

AGHA SHAHID ALI'S NOSTALGIC FEELINGS THROUGH "THE COUNTRY WITHOUT A POST OFFICE"

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ABSTRACT

In his poetic book *"The Country without a Post Office"* Agha Shahid Ali expresses his diasporic consciousness for his homeland and its people for whom he can do nothing except to present in his poetry. So, poet's motherland occurs in his poems not only as a place that was paradise once, but which is turned in to hell at present by different agencies, poet hopes that peace will return, as spring may return. The focus of this paper will be the nostalgic feelings of Agha Shahid Ali about his mother land Kashmir, which was once a time called Paradise on the earth.

KEYWORDS: The Country without a Post Office, Diasporic Consciousness, Homeland, Motherland, Paradise, Hell

INTRODUCTION

"The Country without a Post Office" was originally called *"Kashmir without a Post Office"*. The first title of the poem indicates that this poem is directly written on Kashmir situation of 1990, which the poet expresses as diasporic consciousness. In Kashmir post offices had been closed for several months in 1990, which is directly expressed by the poet in this poem. In that situation a friend of the Ali's father used to watch the post office from his house and he had observed the daily condition of the post office that there was a mountain of letters but nobody was picking them. He felt the diasporic consciousness for his motherland as a true son of the mother country. Carol Muske (2002) in Dukes of the Los Angeles Times wrote: *"What is timeless in these poems is the power of grief – sheer cliffs and drops of despair that he masters and spins into verse with astonishing technical virtuosity."*

The book *"The Country without a Post Office"* starts with prologue, *"The Blessed word: A Prologue,"* is in the form of a prose poem and opens with an epigraph, quoting Russian poet Osip Mandelstam as: *"We shall meet again, in Petersburg / as though we had buried the sun there."* This extract written in 1920s, express Mandelstam's diaspora for his civil war devastated city where hope may be recovered. Then Agha Shahid expresses his diasporic feelings by long note saying:

From Kashmir, that Vale where the Titans sought refuge, where, just before Saturn began to speak to Thea, "There was a listening fear in her regard / as if calamity had but begun," from there: "When you leave home in the morning, you never know if you'll return." "We shall meet again, in Srinagar," I want to answer Irfan. But such a promise? I make it in Mandelstam's velvet dark, in the black velvet Void. (Ali: 2013, 1)

'Home' in Ali's poetry depicts an 'imaginary homeland' because he spend most of his life in exile i.e. away from his 'home' and his diasporic consciousness compels him for 'imaginary homeland'. So, he appeals to this 'imaginary homeland' by various loving names:

Let me cry out in that void, say it as I can. I write on that void: Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir, Cashmir, Cashmire, Kashmiere, Cachemire, Cushmeer, Cachmiere, and Casmir. Or *Cawhemar* in a sea of stories? Or: Kacmir, Kaschemir, Kasmere, Kachmire, Kasmir. Kerseymere? (Ali: 2013, 2)

The poet correlates his diasporic consciousness with the past and remembers the same violence conditions of Kashmir at the time of Moghul rule. He feels nostalgic about the tragic story of 'Habba Khatun' whose husband Yousif Shah was exiled by Akbar. Ali correlates the diasporic consciousness of Yousif Shah with his own even though he was exiled by force but poet had self-exile; still both have the same diasporic feelings. He even feels the sad diaspora feelings in the musice of Habba Khatun.

And will the blessed women rub the ashes together? Each fall they gather *chinar* leaves, singing what the hills have reechoed for four hundred years, the songs of Habba Khatun, the peasant girl who became the queen. When her husband was exiled from the Valley by the Moghul king Akbar, she went among the people with her. sorrow. Her grief, alive to this day, in her own roused the people into frenzied opposition to Moghul rule. And since then Kashmir has never been free.

And will the blessed women rub the ashes together? Each fall, they sing her songs. They create their rustic fuel for winter: they set fire to I the leaves, sprinkle water on them as they burn, and transform them into fragile coals. (Ali: 2013, 2)

This poem "*The Blessed Word: A Prologue*" has dedicated by Ali to his friend Irfan Husan. He had mentioned the name of place of his home land as, "*Srinagar*", "*Zero Bridge*", "*Jhelum*" etc, for the expression of his diasporic feelings:

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... while the Jhelum flows under them, sometimes with a dismembered body. On Zero Bridge the jeeps rush by. The candles go out as travelers, unable to light up the velvet Void.

What is the blessed word? Mandelstam gives no clue. One day the Kashmiris will pronounce that word truly for the first time. (Ali: 2013, 3)

The opening poem of the book "*Farewell*" which is, dedicated to Patricia O' Neill is written in one line stanzas, and this poem mourns the exile of Kashmiri pundits from their homeland. He feels diasporic for the exile of them, as he knows that he has "lost track" of them because he will not be able to find them now in motherland Kashmir. He warns that by their exile there would be no "*peace*" but would be more chorus and confusion and the same happen. He expresses as:

At a certain point I lost track of you.

They make a desolation and call it peace. (Ali: 2013, 7)

In this poem he feels diasporic consciousness not only about his own religion Islam but also about his motherlands another major religion Hindu due to his secular thoughts. He feels nostalgic about the wretched condition of "*temples and mosques*" which are place of worship of Pundits and Muslims respectively:

In the lake of the arms of temples and mosques are locked
in each other's reflections. (Ali: 2013, 8)

The poem "*I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight*" has been dedicated by Shahid Ali to Molvi Abdul Hai.

This poem starts with an extract from William Butler Yeats' poem "Easter 1916" where the Irish poet speaks of how he has "met them at the break of day/ Coming with vivid faces", clearly submitting to his diaspora consciousness from the past who have died in their resist for the Easter Uprising. "A terrible beauty is born", that renowned renounce from the poem by Yeats appears nearly be applicable here in Shahid's poem. In this poem the death of a Kashmiri boy is narrated from the viewpoint of his nears and dears. Rizwan who is appears as a shadow and is in search of his body from the burning valley. The poet expresses his diaspora consciousness about the killing of innocent masses and self-exile of Kashmiri Pundits in groups. Rizwan's death is symbolic for the mass killing of Kashmir by different agencies. He represents one of the so many youths who have been killed without having any knowledge to their family. In this poem Ali speaks of Srinagar in the very first stanza in the first canto of the poem. Different its universal images as activity of either political unrest, or as a tourist destination full of houseboats and lakes, the image that Ali invokes of the city is one of calm personified. He says:

One must wear jeweled ice in dry plains
 to will the distant mountains to glass.
 The city from where no news can come
 is now so visible in its curfewed night
 that the worst is precise:
 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, is
 nothing by Interrogation gates
 so it can slip, unseen, into the cells:
 Drippings from a suspended burning tire
 are falling on the back of a prisoner,
 the naked boy screaming, "I know nothing." (Ali: 2013, 10)

The poem "*The Last Saffron*" has been dedicated to Vidur Wazir by Ali. In this poem the poet depicts his nostalgic feelings about his motherland through his diasporic consciousness. He expresses his wish to die in his mother land Kashmir among the saffron gardens. He knows that Kashmir is Paradise on the earth and he wants to bury his dead body in that paradise. But God does not fulfill his wish as he died in his exile land America. He is haunted by some places of his motherland about whom he expressed in this poem through his diasporic consciousness, these are: "Zero Taxi Stand", "Grindlays Bank", "Pampore", "Nishat", and even river "Jhelum".

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 Timed of Rain
 will be sold in black, then destroyed,
 Invisibly at Zero Taxi Stand.
 There will be men nailing tabloids
 to the fence of Grindlay's Bank,
 If there is a paradise on earth,
 It "is this, it is this, it is this."

The poem "*I Dream I Am the Only Passenger on Flight 423 to Srinagar*", which has been dedicated to Krishna Misri, the poet merges both religion and politics and summoned the spirit of Sheikh Noor-Ud-Din. While looking down from the plane, Ali was puzzled to see the view of burning autumn leaves, was not able to understand the view. He was unable to make up his mind whether he was seeing the burning of beautiful leaves of Chinar or the burning shrine of Sheikh Noor-Ud-Din Noorani at Charar-e-Sherif. So he depicted the cordon of Hazratbal in 1994, Lal Ded's famous encounter with Sheikh Noor-ud-Din and the flaming of his shrine at Charar-e-sharif. Through these descriptions, he had exposed the poetical implication beautifully combined with divine voice. In this incident Ali imagines the destruction of the fifteenth century Sufi shrine in the turmoil of Kashmir which is again a sign of loss of peace in his homeland. So this poem depicts the destruction of the "terrible Beauty" of the Kashmir which was once compared with the heaven on earth, but now turned in to hell. It is a fascinating poem in which the poet combines memory of Begum Akhtar's death. The very first stanzas depict poet's expresses diasporic consciousness about his motherland India. He imagines as if he flights from America to Kashmir over "New Delhi", it depicts his feelings about his nostalgia.

and when we- as if from ashes – ascend
 into the cold where the heart must defend
 its wings of terror and even pity
 and below us the haze of New Delhi
 grays, In your eyed I look for my wounds' deep sea.
 But five hundred years waved with history?
 It is to song that one must turn for flight.
 But with what measure will I shed sunlight

The prose poem "*Dear Shahid*" supposes the voice of somebody remaining in Kashmir who writes to the poet in his exile life about the devastation of his motherland Kashmir. The written letter is an important form in this book, whose central theme is to give the poet the information about his motherland Kashmir which is haunted to him in his

diasporic consciousness. Throughout the prose poem, the poet as the addressee is an absent figure, difficult to reach and actually unable to provide direct help from his exile life. Ali feels diasporic consciousness about what has become compulsory in Kashmir to carry one's address, in the name of 'Identity Card', in one's pocket so that one's body may find its way back home in case of a sudden death; also without it the citizens of the Kashmir are beaten even on their own motherland.

This type of miserable hope one can record in the following lines from the 'letter' titled "Dear Shahid" on the first page of the second section of Shahid's *The Country without a Post Office*. The writer of the letter speaks in a deeply melancholic voice, in short fragmentary sentences and desperate questions:

"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

Things here are as usual though we always talk about you. Will you come soon? Waiting for you is like waiting for spring. We are waiting for the almond blossoms. And if God wills, O! those days of peace when we all were in love and the rain was in our hands wherever we went." (Ali: 2013,29)

The following poem, "A Pastoral" which was dedicated to Suvir Kaul, quotes another letter from Kashmir addressed to the poet in his exile country America. It more clearly inquiries from the poet who lives in a peaceful but untouched, unsympathetic Western world, even though he was haunted by diasporic consciousness. Through these letters, Ali exposes his own dilemma as a poet in exile country and having diasporic consciousness about his motherland. He has only one instrument i.e. to write about his country from a distance. The poem echoes his diasporic consciousness, though more simply: "Where are you? Come back. / Is history deaf there, across the oceans?" Like the journalist he writes about, Ali exposes the suffering of Kashmir to his Western readers, who may otherwise never think about the conflict in Kashmir. Kashmir, for the majority of Western readers, may only be a distant and supernatural place, hardly ever meted in fictional or cultural scenes.

if he'd let them speed to death,

blacked out by Autumn's Press Trust-

not like this, taking away our breath,

holding it with love's anonymous

Scripts: "See how your world has cracked.

Why aren't you here? Where are you? Come back.

Is history deaf there, across the oceans?"

Quick, the bird will say. And we'll try

the keys, with the first one open the door

into the drawing room. Mirror after mirror,

textiled by dust, will blind us to our return

as we light oil lamps. The glass map of our country,

still on the wall, will tear us to lace-
 We'll go past our ancestors, up the staircase,
 holding their wills against our hearts. Their wish
 was we return — forever! —and inherit (Quick, the bird will say) that to which we belong, not like this—
 to get news of our death after the world's. (Ali: 2013, 31-32)

The poem "*The Country Without a Post Office*", has been dedicated to James Merrill and also the book was published under the same title, as a collection of poems in it. Ali finds that contemporary history has made compulsory for him to go back to his motherland, not as a visitor as he had done in the past and as he would have wished at present but as a witness to the brutal condition to the people of his motherland. He represents the miserable condition of his motherland, through his diasporic consciousness, where "*minaret has been entombed*" because religious persons had taken to death; "*each house buried or empty*" as Pundiths had left their homes because they migrated from Kashmir and they will feel now the diasporic consciousness like the poet.

Again I've returned to this country
 where a minaret has been entombed.
 Someone soaks the wicks of clay lamps
 in mustard oil, each night climbs its steps
 to read messages scratched on planets.
 His fingerprints cancel blank 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. They'll see
 us through them —see us frantically bury
 houses to save them from fire that, like a wall,
 caves in. The soldiers light it, hone the flames,
 burn our world to sudden papier-mache (Ali:2013,36)

CONCLUSIONS

In short, the poetic collection "*The Country Without a Post office*" is a upsetting and diasporic consciousness of the poet not only his lost homeland, but as W.S. Merwin (2002) wrote: "*Agha Shahid Ali's Kashmir, in his poems, is our own lost but inalienable homeland.*" as with the occurrence of war and exile in the post cold war period and the increasing disruption of people in time thus Agha Shahid Ali's consciousness represents that of all diaspora people. He was creatively and emotionally anxious with harsh conditions of his mother land Kashmir, where he visited frequently to meet with his parents, friends and relatives.

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