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Re-Mapping Culture and Identity: Diasporic Theorisation and Dislocation Strain in the

Selected Poems of Agha Shahid Ali

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Abstract:

Diasporic writings occupy a place of great significance between countries and cultures, mostly as a response to their lost homes. Addressing the predominant issues of dislocation, nostalgia, discrimination, survival, cultural change and identity-crisis, dislocation is one of the stern feelings that rip apart the diaspora community. When people find themselves dislocated from their native strain, their mental trauma haunts them incessantly, and they strive to re-locate themselves by remembering their nostalgic past. The earnest quest for self identity remains the central praxis for an individual's social existence. But how to reach to its end –either by retreating from the world into one's shelled cocoon or by adopting moderate adherence to Westernization remains much a debatable concern to be answered by nations as well as by the individuals at large. Diasporic literature deals with these experiences of migration and exile, cultural or geographical displacement and the diasporic writers often remain preoccupied with the elements of nostalgia seeking to re-locate themselves in new cultures. Agha Shahid Ali is a Kashmiri poet, who despite being a migrant to USA transcends all geographical, national, and cultural boundaries by the dint of his sheer poetic brilliance. He articulates vehemently his diaspora experiences of “loss and exile” in his poetry and as a visionary integrates the global and the local. In this paper my aim is to represent how literature and culture inter-relates to form the basis of an independent original expression and in turn reflect the problems and aspirations of an individual's existence in the society. Ali the eminent Indian poet represents his earnest urge to relocate his Self amidst “cultural hybridization” asserting his transnational identity to transform ‘violent cartographies’ to ‘The Ghat of the Only World’.

Keywords: Diaspora, Alienation, Migration, Dislocation, Cultural Displacement, Identity Crisis, Trans-national.

Introduction:

The mesmerizing magnetism of Globalization has shrunk the whole world through the accelerator of technological advancements. The acceptance of this thoroughfare tendency stimulates an agile migration in an alien land, while ringing with an excruciating void of chaotic rootlessness, mirroring the realization of impending loss of identity on the other. The feeling of 'no-belonging' incessantly haunts the psyche of a homeless individual, corroding his every life sphere. The portrayal of leaving "the original homeland and coming in terms with new social relations determined by class, race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality" are some important factors that configure a diaspora and subsequently its literature in a distinct manner. However, the diasporas always tend to remain intertwined with their "homeland as an ethno-cultural group". Home, to them symbolizes a "mythic place of inhabitation" co-existing with their native desires and to cherish their innate longing of belongingness. Diasporas have a very strong link with their homeland, and to quote Salman Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands* they find themselves "linked to a certain part of an imagined community which is always in their mind, always beautiful and the best". Home, to them becomes a place where one has lived a part of one's life, a metacentre for desire and longing. Kim Butler in "Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse" says that more than ethnicity, religion and phenotype, it is home land an entity which anchors diasporic identity. Home becomes a haunting focus, more of an abstract idea, denied of a particular given signifier: it is something more than a house which we miss in exile". David Lim in his *The Infinite Longing for Home: Desire and the Nation in Selected Writings of Ben Okri and K.S. Maniam* phrases it as "Home"...could be a domestic site of comfort and security... (Or) mythic homeland left."

Thus dislocation or displacement from the native land, whether under compulsion or as a deliberate act of intention remains nothing less than a calamity. It fosters an uncanny and un-

housedress sentiment amongst people who might have willingly or forcefully moved from their imperial home to their New-Margins, only to be reinvented in language, in narrative, and in myth. Critics of the diasporas and migrant experiences argue this dislocation as a feature of all invaded colonies where “indigenous or original cultures are, if not annihilated, are often literally dislocated” and the diaspora communities fall a passive prey to the processes of dislocation and regeneration. My paper aims to focus on Agha Shahid Ali’s selected poetic works by establishing an inextricable bond between the poet’s treatment of the themes of dislocation and homesickness and his real experiences of the changed atmosphere of dislocated circumstances. Ali in most of his poems pictures the lingering note of discord between his loving vision of home and its contrasted prosaic harsh actuality. His poetry deals his engagement with Kashmir in diaspora and his constant memoirs remapping his cultural identity to re-locate back his native home. Identifying himself as a Kashmiri- American, Ali in his poetry blends the landscapes of Kashmir and America along with the emotions of exile and displacement, nostalgia and home-sickness, loss and regret. The very thought of diaspora life explores within him the deeper sociopsychological concern of ‘home away from home’, undergoing a constant transformation from ‘being to becoming’, and from ‘what they really are’ to ‘what they have become’. This psychological transformation is accountable for their displacement from the historical homeland and subsequent dispersal through many lands. It is a type of consciousness conceptualizing the predicament, a type of acuteness in perception that penetrates to the brain to encounter the question of Self – Identity.

Edward Said in his *Reflections on Exile* speaks on the theme of exile “not as a privilege, but as an alternative to the mass institutions that dominate modern life.” Memories of loss, regrets and emotional detachment demystify Shahid Ali’s poetic coding specially in framing poems

like “From Amherst to Kashmir”, “Postcard from Kashmir”, “Bone Sculpture” to name a few. To reinstate the words of Edward Said we can aptly justify that “the string of homesickness juxtaposed with the tension of transplanted existence remains not a “matter of decision one is born with, rather it is a happening”. Edward Said persistently insists that ‘homelessness’ analogous to ‘exile’ is a “traumatic experience that does not lead to transcendence alone, but to a greater awareness of the contingency of human experience.” They are “metaphorically dislocated, being placed into a hierarchy that sets their culture aside, and ignores its institutions and values in favour of practices of the colonizing culture”. Shahid Ali’s poetic diction “In Memory Of Begum Akther and Other Poems” thrust into this major area of post-colonial study, acknowledging the cultural denigration. Ali’s poetry brims with interesting sites set against the fascinating landscapes of Kashmir intertwined with American backdrop. His poem “A Walk Through the Yellow Pages” is mysterious and gloomy tainted with an element of the ugly with the porosity of social, cultural, and political boundaries. In the “A Nostalgist’s Map of America” Ali makes us enjoy a virtual trip, a strong humanitarian drift that defies geocultural boundaries and moves towards cosmopolitanism. In the poem “Rooms Are Never Finished” he depicts his mourn for the death of his mother simultaneously choked out by the all encompassing reach of his eternal loss for his motherland. Gusto Bache Lard remarks that the ‘inhabited space transcends geometrical space ‘and to Agha Shahid Ali crossing of the border implies the same. His identity is recurrently articulated between ‘home’ and ‘away’, his personal and global, his communal experiences invested into his universal poetic appeal. Thus Ali’s poetic oeuvre is best reflected when he tries to combine different cultures and conforms to what R. Radhakrishnan has said:-

“As diaspora citizens doing double duty [...] we have a duty to represent India to ourselves and to the United States as truthfully as we can.” This research thus illustrates that geographical and cultural displacement creates new forms of cultural belonging, and increasingly informs us of the local-global cultural dialectics. V.Mishra posits that “hypermobility actually reinforces ethnic absolutism because diasporas connect to the myth and politics of homeland.” Diasporic discourses of homeland not only creates a myth of racial purity but also a kind of return of the repressed for the nation-state itself, its pre-symbolic (imaginary) narrative, in which one sees a more primitive theorization of the nation itself. Diasporic study therefore makes it possible to challenge the traditional notion of culture and identity, opening up new spaces or subjectivities.

Critics like Lawrence Needham and Jeannie Chiu have elaborately discussed Ali’s artistic vitality of culture and identity as “compassionate cosmopolitanism.” His multi-cultural tradition foregrounds an ethics of empathy across countrywide with civilizing limitations. His poetic compositions on journey compiled in two books, “A Nostalgist’s Map of America” and “Rooms Are Never Finished” conjures up images of sojourns and displacements, wherein diasporic journeys necessarily imply putting down roots in other alternative homeland. His cosmopolitanism is especially meaningful if read in the context of postwar American travel poetry and enables review of the association between the “home” and the “foreign,” between the local issues and the universal apprehensions. Diasporic populations thus scatter globally and their networks of belonging transcend transnational and transcultural boundaries. It must be borne in mind that home emerges to them “as a mythic space of origin, reinvented through imagination, intertwined with the real experiences of the present day reality mingled with local sounds, smells, sights and colours”. Thus Agha Shahid Ali’s poems narrate the saga of the

bereavement, longing and pain of a helpless spectator who sees from thousands of miles away his beloved Kashmir, the paradise of earth on fire, eternally besieged and ripped apart on account of socio-political violence. In an essay by Bruce King "The Diaspora: Agha Shahid Ali's Tricultural Nostalgia" King elaborately discusses that Ali uses poetry to "recall what has been lost in the process of living". Malcolm Woodland in his "Memory's Homeland: Agha Shahid Ali and the Hybrid Ghazal" explores elaborately on the theme of nostalgia in Ali's text "Memory is no longer confused, it has a homeland."

According to Woodland the poetic dictions of Shahid Ali "embody two stances toward the thematics: one dominated by nostalgia and the desire for return, and one dominated by an anti-nostalgic acknowledgement of cultural hybridity." Reiterating Tolstoy's famous line that "all diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way," we conclude on Ali in a conversation with Amitav Ghosh disclosing his final wish- "I would like to go back to Kashmir to die", thereby inheriting a "tradition of nuanced desire, of fatalism and separation, of imagining, and of nostalgia debarring his ultimate union with the Divine."

The increased complexity between the local and the global, as well as its effect on the idea of nationhood and the native identity is one of the most distinctive features in post national and transnational contexts. Amitav Ghosh brilliantly deals with this postcolonial identity of subaltern and the diaspora movement in his essay, "The Diaspora in Indian Culture". The emotional roots of the immigrants are in reality that is distanced and to a great extent imaginary. The poetic dictions of Agha Shahid Ali brims not only on imaginary sites set against the fascinating humanitarian drift that defies geo-cultural boundaries, but also moves towards cosmopolitanism. Thus while multiculturalism and multilingualism frames the texture of

Shahid Ali's identity, his intense feelings of loneliness and dislocation conjures up creative strategies of survival resulting in the fetishization of exile or in the make-shift desire to assimilate the culture of the new home. With the help of his poetic creations Agha Shahid Ali creates national consciousness on an international dimension. Home becomes the poignant focus of the poet's imagination and nothing substitutes it; or it becomes, as Avtar Brah would say, "...a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination". Thus for Agha Shahid Ali, his poetry expresses his feelings of exile and his loss of home, his imagination transcends uprootedness and helps him to cherish his cosmopolitan attitude "inventing, investigating and refashioning the Self with all the fractured bits of diaspora writings, especially poetry."

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