, Fais Ahmad Faiz, all whom he cites and writes about. By the end of his life he has emerged as a voice that resonated carrying songs of Kashmir out to the world. He has made immortal the changing face of Kashmir.

References:

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