

Chapter 2

Aga Shahid Ali: The Diasporic Gem

The term 'diaspora' has been defined by Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary as, "the spreadings of people from one original country to other countries"(Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary Online) and *The Oxford Dictionary* defines it as, "Jews living outside Israel", "the dispersion or spread of any people from their original homeland, or the people who have spread or been dispersed from their homeland"(The Oxford Dictionary Online). When we look at the origin of the term "Diaspora", we come to know that it referred to the dispersion of the Jews from Israel back in the sixth-seventh century B.C. and later in the second century A.D. from Jerusalem. Then from 200 A.D. to 900 A.D., people migrated from one country to another for their better prospects which result in mass migration. A better prospect was not the only motive behind this mass migration but religion was also their motive. People migrated from one place to another to propagate their religion. From time to time it has gone under certain changes as we know that the people migrated to quench their religious thirst, and then they got migrated in search of their better bread. Colonial period contributed migration due to war and slavery. People from colonized countries migrated to other colonies as laborers. People from the third world countries became the refugees in UK, the USA and the other European countries during the cold war era. The post-modern era witnessed the migration due to economic interests. People flew from their native lands to meet their economic needs in an alien land. It also caused forced exile or

we can say political exile. The diaspora of different lands and their experiences also vary as their history varies. David Pendery by means of Safran's model relates the Chinese, the Jewish and the Black diasporas considering their ethnicity, history, race, culture and identity. "The Chinese can be termed as 'Sojourners', the Jewish as 'displaced people' and the Blacks as 'bondsmen'. Their homeland identities can be taken as nationalistic-mythic, autochthonous and mythic respectively. The initial new land identity of the Chinese is that of aliens, of the Jewish, as strangers and of the Blacks as subalterns"(Pendery *Asian Ethnicity*).

Indian Diaspora:

The Indian diaspora is the largest diaspora in the world. It dates back to the Indian civilization. We can divide it into three phases- ancient, medieval and modern. The ancient diaspora refers to laborers, crafts men and traders who explored new lands for work, wealth and adventures. In medieval times, the British imperialism caused movement of the indentured laborers. In modern times, skilled educated and intelligent Indians moved to the USA and other European countries for economic and professional reasons. This 'new diaspora' is made of experts in different fields like IT, Medicine, Space Technology, Engineering, and Management and so on. There are eminent intellectuals, writers, orators, economists and financial experts etc.

The wave of willed exile came to the Indian soil in 70's which lifted many intellectuals from the land of the Himalaya and the Ganga to the unknown pastures. The pain, nostalgia, inbetweenness, trauma, rootlessness are the prevailing themes which are mourning on the death bed of the Indian diaspora. The Indian diaspora has been celebrated as well as mourned by many writers like A.K Ramanujan, V. S Naipaul, Anita

Desai, Arvind Adiga, Vikram Seth, Amitav Gosh, Salman Rushdie, Bharti Mukharji, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Aga Shahid Ali etc. C.G. Shyamala in his essay, “Perspectives on Diaspora in the Fiction of Anita Desai” maintains the interesting view about the diaspora writers as:

The group maintains its separateness from the host country based on common ethnicity or nationality, yet maintains attachments, nostalgic or related to culture to the home country. Though the group is physically or geographically displaced, they retain their social and cultural position to the old memories of the culture which they have inherited. (Shyamala 1)

The post-colonial phase of the Indian Diaspora is the opposite of ancient period because in the ancient times Indians migrated to other countries as indentured laborers but the migration of post-colonial phase are from the middle-class families, much skilled. The bucks and the white color job bewitched them and they left their country. Such type of happening can be witnessed in a diasporic piece of writing, *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, by a well acclaimed diaspora writer Anita Desai. The said novel unlatches a story of two friends, Dev and Adit, in London. Adit was disappointed with his job in India which compelled him to leave his motherland for a comfortable foreign job. He says out of anger:

All I could find was a ruddy clerking job in some Government of India tourist bureau. They were going to pay me two hundred and fifty rupees and after thirty years I could expect to have five hundred rupees. That is what depressed me-the thirty years I would have to spend in panting after that extra two hundred and fifty rupees. (Desai 18)

The novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* also deals with the theme of otherness. Adit lives in London with his English wife, Sarah who pays the high price of being the wife of an Indian. The people around him treated him as an alien only because of this. The question of identity continues to haunt her:

Who was she –Mrs. Sen who had been married in a red and gold Benares brocade sari One burning, bronzed day in September, or Mrs. Sen the Head’s secretary, who sent out the bills and took in the cheques, kept order in the school and was known for her efficiency ? Both these creatures were frauds; each had a large, shadowed element of charade about it. When she briskly dealt with letters ... she felt an impostor, but equally, she was playing a part when she tapped her fingers to the sitar music on Adit’s records ... she had so little command over these two charades she played each day, one in the morning at school and one in the evening at home, that she could not even tell with how much sincerity she played one role or the other. They were roles and when she was playing them, she was nobody. Her face was only a mask, her body only a costume. Where was Sarah? Where was Sarah? ... she wondered if Sarah had any existence at all, and then she wondered, with great sadness, if she would ever be allowed to step offstage, leave the theatre and enter the real world –whether English or Indian, she did not care, she wanted only its sincerity, its truth. (Desai 34-35).

Anita Desai’s novel *Baumgartner’s Bombay* (1988) deals with the heart-aching, sue-generis story of Hugo Baumgartner, an old Jew who has escaped Nazi Germany and

made Bombay his home. But unfortunately his long stay of fifty years in India waded a bad hand to him. He failed to get close to the Indian people around him. He was considered a 'firanghi' neither Indian nor Western. He suffered a lot due to this inbetweenness. The novel really shows us the pathetic picture of being diasporic who tries hard to adopt an alien culture but cannot. The novel ends with a tragic end; the protagonist got killed by a fellow German for money.

Bharti Mukharji, multi exiled, as she changed many citizenships born in India shifted Canada, from Canada to Australia and from Australia to America, enjoying a soft corner in the Indian English literature. She came to the literary landscape with the dominant themes of diaspora. Her novels "*The Tiger's Daughter*" and "*Wife*" is a clear picture of problems like alienation, dislocation and otherness. Bharti Mukherjee represents the transnational communities and transnational interpretation. Her first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* is a "materialization of the diasporic community and hence alienated" (Chetana Pokhriyal 3). Tara Banarjee, the main character of the novel is the real state of the dispersed community who strongly wants to enter into "nationalised community"(Chetana Pokhriyal 3) by the means of marriage with an American, David Catwright. In this regard Milton Gordon remarks, "inter-marriage leads to marital assimilation which is an intermixture of the two 'gene pools' which the two populations represent, regardless of how similar or divergent these two gene pools may be"(Gordon 11). Her dreams and cultural beliefs got injured when she came to know the union of the two hearts was actually a contract between the husband-wife. While giving the voice to her characters Bharti Mukherjee put the words of reality on the tongue of her characters. She says:

I need to feel like a part of the community I have adopted (as I tried to feel in Canada as well). I need to put roots down, to vote and make the difference that I can. The price that the immigrant willingly pays, and that the exile avoids, is the trauma of self-transformation. (*Two ways to Belong in America*)

Bharti Mukherjee has created a fair place for herself in the literary circle abroad, by her contribution to Indian English writing. Her admirable literary works place her in the class of great diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bernard Malamud, Isaac Babel, and Yashmine Gunratne. The traumas and the agonies that people of Indian Diaspora face, in fulfilling their dreams, constitute the prime concern of Mukherjee's literary oeuvre. Her novel *Jasmine* traces the story of the eponymous heroine in her American exciting journey. Jasmine, the Hindu widow, who leaves India for the US after her husband's death in a terrorist attack, is found to undergo a cross-cultural change in her fractured life as an immigrant. The opening chapter of the novel starts with the words:

Lifetimes ago, under a banyan tree in the village of Hasnapur, an astrologer cupped his ears – his satellite dish to the stars – and foretold my widowhood and exile. I was only seven then, fast and venturesome, scabrous-armed from leaves and thorns. (Mukherjee, 3)

The critic Nagendra Kumar notes that Jasmine's "decision to kill herself first, is a decision of a woman who lives for her deceased husband but the woman who kills Half-Face is prompted by her will to live to continue her life" (110). Jasmine's journey from Punjab, through Florida, New York, and Iowa, to California depicts the various stages of

her exilic condition. But these exilic locations are also representation of the spiritual states of her mind. Jasmine assumes different mythological avatars in her various exilic states: “I have been reborn several times” (Mukherjee 126). She shuttles between identities: “Jyoti [was] the Sati-Goddess, Jasmine lives for the future” (Mukherjee 176). Jasmine emancipates herself from being an illegal immigrant into a self-assured American woman but her spiritual call comes from India: “I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness” (Mukherjee 40).

The need to establish one’s root becomes more acute in the case of diasporic writers. The diasporic writers locate and establish the cultural nuances with the diasporic space. While negotiating between the parent and immigrant culture diasporic writers occupy what Homi Bhabha calls “interstitial space”(144).

Jhumpa Lahiri, a diasporic writer, has written a collection of short stories and a novel both are exploring the clashes of culture in the U.S. Her novel, *The Namesake* is a fine story of emotional dislocation and cultural dislocation. In the wave of the early 60’s many Indian professionals went to U.S.A in search of their better future. Ashoke Ganguli, an Indian Bengali from Calcutta too leaves his motherland to America for pursuing higher education. After two years stay in the U.S.A he returns back and marries a nineteen year old Bengali girl from Calcutta, Ashima. She had never thought to be in an alien land but after getting married with Ashoke Ganguli there was no option to remain in India. She left from Dum Dum airport to the U.S with a bundle of traditional instructions from all the kiths and kins who come to see her off, “not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair and forget the family the moment she landed in Boston”(Lahiri 37). Living in America is a totally different experience for her. Everything was totally opposite what

has she read in the English novels. She feels homesick and alone in their three room apartment which is too hot in summers and too cold in winters. She feels emotionally dislocated and yearns for her home which is a bowl of their dear ones. We see the heights of her dislocation when we see her all the time reading Bengali short stories, poems and articles from the Bengali magazine she has brought with her. Mahesh Bharatkumar Bhatt says:

Ashima's love of family influences her to create a close-knit web of immigrant friends. This group practices Indian custom, speaks the Bengali language, and, in many respects, becomes a substitute family for the vast collection of relatives back in India. But for Ashima, the close relations between the immigrants become an excuse to avoid the customs of American life".(44)

The novel *The Namesake* is a story of two generations of an Indian family who struggles to assimilate with an alien culture but fails. The novel really deals with the complicated diasporic issues. The first generation feels the nostalgic about their homeland and the second generation, Gogol their son, suffers from the identity crises and broken relationships. Gogol could not assimilate himself with the white relations of America. He loves Ruth, a white American but got deceived. His next love is Maxine but this relation comes to an end because of emotional complications of his father's death. After he marries, Moushmi, but the marriage fails because she loves Dimitri, a German man. Gogol struggles to transform himself by escaping from the traditions of the community of Indian immigrants to which his family belongs.

The age of globalization has blessed us with nebulous relationships and so is hovering over the modern diaspora literature. The themes of alienation and exile are dancing on the hyphenated stage of Indian diaspora. The Indian diaspora writings explore the complexities and the dilemma of the immigrants in exile so vividly that it has got the attention of world institutions. It has delineated the problems and plights of exile and the diasporic individuals caught in the crisis of a changing society.

Salman Rushdie is another diasporic giant. Salman Rushdie inaugurated the field of postcolonial diaspora with his debut novel *Grimus*, which is really an experiment to show the plight of detachment and alienation of exiled people. According to him migrants are new types of human beings:

who root themselves in ideas rather than places, in memories as much as in material things; people who have been obliged to define themselves - because they are so defined by others - by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur....The migrant suspects reality: having experienced several ways of being, he understands their illusory nature. To see things plainly, you have to cross a frontier. (124-125.)

Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* harbours the idea of migration. Harveen Sachdeva Mann notes that while depicting the life of a character, Saleem Sina, Rushdie narrates the many changes that dwells in the country's "migration into postcolonial nationhood; of class struggles, language battles, religious skirmishes, political machinations, and territorial wars with neighbouring countries...."(Being borne across": translation and Salman Rushdie's 'The Satanic Verses'). Salman Rushdie cleared the way for postcolonial literature in India. He and his characters wander from place to

place in search of their imaginary homeland but all in vain. *Midnight's Children* is actually a story of dislocation and displacement where Saleem Sinai wanders among three countries, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh but could not find a piece of peace. As Pramod K Nayar opines:

Diasporic writing captures the two invariables of their experience: exile and homeland. All diasporic literature is an attempt to negotiate between these two polarities. The writings of exiled/immigrant writers undertakes two moves one temporal and one spatial. It is as Meena Alexander puts it, writing in search of a homeland. (Nayar 188)

In *Midnight's Children*, he pictures this trauma of fluid identity. In his first migrated country Saleem becomes a dog; a member of the Cutia Unit. Consequently, his body has gone fully numb, the only sense active being his sense of smell, “anaesthetized against feeling as well as memories” (Rushdie 353). His fellow soldiers start calling him ‘Buddha’ because there hung around him an air of great antiquity” (Rushdie 349), though he is twenty four year old at that juncture. Here Saleem Sinai is presented as the microcosm of all the diasporic generation; how they are treated in the newly inhabited territories; how the venom is thrown upon them and the current example of this venom throwing is Australia. Saleem, being the mouthpiece of his creator, expresses the feelings that Rushdie feels while living in an adopted land.

Shame, the most political adventure of Rushdie, exhibits the trauma of migration that he has been facing throughout his life. *Shame* is a novel about migration. At several places, Salman Rushdie emerges as the narrator and narrates the deplorable conditions of migrants:

It's a novel about the changes that happen to individuals and communities under the pressure of migration... I wanted to talk about the immigrant community in London particularly the South Asian immigrant community, and at that time what I wanted to say about it is, "Here's this enormous community of people who are, it seems, invisible—their concerns their lives you know, their fears, and so on, somehow invisible to the white population". (Herwitz Varshney 19)

The Ground Beneath Her Feet is the novel where Rushdie expresses his diasporic views ostensibly. The novelist is entailed in sketching a textual diasporism in the novel. All the three major characters, i.e. Ormus Cama, Vina Apsara and Umeed Merchant A.K.A. Rai experience the predicament of migration.

The Enchantress of Florence is Rushdie's last adventure where he gives the sketches of two kinds of diaspora, i.e. one immigrant and other emigrant. Both of them suffer with the same problems in their accepted countries. Mogor, who arrives India from Florence, declares himself a distant relative of Mughal Emperor Akbar. But later he was exposed and he had to flee. The case is the same with Qara Qoz; she leaves her home for the betterment for Europe but succumbs to several problems. Both the protagonists suffer the crisis for individuality. Against the popular belief, the novelist has introduced a white immigrant and given his experiences that he comes across in India. He makes sure that not only a colonized person suffers this trauma of estrangement but also the same is the condition with the so-called occident lists.

Indian diaspora writings have received unprecedented attention and acclaim. Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* in 1981 drew the attention of the critics

towards the growing and maturing South Asian writings in English often by the diaspora. South Asian writers like Michael Ondaatje received Booker Prize for *The English Patient* in 1992, Arundhati Roy Received Booker Prize for her novel *The God of Small Things* in 1997. Jhumpa Lahiri got Pulitzer Prize for *Interpreter of Maladies* in 2000 and V. S. Naipaul was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 2003. The settings of these narratives are quite varied. In Hari Kunzru's novel *The Impressionist*, the landscape stretches from Rajasthan desert, Agra, Fatehpur, Bombay, London, Oxford and finally to West Africa. Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories are set in Urban American as well as Indian settings. V. S. Naipaul takes readers to slums in Mumbai, Trinidad, England and African countries. Salman Rushdie's settings are often Pakistan and India, and England.

The Indian diasporic literature is one of the most read literature of the world. It has contents which are quite photographic, displays the real picture of their homeland and the alien land. While quoting Sudhir Kumar, *The Diasporic Literature* (176) writes:

...the contemporary diasporic writers such as Naipaul, Shashi Tharoor, Hari Kunzru, Salman Rushdie, Bharti Mukhrjee and others have got a vital clue from Gandhi's commitment to diasporic issues. They have realized that a creative writer needs to be an activist and crusader for justice and equality. Whether one agrees or not, Gandhi can certainly be called a first writer-activist who took up the diasporic issues like exploitation, oppression and erasure of identity in South Africa and fought against racism in a new way. Giriraj Kishore in his book *Pahela Girmitiya* has described Gandhi's saga of struggle against racial oppression. (58)

Novel and short story are the two genres that have become quite popular but it is heartening to note that there is a substantial amount of writing in English in other genres as well: poetry, drama, autobiography, memoirs and travelogues.

The Beloved Witness of Indian Diaspora: Aga Shahid Ali

Aga Shahid Ali was a Kashmiri poet born in New Delhi, India on 4thfeb.1949. He got his education from the different institution of Kashmir after that he moved to Delhi for his further education but the thirst of knowledge remained unquenched then he shifted to the educationally green lands of America where he spent his rest of life while teaching and researching and he died in Amherst, Massachusetts; December 8, 2001.

We can't shove the fact that a man is bound to shake his self on the tunes of his past. We cannot rove without our past whether it is in its beaut attire or threatening, we have to weather it. The writer of any Diaspora cannot yank his past experiences, memories or anything else from his writings. From A.K Ramanujan to Kiran Desia, all are sharing the same thing that they can't survive without their past. The expatriate writers also write about their present ruptured identity, scathing and nebulous dislocation etc, Salman Rushdie very aptly says,

... the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being 'elsewhere'.(12)

Agha Shahid Ali wrote poetry in both free verse and traditional forms, experimenting with verse forms such as the sestina and canzone. He is credited with introducing and popularizing the Ghazal form in American poetry. Ali's poetry is

autobiographical with allusions to exile and Ali's identity as a Kashmiri. His work melds the landscapes of Kashmir and America, along with the conflicted emotions of exile, immigration and in his later works, loss, illness and mortality. Ali's voice is lyrical, reflective and at the same time elegant, enhanced by the repetition of words, half rhymes and culturally specific imagery. As one navigates the complex terrain of his poems, they get a sense of Ali's intricacy in language and thought, his ability to take emotions and frame them into focus, giving his poems an embroidered ornateness.

Aga Shahid Ali's oeuvre is the complete picture of dominant themes of the Diaspora. To quote, a famous modern critic, Bruce King would be appropriate here:

Aga Shahid Ali's poetry swirls around insecurity and obsession[with]...memory, death, history, nostalgia for the past he never knew, dreams, Hindu ceremonies, friendship and self-consciousness about being a poet"(78)

This is a fact that Aga Shahid Ali's poetry smells of exile but in true sense he was not exiled from his homeland which he confesses in an interview by Eric Gamalinda, he says:

... a number of things, I suppose. It can be seen politically, emotionally, culturally. There are definite historical moments of exile; we can think of Ovid and many other people who've been exiled, right down to this century. Writers particularly interest me in that context. Of course, I'm not an exile technically, because I haven't been kicked out of any place, but temperamentally I would say I'm an exile, because it has an emotional resonance, the term exile does. The ability to inhabit several circumstances

and several historical and national backgrounds simultaneously makes up the exilic temperament a lot, especially of this past century and this continuing new century. (*Poets and writers Magazine*)

This is evident from the very first volume of Agha Shahid Ali's poetry where he states:

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox
 My home a neat four by six inches
 I always loved neatness. Now I hold
 The half-inch Himalayas in my hand
 This is home. And this is the closest
 I'll ever be to home. (*The Veiled Suite 29*)

The above mentioned lines are from the poem titled "Postcard from Kashmir". The title of the poem clearly shows that letter is addressed to an exiled man. The body of the letter lets the cat out of the bag in its very first line, "Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox" (*The Veiled Suite 29*). The speaker is denationalized and finds himself without an identity. He undergoes what Talgedin calls an attempt to link an old home that is no longer home to a new home that never feels quite like home speaking of another of Ali's poems in *Reversing the Sentence of Impossible Nostalgia*. The narrator, an exile Kashmiri, experiences three torments; the regret of ever having left his home, the rejection of feeling like an outsider, and the struggle of coming to terms with the changes that would have inevitably occurred in his absence. This inward battle is shown as he looks at a postcard photograph of Kashmir. The narrator is harshly awakened to the reality of his displacement from home as he sees that all that is left of his Kashmiri

heritage is a four by six inch photograph, which is now only a depiction of what used to be. In a related context, Ian Buruma, in an article entitled, ‘Real Wounds, Unreal Wounds: The Romance of Exile’, argues:

Exile as a metaphor did not begin with the Jewish Diaspora. The first story of exile in our tradition is the story of Adam and Eve. No matter how we interpret the story of their expulsion from the Garden of Eden — original sin or not —we may be certain of one thing: There is no way back to paradise. After that fatal bite of the apple, the return to pure innocence was cut off forever. The exile of Adam and Eve is the mark of maturity, the consequence of growing up. An adult can only recall the state of childlike innocence in his imagination; and from this kind of exile a great deal of literature has emerged. (Buruma)

Exile is a powerful theme in *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, which opens with an epigraph from Virginia Woolf’s line about exile, which reveals the fact that Ali was a man who lived bodily in the American land, but his mind and imagination were left in Kashmir, his motherland. This collection also includes the widely anthologized poems “Postcard from Kashmir,” “Snowmen,” and “The Dacca Gauzes.” In “Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz,” Ali writes, “. . . Your lines were measured/ so carefully to become in our veins// the blood of prisoners. In the free verse/ of another language I imprisoned// each line—but I touched my own exile”(*Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz*). In “A Darkly Defense of Dead White Males”, Ali states, multiple exile, I celebrate myself. *Émigré* and *expatriate* describe me better...But as an exile in my own country I use the word for its poetic resonance, for its metaphoric power—I must use the site for the privilege of self-

reflection”(148). Strictly speaking, Ali is not an exile because he moved voluntarily. However, as a postcolonial subject, a native of a disputed and unstable territory (Kashmir), and an immigrant, he has experienced enough loss and displacement to be able to lament after and have a desire for home. In “Rooms Are Never Finished”, his poem titled “Ghazal” through which the reader easily senses the speaker's agony and pain while he is repeating the word “exile” many times:

In Jerusalem a dead phone's dialed by exiles.

You learn your strange fate: you were exiled by exiles.

One opens the heart to list unborn galaxies

Don't shut that folder when Earth is filled by exiles. (*The Veiled Suite: The Collected poems*. 297)

The repetition of the word “exile” suggests the agony of the speaker in a way that puts him into a mood of loss and disintegration .The speaker then says:

By the Hudson lies Kashmir, brought Palestine-

It shawls the piano, Bach beguiled by exiles.

Tell me who's tonight the physician of sick pearls?

Only you as you sit, Desert Child, by exile. (*The Veiled Suite: The Collected poems*. 297)

His collection, *The Country without a Post Office* (1997), was widely praised as a poignant and nostalgic evocation of his lost homeland. With the prevalence of war and homelessness in the post cold war era, and the increasing displacement of people in our time, Agha Shahid Ali's voice represents that of all exiles. A haunting volume, it established his reputation as a poet. In focusing on the tragedy of his homeland, he was

able to create a persona that has great resonance in our time. Shanta Acharya in his essay “American Poetry Today: The contribution of poets from the Indian sub-continent”, gives the reference of Carol Muske-Duke that he says about the poetry of Shahid “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 (*American Poetry Today: The contribution of poets from the Indian sub-continent*). In one of his poems, In “Lenox Hill,” he feels nostalgic about his mother:

As you sit here by me, you’re just like my mother,”
 she tells me. I imagine her: a bride in Kashmir,
 she’s watching, at the Regal, her first film, with Father.
 If only I could gather you in my arms, Mother,
 I’d save you – now my daughter – from God. The universe
 opens its ledger. I write: How helpless was God’s mother! (*The Veiled Suite: The Collected poems* 248)

The poem ends with these lines:

For compared to my grief for you, what are those of Kashmir,
 and what (I close the ledger) are the grief’s of the universe
 when I remember you – beyond all accounting – O my mother? (*The Veiled Suite: The Collected poems* 249)

In the poem, “Summers of Translation,” he strikingly weaves words and images that draw upon Faiz Ahmed Faiz, *bhajans* (Hindu devotional singing) harking back to Krishna and Radha, Begum Akhtar, Muharram, Zainab, Karbala, black and white Hindi films and their haunting songs, and of course his Mother! Through his poetry he achieves

a felicitous co-existence of disparate traditions that has torn people, cities, and countries apart. To that extent his poems are political, taking a stand on how things could be – if human beings were not blinded by their own limited beliefs. And, that was no dream; whole generations of post-independent Indians were brought up in such a visionary milieu. Thus, he was not being overtly political when the cultural backdrop of his upbringing is taken into account. It can be said that he is the celebrator of his willed exile because he has not left any Diaspora theme unshaken. He is the celebrator of nostalgia, rootlessness, hyphenated identity, cultural dislocation and other Diaspora gems. Writing about an interview she had with Ali in his home in Massachusetts in the late 1990's, Christine Benvenuto comments that although much of Ali's writing concerns displacement, longing and loss, in conversation he was “a self-described happy man who expressed impatience with the notion of exile in the lilting Anglo-Indian accent he said Americans love”(*The Massachusetts Review*). He said:

You constantly meet people who are immigrants and who say, oh, I feel like I've lost my culture and I've lost my roots, and I say, please don't feel so fussy about it. The airplanes work. I mean, if you have a certain kind of income, whether you live in Bombay and fly to Kashmir, or you live in New York and fly to Kashmir, for a certain group it really makes no difference (*The Massachusetts Review*).

Aga Shahid Ali we can say like other diasporic writers does feel the grave identity crisis, rootlessness, cultural dislocation and other sickness of the exile. His poetry is the nest of nostalgia and the other sickness of the exile. The collection of poems in *The Country without a Post Office* is charged with emotions of loss, and pain that articulate

the poet's exilic detachment from the imbroglio that has engulfed Kashmir. In relation to such a position Jasbir Jain has termed Agha Shahid Ali as a man of hyphenated identity; "being at once a Kashmiri-American-Kashmiri who is 'concerned more with the Kashmiri he has become after his migration to America'". (Jain82). In Agha Shahid Ali's poems the desire to recover the historical-cultural identity is not due to any racial or cultural alienation faced by the poet in America but rather by an exilic detachment forced upon him by the tumultuous condition of his homeland. Agha Shahid Ali has journeyed from Kashmir to America yet when he sees the rain in Amherst he is reminded of the rain in Kashmir. Within the safe confines of America through dreams and visions the broken images of his imaginary homeland haunt him. However, one might observe that Agha Shahid Ali was not exactly banished from Kashmir and he can physically return back at his will. To such an observation the poet would reply saying that though he is not technically exiled yet he is "temperamentally exiled" (*Poets and writers Magazine*) from Kashmir. Agha Shahid Ali's self-identification as a temperamentally exiled being mildly offends Bruce King's classifying the poet as a representative of the 'new internationalism'. The term is further illustrated by Vijay Mishra who explains it as a 'new diaspora' of 'late capitalism' that can access their homeland anytime due to the availability of advanced technology unlike the 'old diaspora' of 'classic capitalism' to whom the home was purely an imaginary construct (Mishra 26). It must be noted here that though Agha Shahid Ali's poems arrived at a time when the whole world was celebrating the opportunities of e-mails yet he was a poet who could not even post a letter to his home in Kashmir. For the post offices in Kashmir were shut down due to the rise in insurgency making Kashmir a reality only within his imagination which remained

oblivious to desperate voices of his friends who died leaving letters that never reached him. In *The Country without a Post Office* Agha Shahid Ali introduces three Ghazals. The concluding lines of one such Ghazal explain the psychology that informs his works “they ask me to tell them what Shahid means—/ Listen: It means ‘The Beloved’ in Persian, ‘witness’ in Arabic. (*The Country Without a Post Office* 64). The lines also depict how the poet has been left as a distant witness to the turmoil raging in his homeland; but distance has not reduced him to a silent spectator. As another *Ghazal* explains Agha Shahid Ali retrieves a whole new world view from the fragmented world he has left behind: And I Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee—/ God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight (*The Country Without a Post Office* 26). A Research scholar, Mir Liyakat Nazir, in his article, “Kashmir: I write on that void” very rightly says:

Brought up in the trilingual and tri-cultural environment, Agha Shahid Ali remains Kashmiri to the core of his heart and dedicated his poetic voice in singing the sordid tales of his homeland in the foreign shores. His poetry is like a canvas on which he draws an imaginary of Kashmir albeit bruised, besieged but its mesmerizing landscape and unique culture remains an eternal alter ego for him. The most noticeable point about Ali’s poetry is his hyphenated identity as Ali used to call himself Kashmiri-American-Kashmiri Poet. In his magnum opus work *The Country Without A Post office* Ali opens up in the prologue with these lines: Let me cry out in that void...I write on that void: Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere,Qashmir,Cashmir.....?(*Kashmir: I write on that void*).

In this paragraph of merely forty two odd words, Kashmir figures eighteen times. Amitav Gosh in “The Ghat of the Only World :Agha Shahid Ali in Brooklyn” remarks:

for Ali Kashmir became a vortex of images circling around a single point of stillness: the idea of death. In this figuring of his homeland, he himself became one of the images that were spinning around the dark point of stillness—both Shahid and Shaheed, witness and martyr—his destiny inextricably linked with Kashmir’s, each prefigured by the other.”(*The Ghat of the Only World*).

Aga Shahid Ali achieved the heights of name and fame in a very short period of time. His poems compels a reader to put him into the category of two great political or war poets, Walcott of the Caribbean and the Mahmoud Darwish of the Palestine, whose poetry is brimming with political pains and tones. The every letter of his poetry smells of Kashmir. He wrote about the political conflict of Kashmir, exodus pandits, beauty of Kashmir, culture and what not but unfortunately he has been ignored by his homeland and this statement has been also shouldered by a well read Professor and a Scholar on Aga Shahid, Nishat Zaidi, “Ali was not just another Indian diaspora poet writing in English. He was a poet who introduced an entirely new idiom in Indian poetry in English, something that the critics of Indian Poetry in English have not yet fully appreciated”(*Another Chronicle of Loss and Love*).

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