
LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 14:5 May 2014

ISSN 1930-2940

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Agha Shahid Ali:

A Quasi-subaltern Voice from the Margins of the Wounded Valley

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Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001)

Courtesy: http://www.umass.edu/umassmag/archives/1998/spring_98/spg98_books_ali.html

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Abstract

Resistance literature has emerged as a sublime counter-discourse against the mainstream literature, especially from the conflict zones of the world. This literature celebrates mini-narratives, employs innovative narrative styles, hybrid identities and bizarre themes, etc. Kashmir, the paradise on earth, too has produced some prominent voices in Resistance literature. However, the hostile atmosphere in the Valley has almost dangerously subalternised the true voices of Kashmir. Agha Shahid Ali has ventriloquised the voice of the margins, but still how far it can be the true voice of the subaltern people will be the focus of discussion in this paper.

Key Words: Resistance literature; subaltern discourse; quasi-subaltern; territorial desire and conflict zone, etc.

Introduction

Resistance literature recently has emerged as a new variety of English literature. It is especially gaining currency, owing to the various types of military aggressions, outbreak of militancy and other types of political turmoil. It is closely interlinked with the Subaltern discourse. The Subaltern discourse, too, of late has been a hot debate. Generally believed, it simply argues that the oppressed people can't speak. If however they speak, they do that through their bodies. They can't represent themselves. They have to be represented but not romanticised. The humane discourse has been made gender specific. It has, however, the potential to serve the cause of oppressed people irrespective of gender, class and race.

In the case of Kashmir, the homeland of Agha Shahid Ali, the Subaltern discourse seemingly seems to expose the various discursive practices that have subalternized the people of Kashmir. Kashmir is best described by Ananya Jahanara Kabir as: "Locked within the inhospitable terrain, but professed by all to be a singularly beautiful place, the Valley has, in the course of the twentieth century, emerged as a bone of contention for three nationalisms, Indian, Pakistani and aspirant Kashmiri" (1). Four deadly wars have been fought so far by India and Pakistan to gain the territorial control of the Valley. The situation has worsened dangerously, especially after the surfacing of militancy as a response to the alleged vote rigging of 1987, and to force the authorities to fulfill the promises that were made to Kashmiris by both India and Pakistan. Often, Kashmir has become the nuclear flash point, especially after 1998 when both the bordering countries achieved nuclear status.

The literary response by Kashmiri writers in such a set-up, to write from a sandwiched position between the clashing interests of two nations, and exclusively on behalf of endangered Kashmiri denizens has been negligibly less. Basharat Peer's *The Curfewed Nights*, Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator*, and Rahul Pandita's *Our Moon has Blood Clots* are some of the prominent voices that claim to represent the subaltern voices of Jammu & Kashmir.

Agha Shahid Ali's Voice - Literary Writing with the Color of Cultural Rhythms

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Amid the imposed war and appalling situations, in reflecting the true aspirations and feelings of being Kashmiri, Agha Shahid Ali's voice, however, has been phenomenal. This voice has been first of its kind to initiate the literary writing with the color of cultural rhythms, but still it is just a representative voice. To the true voice, there is no access.

Ali, a Kashmiri-American poet, wrote much of his poetry in self-exile, and not while living in the subaltern zone. What he has tried is to rewrite the sense of self (Kashmir). Without being obnoxious and strange, his poetry clothes the Kashmiri-self afresh in English language. He seems to be having a perfect sense of a historian. The way he is able to describe the Srinagar of 1990s clearly reflects the feel of the subaltern denizens of the Valley:

Srinagar was under curfew/ The identity pass may or may not have helped in the
crackdown. Son after son— never to return from the night of torture — was taken
away.

Not the Equivalent of the Subaltern Voice

The tone and tenor of his poetry is engrossed with a sense of debunking the claims of civility of the major stakeholders of the region. The denigrated Kashmiri identity maligned in the biased narratives figures substantially broad and clear in Ali. But in no way it can be the equivalent of the subaltern voice. Nida Sajid writes, "Ali gifts us a Kashmir accessible only to him in a voice partitioned into many selves. Navigating the ever-shifting borders of language & history in order to write:

And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee—

God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight."

(Ali, Counter 40)

Ali seems to be not happy with the narratives that are loaded and controlled by the discursive pressures. Sajid opines, "These fleeting images of deaf parents, blood-soaked newspapers and a forgotten place of an exiled king are all signposts for the nation-state's territorial desire for Kashmir that has translated into an unfulfilled promise from the valley." (89)

Beyond the Religious Intolerance and Hate

Ali writes beyond the religious intolerance and hate. Through his poetic outpourings, the shattered subaltern psyche is graphically painted in words. He is deeply haunted by the disheartening memories of the pundit exodus, which is reflected in the lines:

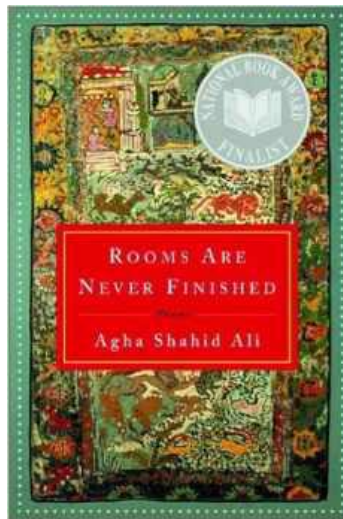
When you left even the stones were buried:

The defenseless would have no weapons.

Ali's homeland is befogged by bogus ideologies that prevent the subaltern denizens from speaking their true selves. Ali tries to put forth the subaltern voice in the landscape of his poetry, and this novelty emerges from the chaos of Kashmir:

Srinagar hunches like a wild cat: lonely sentries, wretched in bunkers at the city's bridges far from their homes in the plains, licensed to kill.

(Ali, *The Blessed Word*)



Ali has tried his best to speak on behalf of the subalterns. In *Rooms are Never Finished*, Ali presents Kashmir as: "Karbala, the sacred site of battle and martyrdom in Islamic Shiite tradition, in order to underscore the loss of uncountable innocent lives in the quest for nationalist self-determination. Such revisionist religious imagery not only overcomes the strict communal boundaries in the Indian subcontinent by cathecting Kashmir as an object of impossible desires, it also opens up Kashmir as a "third country" for hybrid, transnational "citizens of imaginative webs formed by cross-national reading and rewriting" (Ramazani 354).

An Imaginary Homeland

Kashmir remains an imaginary homeland for Ali. He wrote of his barricaded home, the loss, the ghastly violence, the brutal killings in his homeland. There are personal strains and touches to his poems where he alludes to the marginalized voice, which suffers silently, and trembles his way back to the fire that seethes in his heart. His subtle but strong voice is that of resistance and expression which alludes to the metaphor of his homeland's continual and conflicting strife that has bloodied its soil:

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

(Ali, *Farewell*)

Ali mirrors the heartrending, yet true, plight of Kashmir to the outside world. His consciousness about his home's stark reality is an all-pervasive theme that he blends with the rhythms of despair and hope, desire and longing, tears and smiles. His voice does not romanticize or exaggerates but it is a compelling voice of protest against the continued suppression and exploitation, an entire era of violence, demonstration and a choking freedom. He portrays the fire of brutality through the image of Rizwan, who is the recurrent symbol in his poems, who watered the land with his blood as thousands of Rizwans fell to fires burning and bullets charging:

"Rizwan, it's you, Rizwan, it's you," I cry out
As he steps closer, the sleeves of his phiren torn.
"Each night put Kashmir in your dreams," he says,
Then touches me, his hands crusted with snow,
Whispers, "I have been cold a long, long time."
"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.

(Ali, I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight.)

A Gallery of Emotions

Agha Shahid Ali's poetry is a dazzling display of a gallery of emotions attached to Kashmir, depicting pain, suffering, social dissent, political turmoil, and tragedies that have remained unsaid and unheard. Ali speaks from the bottom of the marginality and gives a reverberating strong voice to the hapless plight of Kashmir, stirring hearts and minds, far across

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the oceans together. But an important unsettling query remains whether his voice is in any way the true subaltern voice, to which the answer is implicitly ambivalent. Because he is writing in English plus has access to the metropolitan center. But, perhaps, if he had remained in Kashmir, he would not have been known to the world at all.

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