

## Chapter IV

### Summing Up

Aga Shahid Ali was a Kashmiri-American poet, who has lived most of his life in America and experienced different cultures and literatures, which has brought transformation in him during twentieth century. This century is marked with various significant historical events such as world war, local wars, civil wars, ethnic wars, cold wars, genocides and famines, which have shaped most of the contemporary literary modes of viewing the world around. Theorists have turned to the concept of trauma as a literary tool and have used it as cultural analysis. The idea of trauma also allows for an interpretation of cultural symptoms of growths, wounds, scars on social body, and its compulsive, repeated actions.

Aga Shahid Ali 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 innateness.

Aga Shahid Ali experiments with local Kashmiri themes which reflect and underpin deeper psychological insights borne out of the situations and conditions of the conflict in his homeland and his longings and imaginary belonging from a distant Diaspora setting, America where he studied and taught English literature. His works like *The Country without a Post Office* have been studied by critics and scholars across the globe from different points of view, ranging from postcolonial, historical, sociological, etc. thereby putting Shahid's musings on a universal scale of measurement and evaluation.

Theories of Heidegger and de Man seem to require a way of thinking about trauma i.e. how events in the past return to haunt the present. Theories of trauma can help to demystify all sorts of "narrative fetishes" and ideologies. Two aspects of trauma that the recent theorists have agreed upon are both effects of traumatic repression. First, the dissociation associated with trauma is at the heart of the involuntary return to traumatic memories. Secondly, because of the dissociation, a full understanding of a traumatic experience only comes belatedly to its participants.

Psychology and literature are having bilateral relations. As the psychology of the unconscious can be called literature and is a dune mining approach to its foreign opinion, very familiar to literature and literary critics. The most explicit reference to the human mind is to be found in psychological novels which deal with the individual's inner experiences, thoughts, feelings, emotions and introspections.

Freud is well known for his theories regarding the unconscious mind and the mechanism of repression, which influenced poets, novelists and critics of the twentieth century to a considerable extent in their perception and portrayal of human nature. The

use of stream-of-consciousness can be a significant concept to emphasize the psychological traits of a character to follow his thoughts as the story unfolds and to highlight events which occurred in the past but still haunt characters' memories in present. For instance, Anita Desai who is a popular Indian English fiction writer dwells upon her fiction from outer to inner reality and by carrying the flow of the mental experience of its characters. Her work is located in the corridors of the human consciousness. With a view to capture the prismatic quality of life in her fiction, she uses the stream of consciousness technique, flashbacks and interior monologues to delineate them by sinking deep into their psyche and showing their agony, anger, dissatisfaction and frustration. Thus the concept of stream-of-consciousness can be an important tool to define and understand the state of mind of a traumatic person.

The new psychological ideas emphasize the multiplicity of consciousness, the simultaneous coexistence of several levels of consciousness in which past experiences are retained and by whose retention the personality is colored and determined. The earlier poets and writers with the discovery of the unconscious mental conflicts are manifested in their works.

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 twirling on the hyphenated stage of Indian diaspora. The need to establish one's root becomes more acute in the case of diasporic writers. Diasporic writers locate and establish the cultural nuances with the diasporic space.

A diasporic person always suffers from exile, loss, pain, nostalgia which results in his consciousness and alienated consciousness. He feels himself a stranger in the other

world and suffers from nostalgia. The loss of national identity and east-west encounter leads to rootlessness and alienation. All the characters inherit a sense of loss from their family and society. Aga Shahid Ali, in his poetry, has acutely depicted the mental condition of displaced migrants and their experience of displacement, alienation, assimilation and discontinuity.

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 Desai or Jhumpa Lahri, 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.

Aga Shahid Ali's poem "Postcard from Kashmir" clearly shows that a 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: The Collected Poems* 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 a home to a new home that never feels quite like home. The narrator, an exile Kashmiri, experiences three torments; the regret of ever having left his home, the rejection of feeling like an outsider in a foreign land, 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 “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. (41)

In *Rooms Are Never Finished*, his poem titled “Ghazal” through which the reader easily senses the speaker's agony and pain while Shahid is repeating the word “exile” many times: 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.

His collection, *The Country without a Post Office* (1997), was widely praised as a poignant and nostalgic evocation of not only his lost homeland, is our own lost but inalienable 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. The various dimensions of the grief, he has been observing and witnessing in his homeland, universalizing through poetry. The Trauma, neurosis, role of grief in the development of neurosis, longing, romantic escapism and attachment with the land may be seen and located in his poetry as themes and sub-themes with immense potential for application of psychological explanations in order to understand poetry as a fine medium of expression of the neurotic condition suffered by the poet.

In the poetry collection, *The Veiled Suite: The Collected Poems* by Agha Shahid Ali, there is a poem “Summers of Translation,” Agha Shahid Ali writes: “I who of passion/ always make a holocaust...” (Agha Shahid Ali 255). In the poem “Lenox Hill,” 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. 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.

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. His poetry collection *The Country without a Post Office* is charged with emotions of loss, and pain that articulates the poet's exilic detachment from the imbroglio that has engulfed Kashmir. The blurb of *The Country without a Post Office* very rightly pointed out that "Amidst rain and fire and ruin, in a land of doomed addresses, a poet evokes the tragedy of his birthplace. *The Country without a Post Office* is a haunted and a haunting volume that established Agha Shahid Ali as a seminal voices writing in English." (Blurb *The Country With of a Post Office*). Claire Chambers, a senior lecturer at Leeds Metropolitan University in her very beautiful essay, "The last Saffron: Aga Shahid Ali's Kashmir" says:

*The Country Without a Post Office* is replete with images of shadows, mirrors, and doubles. The shadow is especially noticeable in discussion of the death of an 18-year old, Rizwan. Who is mentioned in many of his poems. His death is seen as being emblematic of Kashmiri deaths at large,

as he is one of many promising youths killed in conflict without his family's knowledge. (Web)

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.....?" (The Blessed Word: A Prologue 1).

Kashmir is a state which has gone through maximum upheaval in history; it is disheartening to see beauty getting destroyed. As Coleridge acutely terms it in one of his poem 'Beast in Beauty', these upheavals have left prodigious bearing on the psyche of Kashmiri people which has caused them pain and agony. The damage is not only of property but also of memory and emotions of people living there. This traumatic impact can be understood by the fact that there is new wave in the literature of Kashmir, writers who are writing on the theme of Kashmir conflict and its traumatic conditions have successfully ignited awareness among people. Aga Shahid Ali's poetry collection *The Country without a Post office* is the best example which acutely explains the agony of Kashmiris.

It is obvious that such kind of poetry is a result of the poet's need to cope with the traumatic past experiences which continue to haunt him even in a foreign land. The term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. Ali finds a way of catharsis for such trauma by writing poems; his poetry is crowded with various individuals and mass traumatic events. His poems are wedded to the grave sufferings of his homeland people. As Freud explains about trauma:

Indeed, the term 'traumatic' has no other sense than an economic one. We apply it to an experience which within a short period of time presents the mind with an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with or worked off in the normal way, and this must result in permanent disturbances of the manner in which the energy operates. (Freud 215)

People of Kashmir have to go through some or the other traumatic experience in day today life because of denial to information, political fragmentation, strikes, curfews, protests and many other actions. In such conditions traumatic victims are mainly either women or children, they are the most vulnerable beings. Kashmir known as heaven on earth has turned in a land of unknown graves, rape, mass killings, fake encounters and suicides. Kashmiri women are among the worst sufferers of sexual violence; it has been routinely perpetrated on Kashmiri women.

The present dissertation is an attempt to explain Shahid's poetry with reference to certain psychological underpinnings of trauma as there is ample scope for unraveling of the same in a poetry that is deeply rooted in a place and among people whose lives have been objects of conflict and a war like situation over period of time. It is an attempt to locate trauma and sufferings in the lives of Kashmiris through the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali. Kashmiris want an end of day today war that they have to fight for their survival. Violence reflects scars on the inner body of human beings which are unforgiveable and unforgettable, the deep mental wounds must come to an end and peace should take place. We are able to locate and identify those places in Shahid's poetry where traumatic effects of Kashmir conflict are directly reflected with neurotic emphasis of the poet on the feelings evoked or provoked by the same.



Ali's poetry is a complex journey of understanding how to write or speak about a land and its people not simply separated by physical dislocation or spatial distance, but by historical and political process that makes aliens out of natives on their own soil. The poets like Shahid who are deeply hit and torn by conflicts get rid of neurotic conditions through expressions and poetry which is heavily laden with emotion and nostalgia.

It is interesting to witness the role of memory and forgetfulness in the making of a poetry that is pregnant with grief, trauma and tragedy. Shahid's poetry has immense scope for unraveling the instances of memory forgetfulness in a war like situation. Memory and forgetfulness happen to be one of the most killing themes of a poet who stays in touch with the hard and harsh realities that surround him.

In the end it can be said that Aga Shahid Ali has immense contribution in this movement and his poems are not merely lines for literary aesthetic, rather they are against the unjust conditions in Kashmir. His poetry as a narrative of an individual who has been a witness to the trauma inflicted on his psyche by a violent conflict and thus resulted in a kind of neurosis. When he speaks of belonging in the context of Kashmir in his poems, his words are already circumscribed by the questions of longing. This structure of longing and belonging replicates the diaspora desire for an imaginary homeland and complicates the trauma of physical displacement and exile.

## Work Cited

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