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### **Understanding Kashmir through the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali**

As a poet, Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001), the well-known Kashmiri-American, had a conspicuous allegiance to the 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). Agha Shahid Ali comes across as a poet who is intensely engaged in the charged politics or 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 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 Kashmir of 1990s 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, or oppression. Agha Shahid’s poetry is more akin to the poetry of the post-1948 Palestine, which, according to Palestinian poet, critic, novelist, and martyr, Ghassan Kannaflani, “emerged with a unique feeling of profound sadness more commensurate with the realities of the situation” (3-4). These “realities of the situation” 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 overstated. 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* as subtly highlighting the problematic proposition of Kashmiriyat. Hence, offering us alternatives to contest the culture patterns disseminated by the dominant powers:

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.

Army convoys all night like desert caravans:

In the smoking oil of dimmed headlights,

time dissolved—all winter—its crushed fennel.

We can't ask them: *Are you done with the world?*

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. 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).

Kashmir has had many flattering 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:

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)

These appellations have emanated from the orientalizing and homogeneous tendencies of categorisation prevalent among the dominant discourses. Kashmir’s history and people are being held hostage by these dominant powers who have assumed the role of story-tellers of master narratives in its context. 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 poets of the resistance movements, in the words of Barbara Harlow, “consider it necessary to wrest that expropriated historicity back, reappropriate it for themselves in order to reconstruct a new world-historical order” (Harlow 50). 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 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”, he 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’s poetry seems to reflect Salman Rushdie’s view on how literature can contest the contorted truths of power structures in the contemporary world:

It seems to me imperative that literature enter such arguments, because what is being disputed is nothing less than what the case, what is truth is and what untruth. If writers leave the business of making pictures of the world to politicians, it will be one of history’s great and most abject abdications... (Outside the Whale)

Shahid’s poetry therefore can be seen as both approximating and redefining the tradition which he inherited.

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 using their respective artistic mediums to give voice to their suppressed aspirations numbed by the voicelessness. Claire Chambers writes, “Agha Shahid’s legacy is assured, with the past decade seeing an upsurge in quality Kashmiri writing in English, most of it influenced, even inspired, by Shahid’s poetry” (10). This literary upsurge may have finally brought home the much desired ‘post-office.’

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