

Land and Freedom: An Abandoned Tryst

A Study of Agha Shahid Ali's Poems

Aswathi. M.P

Assistant Professor

Department of English

K A H M Unity Women's College, Manjeri

Abstract

Agha Shahid Ali, the Kashmiri poet, explores the untold miseries of the generations of loss whose plight after independence was no better than before. Most of his poems echo the lament of the land and cultural maladies of citizens of Kashmir, bearing the imprints of Indo-Islamic tradition. He contextualizes poetry in terms of history and passes through the landscape of memories through Ghazals. The major problem a Kashmiri faces is whether to identify himself as an Indian or as a Kashmiri. The unique position of Kashmir intensified the conflict and thus the land has turned to be a space for the othering of Kashmiri self. The present study aims at analyzing Agha Shahid Ali's poems through defining the land,

differentiating it from nation and examining the concepts such as nationalism, regionalism, terrorism etc. with the objective to eradicate the prejudice towards individuals standing on the margins. Problematizing the very notion of unity in diversity envisaged in the Constitution it tries to throw light upon the shadows of poet's vision, moving deep into its roots. The relevance of the analysis lies in unraveling the predicament of an individual who feels as an outsider inside the broad shelter to which he is supposed to get entangled. The issue addresses not only Kashmiris but also the ethnic, religious, linguistic communities throughout the world who are confined inside the barbed wires of sectarianism. The scope of the reading can be extended to delve deep into the history of India, the idea of freedom and its dimensions and the post-colonial aspect i.e. the dual role that language plays in relation to history, viewed through the looking glass of contemporary existence.

Key Words: Promised land, Tryst. Kashmiri, Partition, Diaspora

Memory is no longer confused, it has a homeland—

Agha Shahid Ali, "Arabic," *Ishmael*

The cultural geographical territory, land, has often possessed allusions to a generation's past, not simply past but a sort of glorified nostalgic memories, whether it be a period of suppression, marginalization, discrimination or even under colonial subjugation. The reason for such a group of images the individuals cherish about the history of home land would be the delusion derived out of hope- regarding a premeditated meeting with one's dream. They like to call it a tryst and believe that meeting would bring about the freedom in every sense of the term. A touch of loss is felt in the minds of such a group who are forced to limit their wishes and live with the aspiration that the tryst, which is abandoned, will happen but not at the present moment. In search of the paths to the dream of a generation to come to be true, the politicians, activists, writers and laymen devise their own strategies without being anxious of the consequences. As it could be seen in any field of resistance the modus operandi is multifaceted and at times to demarcate patriotism from terrorism would be a tedious job. So is the attempt made by expatriates to portray the ever and never present entity, their homeland, an act with no guarantee of success.

The partition of India and after math, especially communalism, terrorism and prejudice, were voiced in many literary pieces of different genre such as Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children*, Kushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions* and so on. Rudolf Steiner in his work *The Philosophy of Freedom* distinguishes between concept and percept as the acceptance of universal view about his existence and individual's understanding of one's existence respectively (Steiner 121). Freedom is a percept as well as a concept as far as the Indian context, especially the context of Kashmir is concerned. The outsiders can perceive it to be a part of the Indian sub continent, but the right of the citizens of Kashmir is limited due to its peculiar kind of existence in the boarder - as a child claimed by two mothers- India and Pakistan. The political manifestoes of no government could fulfill the hope of Kashmiris to live peacefully, enjoying the right of freedom that Indian Constitution offers. Obviously the unique travail the Kashmiri faces makes him to rethink the resort to which he is to be identified. He is torn in between two identities as a Kashmiri and as an Indian, though the second contains the other. This feeling of abandonment or a sense of othering in motherland may

contribute to the yearning for the independent status he pleads.

Agha Shahid Ali, holding the pains of partition- the inevitable compromise of establishing the utopian idea of emancipation from the clutches of prejudices and rivalries, in his poem “Post Card from Kashmir”, ironically calls himself as a survivor, because he had already taken shelter in the security of a nation far away, when the threat of unsafe existence remained, or better aggravated in homeland. He wished to call himself better as an expatriate rather than exile because the feeling of uprootedness is not that much strong in him as compared to the other diasporic writers. This can be read in another way too. Agha Shahid Ali, born a year after Indian Independence, studied in University of Kashmir, has already learned to cultivate a mindset to feel at home in the midst of disputes and the same idea of adaptation made him feel at home in United states. But delving deep into his works, whether it is *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* or *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, *A Nostalgist's Map of America* or *The Country Without a Post Office* subtle images of his homeland and the agony the poet bears, the quest for freedom and the sense of history and contemporaneity of India in general and Kashmir in

particular is observable. More than a personal loss, Ali's poems marked the pain, the pangs of separation, urge to embrace the past that will be the primary motive of the other individuals – his parents or grandparents, friends from both sides of the globe and in certain situations the imaginary people. As Bruce King in *Modern Indian Poetry in English* remarked, with all his infatuations and inhibitions Ali is more a product of 'New- internationalism' than a category in Post- colonialism.(King 258). Being a tricultural writer , the metaphoric language he used to express the world he knew not only through sense perception but also through the spectacles of writers, ancestors and media influence his explorations. It is interesting to point out the medium of lyric of Urdu Ghazals he used to claim the melancholic celebration of his love with the Indian Islamic tradition that participated in the unified Hindu- Islam cultural memories , partition wiped away. In that view Ali's poems function as the alarms to remind us that the time has come to estimate the inheritance of our loss and to restore it.

In the poem titled 'Land' the writer reminds the makers and 'rulers' of India about an abandoned premeditated reconciliation with harmony. The poetic voice utters:

The hour has come to redeem the

pledge(not wholly?)

In Fate's "Long years before we

made a tryst" land. (5-8)

He reminds the equivocator that 'there is no sugar in the promised land'. The other adjectives the poet uses to represent the land include the capitalist, the missed, the prejudiced, the dismissed, anarchist, tourist, atheist(because God and human Gods failed to bring about happiness here)and amethyst. The attributes put can be applicable to his home(s) on 'both sides of the globe'. It well suits to the promised land- Kashmir in that incarnates Shahid's- beloved or witness, or beloved witnesses- named as terrorists with broken arms. The poem is filled with anger , as the poetic persona criticizes the personified land for insisting him to wait for the people who find a place for tourism-enjoyment- in his dismissed land where he could not find sweetness but only the cataclysm of the destroyed mosques and prays for the death of those bringing the doomsday a little earlier than it is expected to arrive. The poem begins and ends with the apprehensions of the poetic

persona about a land of promises. He brings out the attentions of Abrahams and reminds ‘his’ descendants about the promise. This allegory the writer incorporates is the typical Biblical note, i.e. Western and by attributing the same to the Eastern a universal colour is painted for the suffering and instills the pain in the minds of the readers whether they are from Palestine, Israel, Pakistan, United states, Germany, Latin American countries or Russia. The form of melancholy and beauty i.e. ghazal is taken as a medium to represent the melancholy of the land of beauty. The typical disputes lying at the backdrop of violence is revealed through the images such as of ‘a mosque now the dust of the prejudiced land’ and of ‘a land with blind hold temples with closed eyes thinking whether their deities are stolen for an atheist land. The writer uses the very term ‘Doomsdayers’ to denote the connoisseurs of demolition. In the poem land substituted the place of the omniscient voice of the God and the individual is seeking answers to his question on the very soil where the crisis originated. So the writer, in the whirlwind of anxieties where butterflies are lost is still confident of a spring that the destroyers envy, when the prison no longer filled with the cries of the ‘midnight’s children. The writer exhorts the land not to under

estimate the love of people like him who has 'borne no children' in the land of anarchy. At this point the writer shares his thought that it is not the anarchism that he meant for freedom.

In 'Farewell' the promised land is equated with Paradise where the happiest father and mother are cursed for disobedience. The guardians of this paradise are not the angels, but the Army convoys. For them peace may be the absence of wars even if they did not study the structuralism: "They make a desolation and call it peace. /Who is the guardian tonight at the gates of the Paradise?(9-10)Freedom lies not even in their wild dreams. The mosques and temples are locked here i.e. the freedom to worship in religions is under threat. The 'you' of this poem may be the symbol of the land, the 'track' of which the poetic persona lost at a certain point. However his memory is in fact the narration of the personal history of the land, when the reflections of the temples and mosques joined hand in hand in the lake. They were complementary and supplementary like a bride and bride groom and poetic persona doubts that the land soaked saffron to pour on them to bless the union. Here also he contrasts the freedom he witnessed in the west with his own country: there 'we' move

with our doors in our hands' and windows in children's hands, but here if one switch to open it, the country will be torn in to pieces. The barbed wires enclosing the boundaries are not only closed but also guarded. The writer fears the attitude the land has inculcated towards opportunists or selfish citizens of it and expresses his feelings of acceptance of the charge of deception: "I am everything you lost. You can't forgive me. / I am everything you lost. Your perfect enemy"(29-30). The ambivalence and irony are portrayed in the line containing the extremities i.e. 'the river of hell flowing through the Paradise'. By its beauty Kashmir is a Paradise for Tourists. But to the natives because of the multifaceted trouble they encounter due to communalism, terrorism, sectarianism and some sort of civil wars going on, the river or the life preserving force, the source of water appears to be life taking i.e. anything that is expected to protect a generation whether it is Government, religion, takes the life and freedom of the believers making them anarchists.

We are inside the fire, looking for the dark,/ one unsigned card left on the street says.(25-26) when it came to the sight of the witness (Shahid). When the freedom is threatened, one is compelled to be a refugee,

when the communication is dropped one may feel to be confined, he says in 'Country without a Post Office'. Undoubtedly one is threatened to be silent or to reduce the voice representing freedom to silence with the hope of finding a direction or the reestablishing of lost benefits. The condition that led to this house imprisonment is quite evident when the poet says:

The houses were swept about like leaves

For burning. Now every night we bury

Our houses and theirs, the one left empty.

We are faithful. On their doors we hang
wreaths.(19-22)

The house, the miniature of the cultural community is walled with fire and so is the land itself. However the "fire prophets" predict rejuvenation, a phoenix like rebirth for the land. The destruction conveyed a new message of survival to the prisoners who are free- the message of autonomy. The collaborators of time will not recognize the occurrence of the footprints of the new world in the leftovers of fire. The bodily confinement is well expressed through the images such as 'foot print', 'finger print', 'fingers at the edge of

pain’, etc. The inhabitants of the land knew well that even at times they will have to evacuate the land, in future they have to return because they are tied to the land by the chains of history and heredity. Hence the land which is free outwardly has turned to be a place of confinement and by proposing certain code of conduct such as to be deaf and to be silent to listen to the authority as a “mirror”; the individual, for survival , should forfeit his freedom.

The poem ‘Snowmen’ should be read as an extension of this imprisonment because the snowmen about whom the writer speaks in the poem are not only the ancestors of Kashmiri Muslims, but also the embodiments of emancipation. They being a wandering cult the historians could sense their breath in arctic, and the Anthropologists found their Skelton out from glaciers. They came from Samarkand. But the same wandering ancestors tied the forthcoming generation to their place of permanent occupation. This truth is evident when the poetic voice says:

No, they won’t let me out of winter,
and I have promised myself ,
even if I am the last snow man,

that I will ride into spring

on their melting shoulders. (19-23)

So not merely his personal association is the factors that lead the Kashmiri to stick to the 'house and land' but the collective memories lying at the basement or buried under the snow have their own roles to be enacted. Though he is with the homeland inwardly his body cannot obey his mind's call due to practical reasons: his identity is transformed and so is the land. In order to maintain the rapport he had, he made it shrink to his mail box and thereby balances the two souls dwelling in his breast.

Agha Shahid Ali not only depicts the past of the country, but also the future of the past metaphorically. In the poem 'A Lost Memory of Delhi', he writes:

I want to tell them I am their son
older, much older than they are
I knock, keep knocking

but for them the night is quiet
this the night of my being

they don't they won't

hear me they won't hear
my knocking drowning out
the tongues of stars.(25-33)

'I', in the poem may be the Promised Land and it continuously knocks at the doors of ancestors to make it free. But the ancestors either may not be aware of the presence of their followers or they may feel his existence to be safe as he is secure inside the mother land. But the promised one seeks autonomy which is discarded in the enthusiasm of the night of union and partition of the wedding night on 14th August 1947. In "Memory of Begum Akhtar", the poet admitted the meaninglessness of the post mortem of the loss of freedom. The land is already dead, he continues:

One cannot cross-examine the dead,

but I've taken the circumstantial evidence,
your records, pictures, tapes,
and offered a careless testimony.

I wish to summon you in defence,

but the grave's damp and cold, now when
Malhar longs to stitch the rain,

wrap you in its notes: you elude
completely. The rain doesn't speak,
and life, once again, closes in,

reasserting this earth where the air
meets in a season of grief. (28-39)

The metaphorical language and the images of his nostalgia ,softened anger and grief cover the reality by displaying the omniscient feeling as purely personal. But the trauma of being deceived is opened up in plenty of subtle images. But Ali still carries the flags of hope as he clearly states in “A Pastoral”:

We shall meet again, in Srinagar,
by the gates of the Villa of Peace,
our hands blossoming into fists
till the soldiers return the keys
and disappear. Again we'll enter
our last world, the first that vanished. (1-6)

Spirituality, religion, politics, hybridity and transnationalism cultivated the vision of land in Agha Shahid Ali's poems. In addition to them a psychological pull towards the collective unconscious of his predecessors prompted him to talk about the issues related to the Kashmir conflict and to pronounce the agonies of land through poetry. The typical medium of ghazals invited the readers' attention to the tradition of Indian Islamic art and music, the dying Urdu lyrics and the rendition of that through a foreign tongue. The global significance of the territorial division is also pointed out through metaphors and images. Even amidst these conflicts the writer is still optimistic about the second birth of his country that he, through his everlasting poems of lyrical nostalgia, set the atmosphere for the abandoned tryst between his land, Kashmir, and freedom, the percept of each and every citizen of Kashmir to which the writer identifies himself.

Bibliography

Ali, Agha Shahid. *In Memory of Begum Akhtar and Other Poems*, Writers Workshop, 1979.

--.*The Half-Inch Himalayas*, Wesleyan University Press,
1987.

--.*A Walk Through the Yellow Pages*, Sun/Gemini Press,
1987.

--.*A Nostalgist's Map of America*, Norton , 1991.

--.*The Beloved Witness: Selected Poems*, Viking Penguin,
1992.

--.*The Country Without a Post Office*, Norton, 1997.

--.*Rooms Are Never Finished*, Norton 2001.

--.*Call me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals*, Norton ,
2003.

--.*The Veiled Suite: Collected Poems*, Norton , 2009.

Dharwadker, Vinay and A.K. Ramanujan. Editors. *The
Oxford Anthology of Modern Indian Poetry*.

Oxford University Press, 1996.