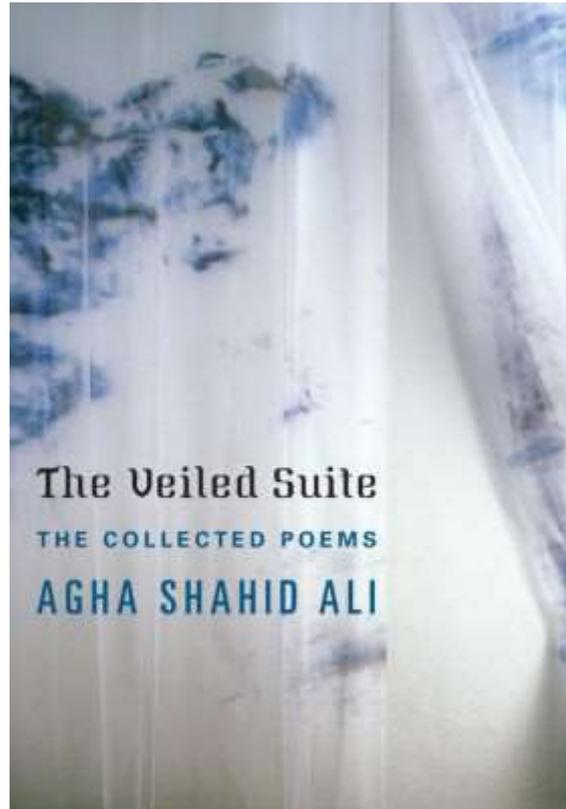


“The Diasporising of Home¹”: Exploring the Duality of “Home” in the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali

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Abstract

In the course of diaspora studies, the definition of the concepts of nation or nationhood, home or homeland and last but not the least, identity has changed a lot. Academicians like Avtar Brah has redefined and reconfigured the diasporic notion of home— an argument which has acquired a distinct place in the research on diaspora. They theorise home and suggest that the disputative perception of home can be discussed from both geographical and psychic points of view. Indian diasporic writers such as, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Daswani, Jhumpa Lahiri, A.K.Ramanujan, Agha Shahid Ali and so on, have represented this duality of home in their writings. The Indian-American diasporic poet Agha Shahid Ali has drawn on both Indian and American cultures simultaneously. As he expresses his poignant nostalgia and concern for India, his geographical home, he represents America not from the perspective of an outsider; rather, he views it as his second home—the fountain of his psychological solace. In this article, my purpose is to show how Shahid Ali has

dealt with this dual concept of home and reflected it in his poetic compositions successfully and artistically.

Keywords: Agha Shahid Ali, Diaspora, nation/nationhood, home/homeland, duality, India, America.

Introduction

The Indian born American poet Agha Shahid Ali's (1949-2001) poetry has been highly acclaimed because of their multifaceted and heterogeneous aspects and themes— political scenario of Kashmir, Indian ghazals, European classical music, Indian myths, American landscape and many more. Perhaps the greatest appreciation of Shahid's poetry comes from his friend and critic Daniel Hall who in the Foreword to *The Veiled Suite*, an anthology of Shahid's poems, compares his poetry to Eliot's *Four Quartets* because of their numerous approaches, declaring that they "are not incomprehensible, but inexhaustible; they reward rereading; they teach us and change us as we grow older with them" (17). Through this article, my purpose is to argue how Shahid Ali has dealt with the diasporic concept of 'home' and represented them in his poetry. To put it otherwise, this paper proposes to show how Shahid, as a diasporic subject, constitutes the binary proposition of 'home'— both India and America— through his poetic compositions.

Diaspora and Homeland: A Brief Overview

It cannot be denied that in the discourse of diaspora, the concept of 'homeland' or 'home' appears to be one of the most argumentative and intriguing issues. Theorizations of diaspora are concerned with the problematics of nation and nationhood. In the post-World War II scenario, the previous and conventional geographical concept of nation began to get eradicated, resulting in rethinking the idea of nationhood. With the independence of colonies and the practice of globalisation, the thought of nation has been remapped.

With the remapping of the concept of nation and nationhood, the diasporic meaning of the idea of home has expanded because in the discussion of diaspora, the notion of home or homeland can be interpreted from geographical and psychic perspectives, thereby modifying the general proposition of 'home' as simply one's land of birth or origin. It can be argued:

The concept of diaspora places the discourse of 'home' and 'dispersion' in creative tension, *inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins*. The problematic of 'home' and belonging may be integral to the diasporic condition, but now, when, and in what form questions surface, or how they are addressed, is specific to the history of particular diaspora. (Brah 189, italics in original)

The italicized part of the quotation of Brah's text clarifies the problematizing issue concerning the diasporic notion of home which suggests belonging as well as being. Brah differentiates between the two major disputative ideas of home, whereas one simply suggests "staking claim to a place as one's own" (190), the other denotes "feeling at home" (190). In other words, the first argument echoes the typical assumption of descent or ancestry but the second one pays attention to the construction of home from the lived experience of the diasporic subject, thereby endeavouring to negate the stereotyped abstraction of home.

In order to clarify the diasporic concept of 'home', we should have a study of certain diasporas and their history. Each and every diaspora is related to its historical background whatever it may be. The study of diaspora originates from the discussion of the Jewish experience under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, the authoritarian Babylonian king who coerced the Jews in 586 BC to leave Egypt,

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their land of origin and to “desert the land ‘promised’ to them by God to Moses and thereafter, the tradition suggests, forever became dispersed” (Cohen 2). Like the Jews, the African slaves shared the same fate when they were forcefully deported to Asia and the Middle East as a part of slave trade and later to America to work as labourers in the plantations². The deportation of Armenians from Byzantium (sixth century AD) and later the forceful expulsion of a huge number of Armenians by the Turks to Syria and Palestine followed by the massacres reiterate the same history of dispersion from home due to “a traumatic event in the homeland, to two or more foreign destinations” (Cohen 2). From this perspective, it cannot be ignored that to the Jews, African slaves and Armenians (and many more), the idea of home, homeland, origin and ancestry became the mechanism of trauma and violence. In other words, to those diasporic subjects, homeland “is linked to that recollected trauma that stands for the sign of having been wrenched from one’s mother (father) land” (Mishra 16). But at the same time, the migration of the Indians to the western countries to be recruited as indentured labourers, the trade diaspora of China and Lebanon and last but not the least, the voluntary migration of students, scholars, academicians and asylum-seekers to Britain and the USA utter a different history because many of them are capable of locating a homely atmosphere in the hostlands which encourage their individuality.

It is rather interesting to declare that in diaspora studies, the perception of home is a moving concept. It not only focuses on the origin but also on the real-life experience of the diasporic subject. In her article “Immigrants, Images and Identity: Visualising Homelands across Borders”, Cynthia J. Miller emphasizes this disputative theorization of home as she opines:

...places, and homelands by extension, are not merely inert backgrounds where peoples’ identities carve themselves out— already fully formed settings for action and performance. They are ‘moving targets’ if you will, made in the process of constructing and contesting identities, and deeply implicated in the politics of being and belonging. (286)

The theoretical discourse of diaspora, therefore, negates the prevailing thought of home that denotes fixed origin of an immigrant; instead, it argues that the idea of home is constructed and reconstructed according to the real-life experience of the migrant.

Brah sums up the diasporic discourse of home from two points of view: “a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination” (188) and “the lived experience of a locality” (188-189). While focusing on the first one, it can be assumed that to an immigrant, it is rather impossible to return to the mythic homeland. What appears is “the idealization of the real or putative ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation” (Cohen 104). To go back to the geographical homeland does not mean to relocate and recuperate the mythical and idealized perception of home. This desire for home and this attempt to recover the idealized and utopian concept of home is akin to what Prof. Mishra thinks “the diasporic imaginary” (5). By the quoted expression, Mishra refers to “any ethnic enclave in a nation-state that defines itself, consciously, unconsciously or through self-evident or implied political coercion, as a group that lives in displacement” (14). On the other side, Brah’s second concept of ‘home’ assures that the diasporic idea of home is not static at all; rather, it reiterates the definition of home as a concept that is kinetic as it varies according to the experiences of the immigrants themselves.

India: Home, Memory, Nostalgia

Let me cry out in that void, say it as I can. I write on that void: Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir, Cahmir, Cashmire, Kashmere, Cachemire, Cushmeer, Cashmiere,

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Casimir. Or *Cauchemar* in a sea of stories? Or: Kacmir, Kaschemir, Kasmere, Kachmire, Kashmir. Kerseymere? (“The Blessed Word: A Prologue”, 171, italics in original)

The representation of Kashmir, Shahid’s land of birth, under the garb of several spellings and pronunciations claims his deep love for and attachment to Kashmir. He thinks that as a poet it is his responsibility “to glorify and objectify the love for his motherland— Kashmir” (Kacker 69) through his poetry. Throughout his literary career he attempts to sketch the natural beauty of the Himalayas, lakes, rivers, Indian classical music, an apt combination of myths of Hindu and Islam of his homeland.

In his poem “Postcard from Kashmir” (from *The Half-Inch Himalayas*)³, he addresses Kashmir as “my home” (29) and “this is home” (29). The postcard sent from Kashmir leads him to recollect the beauty of the natural surroundings of Kashmir. To quote:

When I return,
the colors won’t be so brilliant,
the Jhelum’s waters so clean,
so ultramarine. My love
so overexposed. (29)

The poet knows for sure that even though he will be able to return to the geographical territory of India, he will fail to recover his homeland or the mythic beauty of homeland as he used to do before his migration to America. The poet is aware of his limitation. He expresses his nostalgia and simultaneously a sense of loss— the two factors which are common to the immigrants searching for root in their place of origin.

Although Shahid has lived in America since 1976 and spent more than two decades in the first world country like America, he fails to become an American; rather, he feels his motherland which always remains in his blood, his spirit and in his soul. He is physically away from Kashmir, but Kashmir is never away from his inner self. It is argued that his poems “celebrate in all shades, the character and role of Kashmir. Simply, Kashmir could be witnessed in background and foreground, in twists and turns, in all tones and shades. Sketching the picture of Kashmir Ali sets various perspectives in his poems” (Kacker 72).

It is captivating indeed to locate that Ali not only idealizes Kashmir but also expresses his concern for Kashmir because its heavenly beauty is destroyed by man-made politics. In his poem “The Country without a Post Office”, the poet shows his distress and disturbance due to political turmoil in Kashmir that has left negative impact upon its people and their way of life and has hindered the entire process of communication. As Ali says:

His fingerprints cancel black stamps
in that archive for letters with doomed
addresses, each house buried or empty.
Empty? Because so many fled, ran away,
and became refugees there, in the plains,
where they must now will a final dewfall
to turn the mountains to glass.
...
... Now every night we bury

our houses— and theirs, the ones left empty. (202)

The poet is capable of portraying a true picture of Kashmir that is now politically vulnerable. His representation of Kashmir both as a paradise on earth and then as a place that is politically downtrodden exclaims the contesting appearance of Kashmir, his geographical homeland to which he belongs.

Memory plays an important part in Ali's evocation of homeland. Ali was born in New Delhi and then grew up in Kashmir. So, in his poetry, both Kashmir and Delhi play the role of homeland(s). In his poem "Snowman", he speaks about his ancestor who was "a man of Himalayan snow" (34) -- a man who comes from Samarkand to Kashmir. He proudly declares -- "generations of snowmen on my back" (34), and thus sings panegyric on his ancestors who impose upon him the responsibility of carrying out the spirit of a snowman— an identity which he has gained as a part of his inheritance.

In his poetry "Cracked Portraits", he undertakes a journey to his family history spoken through the family portrait— through "the soundless/ words of my ancestors" (37). The representation of four generations— his "grandfather's painted grandfather" (35), his great-grandfather, grandfather and his father— and the minute description of their different tastes draw a picture of an Indian family. His reference to grandfather's fascination for the Koran in Arabic inscription, great-grandfather's vigorous spirit and interest in gramophone and Malika Pukhraj's songs, grandfather's involvement in the philosophy of Socrates and finally his father's articulation of "Lenin's love of Beethoven" (37) and then turning to Gandhi, and at the same time, the pictorial description of a Kashmiri household suggests Ali's effort to excavate his ancestry, his attachment to his family and root like a conscious historian. In another poetry, "A Lost Memory of Delhi", he paints the conjugal lives of his parents who "always faded in photograph/ in the family album" (30). His representation is not merely poetic but also truly artistic. Like a successful artist, he blurs the lacuna between the present and the past, thereby providing us with a proof of his poetic talent.

Apart from drawing the panorama of natural beauty of his motherland, Shahid Ali is also in his quest for Indian myths and Indian traditions. In "The Seasons of the Plain", the poet refers to his mother who alludes to Siddheshwari and Rasoolan, two thumri-singers of Benares, who express their devotion for Krishna, the "blue-god" (44). Ali's allusion to the Hindu myth of Sri Krishna's separation from Radha proves his depth in Hindu mythology. He also makes a mention of Heer and Ranjha, the legendary lovers, and "their love forbidden" (44). Ghalib's ghazals become the theme of his poem "A Butcher". Ghazals appear to be a significant segment of Ali's poetic oeuvre which carries the evidence of his consciousness of Indian musical gharanas. His allusion to both Hindu and Muslim myths as an integral part of the lives of Indian people draws the secular image of his motherland— an image that a diasporic writer can proudly cherish throughout his life.

America: Home away from Home

America and India were the two poles of his life, and he was at home in both, a way that was utterly easeful and unproblematic. (Ghosh, qtd. in Islam, 258)

Whereas Shahid Ali grows up in Kashmir and Delhi, it is in America where his poetic talent flourishes; if India is his geographical home, America provides him with homeliness. In other words, if Kashmir gives him solace as his motherland, America makes him a romantic poet who admires the nature of his second home. Rootlessness or homelessness that is prevalent among the immigrants in diaspora is absent in Ali; rather, he feels rooted both in India and the USA. In his poem "Flight from Houston in January", the romantic ambience of America comes to the fore through the view of a romantic genius:

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If clouds were boats,
one would row them
with rods of lightning
across the world.

...

...the sun
touched with Mexico...
We drop through thousands
of feet of clouds,
the wings threshing them
like cotton for quilts.
Suddenly, the white hills
of Pittsburgh...(69)

The depiction of clouds floating in the firmament, warm sunshine, “the white hills/ of Pittsburgh” (69), the flight’s crossing “ever-white trees/ found on Christmas cards” (70) and so on confirms the poet’s attempt to embrace America as his home.

A Nostalgist’s Map of America is perhaps the most authentic representation of America of Shahid Ali, the poet, in whose writings “North American landscape is not filtered through the eyes of an outsider” (Islam 265); rather, it can be said that Ali’s “detailed and multifaceted representation weaves through the historical, cultural and literary legacies of the United States, and Ali speaks as one who not only knows the land’s myriad narratives, but as one who can speak from its narratives” (Islam 265). In the Preface to *The Veiled Suite*, Daniel Hall regards his anthology *A Nostalgist’s Map of America* as his “American book” (16) that portrays the American scenario, its landscape, its multifarious dimensions through the perspective of an Indian diasporic poet who is capable of getting himself involved in the narrative of his adopted home and representing America from the core of his heart.

In “Leaving Sonora”, Ali portrays the landscape of the Sonoran Desert, where the Hohokam, a tribe, has been living for more than 1500 years. Even though at first, the poet thinks that in the desert only the “perished tribes live” (116), later he modifies his belief when he sees a tribal woman beautiful against the landscape and her voice is “low as summer thunder” (116). He represents the sanctity of the desert which demands fidelity and faithfulness from all the people including “those who no longer exist” (116).

In his poem “I Dream I return to Tucson in the Monsoons”, in his trance, the poet is totally unconscious of the dichotomy between illusion and reality because the two merge into each other. America offers him such experiences that living in America makes him feel that his journey is from one homeland to another. Ali crafts “A Nostalgist’s Map of America” which “captures the death of a lover and that exists as an elegy— the metaphorical landscape of death and the literal landscape of Pennsylvania become the poetic landscape of one of the America’s most noted writers” (Islam 265). He writes this poem in memory of his friend, Philip Paul Orlando. While visiting Pennsylvania, the poet wants to create Evanescence— an imaginary and literary landscape as described in Emily Dickinson’s poem “A Route of Evanescence”. The poet wishes that he may create this literary territory and asks his friend to visit him “disguised in the climate of Southern California” (119-120). In this elegy, he expresses his nostalgia, futile hope and sense of loss for his American friend.

In “Snow on the Desert”, again his romantic spirit comes back. During his driving to Tucson International along with his sister, Ali visualises nature in a different manner:

...the snow, which had fallen all night, now
sun-dazzled, blinded us, the earth whitened
out, as if by cocaine, the desert’s plants,
its mineral-hard colors extinguished,
wine frozen in the veins of the cactus. (164)

The projection of the saguaros plants as ‘human’ (165) which can produce “sacred wine” (164), the snowy-covered road as ‘glass’ (165), the sky as “relentlessly sapphire” (165) makes Ali as a romantic genius who becomes gradually rooted in the America soil.

Conclusion

Even though Ali is a diasporic poet, the concept of the loss of home and the problems of constructing one’s identity in his host-land which are common in diaspora are hardly reflected in his poetry. He leaves India, his homeland and finds out another home in the USA. The nature and natural surroundings of America never appear to be bizarre and weird to Ali; instead, he glorifies and romanticizes it as he is accustomed to do in the case of India. He never suffers from the problems of hyphenated identity; rather, he celebrates “his hyphenated existence by equally embracing and using both North America and India as muses for his poetry” (Islam 258).

Notes:

1. The expression “The Diasporising of home” used in the title of the article has been taken from Avtar Brah’s epoch-making book, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, page 187.
2. A detailed study of the history of immigration and diaspora shows the classification and categorization of several diasporas according to their nature and characteristics -- victim diaspora, labour diaspora, imperial diaspora, trade diaspora and last but not the least, de-territorialized diaspora.
3. All the quotations from the poems of Agha Shahid Ali have been taken from *The Veiled Suite: The Collected Poems*, an anthology of his selected poems from several volumes of poetry.

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