

DEATH AND LAMENT IN AGHA SHAHID ALI'S POETRY

By

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Abstract

At present, when Agha Shahid Ali is read widely in the academia, to re-read it in the present scenario and to give meanings to the texts from different angle is necessary. The paper aims to analyze the frequent references of death and lament in his poems. Ali, through his poetry, seeks to bear witness to the tragedy, and through the metaphor of letters and post office, he tries to narrate the tragedy to the world. The paper outlines the concept of "death" in Agha Shahid Ali's poetry highlighting instances of death, including death of his mother, poets, Kashmiris and of himself, which he predicts in one of the poems. This paper emphasizes the idea of death, conceptualized by Jacques Derrida as an analytical tool to understand the death as idea the trope of Agha Shahid Ali and the concept of minor literature proposed by Giles Deleuze to delineate the from the image of "popular". Furthermore discuss the strong philosophical influence of Shia Mystical Tradition in the continuous imagination of "becoming". The paper underlines the interchange of paradise to hell in his works and on the concept of "home". Accordingly, the paper throws light on the poet's lament on the barbarism and violence perpetuated against the people at the time of war, and the brutality of war affecting even the communication, like receiving the mail or listening to the radio.

Keywords: *death and lament, agha shahid ali's poetry, philosophical influence.*

Introduction

The Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali, true to his name, bears "witness", ("*Shahid*" in Arabic means "witness". The same words are written as his epitaph) to the tragedy of his homeland. The frequent references of death and lament in his poetry highlight the violence and turbulence swamped in his home country,

Kashmir. Ali, like all poets in the diaspora (*The term was originally engaged explaining the botanical phenomenon of seed dispersal but in contemporary*), struggles to deal with the psychological demands of being away from homeland. As Vijay Mishra (*Vijay Chandra Mishra is an academic, author and cultural theorist*) states, "All diasporas are unhappy, but every

diaspora is unhappy in its own way” (189). Ali’s poetry plays a very active part in projecting perpetuated trauma as well as mediates the socio-cultural and political experiences of the people of Kashmir. The memories of loss and the reversal of “paradise” (*Emperor Jahangir is reported to have called Kashmir as “paradise” and said soulfully about Kashmir that, “If there is paradise on Earth, it is here, it is here, it is here.”*) to hell, which brutally murders humanity creates a psychosomatic trauma of displacement in the poet and it is evident in his poetry in the form of recollections, memories and nostalgia. The poet laments in his poem “Farewell”: “I am being rowed through Paradise on a river of Hell: // I hid my pain even from myself; I revealed my pain only to myself” (Ali 177). The poet’s relationship with Kashmir is of a yearning for the lost home and lamenting over the catastrophic events taking place there. Even though the poet passed away in December 2001, the timelessness in his works and his mastery over verse calls for renovation in understanding. Ali’s poems lament the breeding violence and voice for love, peace and friendship. The poems

fit perfectly even in these times as the call against hatred and violence is continuing. His words wounded by the ongoing violence project a literary tradition in which the people of their homeland speak their innate sentiments. Most of his poems brim in lament or sorrow of loss as Salman Rushdie states in *Imaginary Homelands*:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles, or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutilated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must do in the knowledge - which gives rise to profound uncertainties- that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost, that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (10)

Instances of Lament in Ali's poetry

There is a culmination of intense grief and sorrow in the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali which is explicitly presented. To be in sorrow is a natural process through which all human beings go in one point of time in their life after they suffer any material loss or physical loss. The excruciating pain one feels after hearing any disturbing news about the homeland or near ones when away from them is more. The intense loss and sorrow experienced in the state of exile are difficult to handle that far away from their roots people naturally feel more sensitive and emotional about their homeland. For a few decades the turbulent political condition in Kashmir had been subject to continuous turmoil followed by the military crackdown. Kashmir stands alone as the world's highly militarized zone with death as "preconditioned" possibility. Life inside Kashmir Valley has been unparalleled to the sufferings in history, until today. Agha Shahid Ali's lament is not just based on the dreadful events that took place in 1990 events but it dates back to five hundred years ago, when Yousuf Shah Chak, the last emperor of Kashmir was

exiled by Mughal emperor Akbar. The poet correlates the past with the present and feels homesick on the tragic story of Yousuf Shah Chak and Habba Khatun (*Zoon, or Habba Khatun, was a famous 16th century Kashmiri poet and was credited with being one of the few to introduce romantic lyricism into Kashmiri poetry. She was a peasant woman who married the last emperor of Kashmir, Yousuf Shah Chak. She spent her days singing her songs in the Valley, when her husband was imprisoned by Emperor Akbar*).

And will the blessed women rub the ashes together? Each fall they gather chinara leaves, singing what the hills have reechoed for four hundred years, the songs of Habba Khatun, the peasant girl who became the queen. When her husband was exiled from the Valley by the Moghul king Akbar, she went among the people with her sorrow. Her grief, alive to this day, in her own roused the people into frenzied opposition to Moghul rule. And since then Kashmir has never been free. (Ali 2)

The poet implants characters to portray the intense pain of death and destruction plagued throughout, irrespective of past and present, unifying personal losses with the world's losses. He highlights the uncertainty and the hope he holds of having a proper meeting with his friend, Irfan in *The Country Without a Post Office*:

When you leave home in the morning, you never know if you will return. We shall meet again, in Srinagar, I want to answer Irfan. But such a promise? I make it in Mandelstam's velvet dark, in the black velvet Void.
(Ali 1)

Concept of Death and Life

Death is a loose but very persistent line that may be drawn under most elegiac literature until the advent. It insists on a certain "becoming" through a premeditated and continuous process of "death" and "resurrection". According to Derrida, the end of the world is the only possible response to the death of the other. Derrida following the death of his friend Paul

de Man in 1983 started to organize his thoughts and later developed it in his text *Mémoires* (1989). The core argument proposed by Derrida questions the foundational arguments of Freud in his essay "Mourning and Melancholia" which argues trauma as healer mourner. Derrida questions the centrality of argument by Freud and proposes what he says "unsuccessful" or "resistant" mourning. Derrida's argument contradicts the idea of "successful mourning" that heals the trauma. Furthermore, he argues that any personal, socio-political, aesthetic or intellectual involvement with mourning must, first and foremost, be "unsuccessful". Like Derrida, Agha Shahid Ali's mourning too is not a healing process. In *Rooms are Never Finished*, the last collection published before his death, depicts the loss of his mother with his loss of his homeland, highlighting his personal sorrow and grief in this way. The collection presents Ali's reflection of memories and people, who were very close to him particularly his mother, poet James Merrill, Iqbal Ahmad and Begum Akhter, who left this world and left the

poet alone to lament. Ali states that "The Beloved leaves one behind to die" (3). Most of his poems like "Bones", "Dear Editor", "Cremation", "Autumn in Srinagar" and "Farwell" portray the intense grief largely because of death and destruction in the Kashmir valley. Ali presents a multilayered reality of death and rebounds in the face of death, bringing back who already passed away. In "Rooms Are Never Finished", the poet presents the weeping of Abraham, Angels and even God weeping as "Hussain's blood streams the desert" (Ali 275). Ali writes it down in present tense because he believes that the chapter of Karbala is not yet over and still he awakes pain in him. The whole collection depicts intense grief, loss and separation of his beloved ones but they have not left, but comes back to the poet from time to time.

Ali writes:

The years are dead. I'm

Twenty, a mourner in the
Mohorrum Procession, mixing
blood with

Mud, memory with memory. I'm
Still alone. Death filled the
years, there

Was no time to mourn ...
Grandfather Still mocks me in
my dream: did

I light the oil-lamp at this tomb?
(Ali 11).

In the Bone-Sculpture, there is a late autumnal mood encompasses which depicts a world beyond redemption, resigned to material corruption and a legacy of bones and dust. The grandfather revisits Ali even after the death and mocks him, asking to light the oil-lamp at his tomb. "I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight" shows his explicit sorrow over the dreadful massacres of innocent people that took place in the Srinagar city during the 1990's. Ali talks about the Rizwan (*Rizwan is an Arabic word which means gate keeper of paradise, and with his death, paradise on earth. Rizwan was a teenager, son of Molvi Abdul Hai, to whom the poem has been dedicated. He went to cross the border in the early 1990s and got killed on the border while coming back. He is among those*

unburied boys who never returned. His father later on built a college in memory of his son, named Rizwaan College of Education, where the poor are given free education), the victim, one among many who face the same destiny of death in Kashmir. Rizwan is hounded by the army as he begs for his life and repeatedly proclaims his innocence but death becomes his ultimate fate. The poem talks about the mass killing of fifty innocent people who were shot by the so called security forces during the funeral procession of the chief cleric of Kashmir, Maulvi Mohammad Farooq who was shot dead by the unknown gunmen at his residence. The poet talks about the curfewed night in which shadow of a boy "is running away to find its body" (Ali, 178). The body has long left the soul but the "shadow" is running to find its body and all that can be heard is a cry "I know nothing" (Ali 178). Death has happened to the body but the soul of the boy who has been "cold a long time now" (Ali 179) pleads the poet, "Don't tell my father I have died" (Ali 179). The poem presents a glimpse of interrogations Kashmiri boys underwent which have been ghastly

and full of horror. The shadow which still searches for its body tells the poet: "Each night put Kashmir in your dreams" (Ali, 179). The poet does not view death as the termination but is an unending process. Rizwan is depicted as a shadow, roaming the streets of Srinagar, searching for his body. The boy's troubled soul witness further atrocities, such as the torturing of a prisoner by dripping molten tyre on his back. Ali, saddened by the pathetic situation replies, "I won't tell your dad you have died, Rizwan" (180) and ties a knot with green thread at Shah Hamdan's shrine, only to be untied when the atrocities end.

The poem "Cremation", the four line poem appeared in the anthology, *Bone-Sculpture*, is a perfect example for the transcendental nature of death. The poet writes:

Your bones refused to burn
When we set fire to your flesh
Who would have guessed

You'd have stubborn in death?
(Ali 19)

The poet's disillusionment with the past finds eloquent expression again in

this poem. He dramatizes the restrictive hold of the past manifest in his ancestors. He writes how after their death, their “bones refused to burn”; the poet consciousness doesn’t allow them to leave this world for his present personal state of self-imposed exile in the America is bearing the same burden as they had. “I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World,” weaves death and love together in the figure of a mysterious Beloved, as Ali asks, “will he who wears his heart on sleeve eaves drop always, in his inmost depths, on a cruel harbinger?” (321). With his words, Ali question even death. The poem “I Dream I Am the Only Passenger on Flight 423 to Srinagar” is combined with the memory of Begum Kantar’s death, the siege of Holy Shrine Hazratbal in 1994, Lal Ded’s (*The female mystic poet*) famous encounter with Sheikh Noor-ud-Din, The most revered Saint in Kashmir and the burning of his shrine at Chrar-e-Sharif (*A small town in the central Kashmir*). The poem narrates the haunted and the desolate picture of the valley and is a blend of history, poetry, and politics but it ends on a gloomy and sorrow note. The death of Begum Akhtar, a

famous Ghazal singer becomes the “heart of perfume” and the burning of holy shrine at Chrar-e-Sharif is a catastrophe for him. Her songs were once joyful and soulful but now she is dead and lies forever in her solitaire is unbearable but irrespective of her death she keep singing to the poet. The siege of army around the holy shrine of Chrar-e-Sharif and the bloodshed and destruction makes the poet grief stricken over the loss of heritage. The songs of Lal Ded reverberate again in the valley as the violence and sorrow ceased the peace of valley. The poet says after the female mystic poet Lal Ded, Sheikh Noor-u-din Nooraini, her perfect heir in the form of but the ongoing violence has reduced his shrine of spirituality and redemption to the ashes. The ongoing bloodshed aches his sensibility. The poet captures the misery of people and the loss of heritage and spirituality when the devastating fire destroys the holy shrine of an esteemed saint, Sheikh Noor-u-din Nooraini.

Voicing the minority

The voice of Agha Shahid Ali is seminal as he speaks mostly about the under

privileged be it people of Kashmir, Bosnia or Native Americans. Ali's poetry mourns and lament at the loss of their people in the lap of violence and gathers a wider compass, which addresses the grave concerns of the besieged people. The language and the way minorities communicate differently from the majority and most conflict with their interest. Minor literature is not the literature of a minor language but the literature a minority makes in a major language. But the primary characteristic of a minor literature involves all the ways in which the language is effected by a strong co-efficient of deterritorialization. As Nishat Zaidi notes that "Agha Shahid Ali's poetry is a serious attempt to make his culture known to the world" (3). Writing is an impossible task/action at many points, the state consciousness (most of the nation's consciousness is defined by the state). This agent pauses impossibility to expression and oppressed minorities construct their language to communicate the conflicts of "self". It is political which communicates with the social and cultural milieu at large and is

completely different: because it exists in a narrow space, every individual matter is immediately plugged into the political. Thus the question of the individual becomes even more necessary, indispensable, magnified microscopically because an entirely different story stirs within it. As Humayoun states, "Agha Shahid Ali through his poetry is trying to do the same: foregrounding violence and bearing witness to the events which might be forgotten when the events of bloodshed end" (70). The poem, "A Villanelle" is written in the backdrop of the violence in Kashmir depict the horror of violence in Kashmir that the poet says that: "When you leave in the morning, you never know if you'll return" (Ali 78).

Concept of self and other

Agha Shahid Ali's poetry is quite literally rooted in the Shi'a narratives that Ali recounts in his last volume, but it is also in the trauma of approaching death, the deterioration of the speaker's body, and the images of torture relayed in the war-ravaged Kashmir. He contextualizes his personal and the collective sorrow of

Kashmir's when he captures the spirit and the battle of Karbala, place where the grandson of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) was martyred. Rather than an individual "self", Agha Shahid Ali presents a "communitarian" one. As French philosopher Christian Jambet says the relationship between God and human is not vertical which means that it is not hierarchical of being a master and slave but horizontal. There is not any barriers of law between a man and his Lord; that freedom as Jambet calls is "Creative Freedom". There is always a mystic process of "becoming" where the soul yearns to go back to the God and this gives new imaginations to the concept. To get back to God in its best form, it is necessary to get rid of the ego that stirs within human mind. Thoshiko Izutsu (*Japanese philosopher of language and mysticism and an Islamic scholar*), writes beautifully about the meeting of Prophet Moses with the God in a metaphorical angle. He says that Prophet Moses saw God only after removing the stick from his hand. Izutsu refers to the stick as the ego of the man and says that without removing those, self-annihilation is not

possible, thereby returning to the God too is not possible. As the saying by Ibn Arabi, "He who knows himself, knows his Lord" and the process of knowing is "unveiling". The "annihilation of self" is present in the Shiite mourning of Karbala in Muharram. Likewise, Agha Shahid Ali, pains his own "communitarian self" and asks for forgiveness on his behalf rather than writing about the ones who really caused the bloodshed in his homeland. Thereby, he is on the process of "becoming". By mourning, Ali shows his spiritual renovation as well as he trying to regain his lost paradise.

The people celebrate Karbala every year simultaneously they also celebrate the death anniversary of their loved ones in Kashmir for "Death has turned every day in Kashmir into some family's Karbala" (Ali 253) and he states that, "only Karbala could frame our grief..." (Ali 258). The political instability and the unending bloodshed in Kashmir makes the battle of Karbala become more symbolic in terms of sorrow and struggle. The tone of whole poem is elegiac as the poet compares the night of Karbala with the curfew night of Kashmir and expresses

his pent of sorrow over the martyrs of Karbala and the mass killings in Kashmir. The images associated with Karbala indicates the poet's personal lament when his mother died and was accompanying her coffin to Kashmir as per last wish to be buried there and the grief caused by the violence ridden Kashmir. His influence of Shia Metaphysical tradition opposes the death of "other" and metaphysical (resurrection) concept becomes that concept's condition of possibility. The death, destruction and the daily funerals in which a helpless father gives shoulder to the coffin of his son projects Kashmir as a kind of modern Karbala.

In the poem "In Search of Evanescence||" Ali recollects the memory of death of an eighty-year old who was the last surviving person to speak an ancient language called Oubykh, which has a Turkish origin. The poet sees an ancestral connection with the language and the dead man because his paternal ancestors were also Turks and the first word of his name Agha signifies a Turkish lineage. For Ali death of a person signifies death of a tribe, landscape and the

death of a language too. Ali portrays the biblical theory of death, alienation and loss while lamenting in a town where in which the river Sind flows besides his mother, in the poem, "By the Waters of Sind". After losing his mother he fights with nature and his own self because the loss of mother and motherland is unbearable. Ali remains engrossed with the feelings of lamentation, appears as a post-colonial poet, mourning dead aspects of his native culture while advocating the complexity of his tripartite heritage.

Pannian Prasad in Edward Said and the Question of Subjectivity writes:

Although Edward Wadie Said always hated the idea of origins, most biographical accounts portray him as an Arab-Palestinian Christian born in Jerusalem—referring to this geographical place as a point of his origin. However, for Said, Palestine was only a beginning rather than an origin. For, "[b]eginning is basically an activity," writes Said,

"which ultimately implies return and repetition rather

than simple linear accomplishment.” While origin often implies a theological/divine association, both beginning and beginning-again confirm “a radical severity and verify evidence of at least some innovation—of having begun” (Beginnings: Intention and Method xiii). In this sense, it is appropriate to say that Said began his life with Palestine rather than he originated in Palestine. (1)

Agha Shahid Ali, despite his expatriation, unlike Edward Said, considered himself an American poet, and he insisted on identifying himself as Kashmiri. His poetry is a continuous process, unending, that constitutes a homeland, which is constructed through this continuous process. He never proposes the death of “other” in order to imagine the homeland, instead he questions, critique, deconstruct and proposes death to “self” and imagines a radical “becoming” through this recurring process he constructs a homeland. He is known for his prominent literary works as a way both of circumventing traditional

philosophical problems and of renaming them by highlighting their fundamental questions. Death is usually considered as a terminal experience and post-death as a territory inaccessible for human intelligibility to penetrate. It is conceived as an idea of loss enormously in traditional Indian literature and there is an excess of such literature. But, death can be considered as an idea of transcendence reconditioned by possibility of “becoming”. Agha Shahid Ali relies on the continuous possibility of death. In this process designates the death of the self, in contrast to the death of the “other”.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that death in Agha Shahid Ali is a continuous process, an unending process that constitutes a homeland, which is constructed through this continuous process. The poet never proposes the death of “other” in order to imagine the homeland, instead he questions, critique, deconstruct and proposes death to “self” and imagines a radical “becoming” through this recurring

process he constructs a homeland. Agha Shahid Ali is known for his prominent literary works as a way both of circumventing traditional philosophical problems and of renaming them by highlighting their fundamental questions. In this process designates the death of the self, in contrast to the death of the other. Throughout his poetry the influence of

Shia Metaphysical tradition opposes the death of “other” and metaphysical (resurrection) concept becomes that concept’s condition of possibility. The central outcome of this paper is deepening of the understanding of Agha Shahid Ali, based on the understanding “Agha Shahid Ali as an idea “itself: that is, self/ other, life/ death, becoming/ resurrection.

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To cite this article

Adhila Abdul Hameed. (2022). Death and Lament in Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry. *John Foundation Journal of EduSpark*, 4(2), 19-31.

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