



## Topicality in Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry

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### ABSTRACT

Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001), the well-known Kashmiri-American poet, comes across as one who is intensely engaged with the tragic circumstances of his motherland. His poetry has deservedly won accolades from readers and critics alike. However, not much critical attention has been paid to the deep committedness of his poetry. As this paper argues, the essence of his poetry lies in its brilliant combination of the aesthetic and political. The tension between the personal and the historical generates new literary paradigms in Agha Shahid's poetry. The paper argues that a fresh critical framework can be formulated wherein Agha Shahid's poetry can be studied as actively engaging in the historical process of aligning with people's rising consciousness against violence and injustice.

Keywords: Agha Shahid Ali, Kashmir, Poetry, The Country without a Post Office, Conflict, Memory, Identity.

It is an undeniable fact that Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001), the eminent Kashmiri-American poet, had an unwavering commitment to the high aesthetics of art. However, in giving prominence to this undeniable facet of his poetry, critics, in the words of Claire Chambers, have "soft-pedalled the political message" of Agha Shahid's poetry (1). As Kashmiris come to terms with what they suffered in the last two decades, it is both imperative and pertinent to revisit the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali who poignantly rendered Kashmir's pain to the outside world in the tragic decade of 1990s when there were not many like him doing so. Agha Shahid Ali comes across as a poet who is intensely engaged with the tragic circumstances of his motherland. The feature of his poetry lies in its brilliant combination of the aesthetic and political. One is reminded of Prem Chand's famous remarks, "We have to change the standards of beauty" [Hamein husn ka mayaar badalna hoga], made at the opening Progressive Writers Conference in Lucknow in 1936. The tension between the personal and the historical generates new literary paradigms in Shahid's poetry. It is here that Agha Shahid takes the Kashmiri literary tradition to a new manifestation where his poetry can be studied, in the words of Barbara Harlow, as "actively engaging in the historical process of struggle against the [forces of] oppression, and assert thereby [its] own polemical historicity" (Harlow 37). Scholar and critic, Professor M L Raina's observation that Agha Shahid "has no ideological wares" comes into contention. Shahid is a witness, but this witness is not a "dehistoricized" witness, just poignantly reflecting on the horrors of human condition and existence. Agha Shahid is a chronicler of pain; but this pain is not a "dehistoricized" pain. The "waai waai" (suffering/lamentation) in Agha Shahid's poetry, or, for that matter, the waai waai of contemporary Kashmir cannot escape its immediate situatedness or circumstances; it is, by no means, an ahistorical or an existential cry articulated in perennial agony of human depravity. While being part of a historical process, Agha Shahid's poetry is "taking sides" against the forces of brutality, injustice, and oppression which have been reigning the lives of Kashmiris for too long now. Agha



Shahid's poetry is more akin to the poetry of the post-1948 Palestine and other such landscapes where reality was construed by oppression and daily struggle. These realities which Kashmir has been facing since 1990 get polished and reflected through Agha Shahid's literary craft and imagination. In this perspective, renowned writer and critic, Olive Senior argues: "Storytellers, poets, writers, have always found ways of confronting tyranny, especially in spaces where such actions are dangerous and deadly. Throughout the ages, writers have developed and employed myriad literary devices and explored the fullest limits of language through satire, magical realism, fantasy, fable and so on. Writers over the ages have found ways of talking about issues – like politics – without seeming to talk about them. The function is not to present the world as it is, but to present it in a new light through the narrative power of art" (Senior 2013). Poems of resistance engage in a radical critique of what Dorfman has called the "standard , uniform patterns" of culture, patterns, disseminated by the ideological domination of the powers (qtd. in Harlow 36).

Kashmiriyat, as a cultural identity, was given essence through the Sufi-mystic tradition through successive ages, but it also seems that Kashmiriyat as a standard analytical tool in studying the cultural politics of Kashmir has been rather too gaudy which provides a thick facade to serious political manipulations. Chitrlekha Zutshi locates and interrogates Kashmiriyat as a historical entity, asserting that Kashmiri regional identities have been far more ambiguous, and certainly more complex than the term Kashmiriyat would lead one to assume. Zutshi argues: "To suggest that a Kashmiri identity, Kashmiriyat, defined as a harmonious blending of religious cultures has somehow remained unchanged and an integral part of Kashmiri history over the centuries is a historical fallacy. Certainly, Kashmiri identities have followed a distinct trajectory depending on a host of factors, including state and economic structures, political culture, and the religious milieu at particular historical moments" (55) . Without questioning the humanist vision and idea of secular redemption in Agha Shahid's poetry, one can read his poem Farewell (addressed to one of his Kashmiri Pandit friends) as subtly highlighting the problematic proposition of Kashmiriyat:

At a certain point I lost track of you.

They make a desolation and call it peace (quotes this from Tacitus)

When you left even the stones were buried:

The defenceless would have no weapons...

My memory is again in the way of your history...

In the lake the arms of temples and mosques are locked in each other's reflections.

Have you soaked saffron to pour on them when they are

Found like this centuries later in this country

I have stitched to your shadow?

I am everything you lost. You won't forgive me.

My memory keeps getting in the way of your history.

There is nothing to forgive. You won't forgive me.

I hid my pain even from myself; i revealed my pain only to myself.

There is everything to forgive. You can't forgive me.

If only somehow you could have been mine,

What would not have been possible in the world?



According to Claire Chambers, the poem “speaks eloquently about the othering of the two sides in the Kashmiri conflict” (4). This “othering” segregated the identities or belongings during the early years of the armed conflict in Kashmir. By this way, Agha Shahid’s poetry is offering us alternatives to contest the culture patterns disseminated by the dominant powers. In his essay, “Midnight’s Children: Kashmir and the Politics of Identity,” Patrick Hogan distinguishes between two kinds of identity.

“Categorical identity”, he says is “one’s self-concept which in turn, comprises of the hierarchized series of categories like sex, ethnicity, race, religion, nationality and many others” (517), while “practical identity” perceives Kashmiri tradition as “the complex of habits, beliefs, and attitudes ... shared by all the inhabitants of Kashmir regardless of their religious affiliations” (528). In the 1990s in Kashmir, categorical identity was manifested in the beginnings of the movement for independent nationhood and had religion as its motivating force. The categorical identity of Kashmiris gets manifested in Ali’s poetry in his poems like Farewell. In his novel, *The Garden of Solitude*, which describes the story of displacement of Kashmiri Pandits from Kashmir valley, Siddhartha Gigoo also refers to the articulation of a new “cultural identity” by the proponents of new Kashmiri Muslim nationalism in the early years of the armed conflict (36).

In different ages, foreigners have given Kashmir many of its obsequious appellations: “Paradise on Earth”, “Solomon’s Garden”, “Happy Valley”, “Supremely Beautiful Woman”, “Switzerland of Asia”, to mention a few. In recent times, the epithets like Atoot Ang and Jugular Vein have been rhetorically canonized into the nationalist languages of India and Pakistan, respectively. These appellations have emanated from the orientaling and homogeneous tendencies of categorisation prevalent among the dominant discourses.:

I am writing to you from your far-off country.

Far even from us who live here

Where you no longer are.

Everyone carries his address in his pocket

At least his body will reach home. (TCWAP 29)

Kashmir’s history and people have been held hostage by the dominant foreign powers for too long now. Agha Shahid Ali refers to such Foucauldian panoptic states controlling the lives of Kashmiris in following lines, in his poem “Death-Row”:

Someone else in this world has been mentioning you,

Gathering news, itemizing your lives

For a file you’ll never see. (TCWAP 69)

The beauty of the valley, or, its appellation as an earthly paradise, is described by Agha Shahid in ironical terms. For Shahid, the image of heaven comes only through the memory. It comes in the form of a loss or a longing. He says in his poem Farewell :

I am being rowed through Paradise on a river of Hell

Here, the image of heaven has been conjoined with the image of hell to reflect the magnitude of the tragic situation of Kashmir. As Edward Said notes in the very beginning of his famous work, *Culture and Imperialism*, “Appeals to the past are among the commonest of strategies in interpretations of the present” (Said 1). The forays of memory into the past — to the times preceding the armed conflict, are contrasted with the descriptions of the present. This present is about oppression and stories filled with immense tragedies. This renders the physical beauty of the landscape irrelevant. In these moments of pain, it counts for nothing, while only turning into a silent witness of the site of human blood being splattered over the green grass. In this present, the



“paradise is bleeding”, the “city” is broken”, the “world is vanished”, the “graves are hurried with no names”, the “birds are silent”, the “post offices have died”, and the “history is deaf.” The assortment of these recurring images in Agha Shahid’s poetry reinforces a contestation of the flattering and homogeneous categorisation of Kashmir. He poignantly portrays the present plight of the so-called Paradise and its keepers:

You must have heard Rizwan was killed. Rizwan:

Guardian of the Gates of Paradise.

Only eighteen years old.

Yesterday at Hideout Cafe (everyone there asked about you),

A doctor – who had just treated a sixteen-year old boy released from an interrogation centre – said:

I want to ask the fortune tellers

Did anything in his line of Fate reveal that the webs of his hands would be cut with a knife? (TCWAP 29)

Don’t tell my father I have died, he says, and I follow him

Through blood on the road and hundreds of pairs of shoes the mourners left behind,

As they ran from the funeral, victims of the firing.

From windows we hear grieving mothers, and snow begins to fall on us, like ash.

Black on edges of flames, it cannot extinguish the neighbourhoods,

The homes set ablaze by midnight soldiers.

Kashmir is burning. (TCWAP 11)

In his prose poem, “Karbala: A History of the House of Sorrow”, Shahid compares the scenario of Kashmir of 1990s to the tragedy of Karbala:

Summer 1992 — when for two years Death had turned

Every day in Kashmir into some family’s Karbala. (72-73)

Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry seems to reflect the view that how poetry, without reducing its artistic quintessence, can be made as a medium of resistance to contest the contorted truths of oppressive power structures in the contemporary world. Shahid’s poetry therefore can be seen as both approximating and redefining the tradition which he inherited as Kashmiri poet. There has been a remarkable influence of Agha Shahid among the recent generation of Kashmiri English writers- both fiction and nonfiction writers. Even Kashmiri and Urdu writers are bearing his influence. Not only writers, we are also witnessing painters, cartoonists, calligraphers, musicians, etc using their respective artistic mediums to give voice to their suppressed aspirations numbed by the violence and oppression.

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