

# **الوطن المفقود وقصائد الألم: دراسة موضوعية المنفى في قصائد مختارة للشاعر أغا شهيد علي**

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**Lost Home and the Poems of Pain: A Study of the  
theme of Exile in Selected Poems by Agha Shahid Ali**

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### المستخلص

تناول هذا البحث موضوعة الوطن المفقود والمنفى في قصائد الشاعر الأمريكي من أصل كشميري، أغا شهيد علي. يسعى البحث إلى تسليط الضوء على قضية الوطن الجريح في شعر أغا علي وتأثيرها الكبير على الشاعر وبيان فكرة الكتابة والعيش في المنفى بعيداً عن الوطن الأم، الأمر الذي يفسر الارتباط بين حالة المنفى وإحساس الشاعر بالألم والضيق. ويركز الباحث حصرياً على تحليل قصائد مختارة من المجموعة الشعرية "البلد الذي ليس فيه مكتب بريد" (١٩٩١) التي تروي تجربة خاصة في المنفى، ويحلل الأساليب المختلفة التي يوظفها الشاعر في وصفه الألم والمعاناة والشوق لوطنه من جهة وحالة الدمار والخراب الذي حل في كشمير بسبب الحرب من جهة أخرى.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المنفى، الوطن المفقود،

الحنين إلى الوطن، كشمير، الألم والتوق

### Abstract

This paper offers an analysis of the poetic representations of lost homeland and exile in the poetry of the exiled poet, Agha Shahid Ali. It endeavors to bring into focus the question of home and exile and the idea of writing and living far away from home, which may approach the correlation between the state of exile and the poet's sense of pain and loss. The paper concentrates exclusively on the collection the Country Without a Post Office (1991) which narrates a special experience of exile. The paper applies theoretical perspectives on the exile and the emotional states associated with it such as loss, pain, nostalgia and longing for home. It examines the different approaches employed by the poet in depicting pain, suffering and agony for his homeland .

Keywords: Exile, Lost Home, Nostalgia, Kashmir, Longing, and Pain

## Introduction

Over the history of humanity, stories of exile and dispossession are always replete with the feelings of loss, pain and mourning. In Adam's exile from Heaven, the captivity of the Jews, the exodus of the Armenians, and the migration of Indians, Arabs and Africans, tragedy and suffering lie at the heart of the exile's journey. According to Edward Said, exile is "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (2002: 173). Originally, the word exile was used to refer to a banishment, the practice of compelling a person to depart his country (Ibid). Exiles are similar to, but not identical with refugees, expatriates and émigrés. However, these terms are interchangeable in practice to denote displaced people from their native homelands, even when they voluntarily leave it. In his article "Edward Said and the Space of Exile", Barbour D. John states that "exile is dwelling in a space with a constant awareness that one is not at home. The exile is oriented to a distant place and feels that he does not belong where he lives" (2007: 293).

The identity of the exile is an important issue of scrutiny because it transforms from a familiar world into a completely new world. The exile develops a feeling of foreignness due to being out of touch with his/her land, people, language and culture. He/she has a foreign world to familiarize with\_ a new language, a new culture and new people who are different from him. The process of adaptation in the new world is highly intricate, and it differs in nature and time from one person to another depending on many intrinsic and extrinsic factors. This metamorphosis strongly influences identity and all its aspects. The identity of the exiled becomes hybrid, embracing multiculturalism and multilingualism. In fact, the exiles are always torn between their past and present. Once they become acclimatized to their new life, yearning for old good days agitate in them volcanic feelings of nostalgia for home. Hence, feelings of loss, pain and anguish are always accompanying exiles since they are nor here, nor there hanging in the space between earth and sky.

### 1. Agha Shahid Ali: Life and literary career

Agha Shahid Ali was a renowned Kashmiri- American poet, critic and translator. He was born in New Delhi, India on the 4th of February 1949, to a distinguished and highly educated family. His father, Agha Ashraf Ali, was a well-known educationalist in Jammu and Kashmir. Ali

grew up in Kashmir where he attended the Burn Hall School and later the University of Kashmir. After graduation, he returned to New Delhi to do his Master Degree at Delhi University. In 1975, Ali migrated to the United States for higher studies. He joined a PhD program in the English language at Pennsylvania State University and then an MFA at the University of Arizona. Besides, he held teaching positions in many American universities like the University of Massachusetts Princeton College (Sharma and Sethi, 2005: 216).

It is in America where Ali attracted the limelight on him and shone his stardom as an American poet writing in English. He is not only the first poet who writes Ghazal poems in English but also the cultural ambassador of his country. Ali's poetry is highly influenced by his multi-religious and multi-cultural hometown, Kashmir which witnessed one of the worst conflicts in the history of India and Pakistan. His poetics makes him the spokesman of Kashmir from which he seems only physically exiled. He speaks out the suffering, displacement, and brutal violence experienced by the Kashmiri people (Nazir, 2013: 119).

Ali was a highly prolific poet. He wrote several collections of poetry including *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001), *The Country Without A Post Office* (1997), *The Beloved Witness: Selected Poems* (1992), *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991), *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* (1987), *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987), *In Memory to Begum Akhter and Other Poems* (1979), and *Bone and Sculpture* (1972). Also, he has translated into English *The Rebel's Silhouette: Selected Poems* by Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1992), and authored *T.S. Eliot As Editor* (1986). Most of his poetic collections abound with his deep sense of loss, alienation and exile. He won the Pushcart Prize and was a finalist for the National Book Award for his collection *the Country Without A Post Office*. Agha Shahid Ali has left a monumental poetic heritage that engraved his name among the great poets in the immortal world of poetry. Celebrating his Memoriam as a great poet and a teacher, the University of Utah Press awards Agha Shahid Ali Poetry Prize annually (Sharma and Sethi, 216).

*The Country Without a Post Office* narrates, in a highly poetic language, the saga of hardship, agony and longing of a helpless exile who sees from afar the bloody conflict tearing up the heart of his beloved hometown, Kashmir. The dispute over Kashmir between India and Pakistan did not stop since the partition of the two states in 1947. Ali's poems mourn the everlasting curse of war and devastation poured on his

childhood home. Kashmir, once a serene paradise known for its eastern fascination, cultural diversity and beautiful nature, has turned into a besieged distressed land. This collection establishes Ali as a spokesman of his lost home and the victimized Kashmiri people whose suffering remained muted in the English world literature. He cries out the atrocities of war inflicted upon his home and countrymen.

## **2. Ali's Exile and the Nostalgia for Home**

The theme of exile appears at the very beginning in *the Country Without a Post Office*. In the prologue to this volume, Ali takes readers back to the time of the Kashmiri King Yusuf Shah Chak who was exiled by the Mughals to Northern India until his death. Consequently, anguish and longing fill the heart of the Queen Hibba Khatoon due to the absence of the King. The poet links the continuous grief of Hibba Khatoon to that of Kashmir, which both of them are linked to his own tragedy that springs from separation. While Khatoon expresses her sadness through singing, which turns the people into opposers of the Mugul rule, Ali uses poetry (Jahangeer, 2017: 10).

When her husband was exiled from the valley by the  
Mughal King Akbar, she went among the people  
with her sorrow. Her grief, alive to this day, in her  
won roused the people into frenzied opposition to  
Mugual rule. And since Kashmir has never been free  
(2009: 172).

While he is in America, the childhood memories and the days spend in Kashmir seems inseparable from Ali's imagination. The fascination of this town has haunted him to the extent of becoming his alter ego. For Ali, Kashmir is not only a lost home fuming with violence and civil conflicts, but an enchanting mistress usurped by the political propagandas and the intrigues of politics. In *the Blessed Word*, Ali paints a portrait immortalizing his pain and nostalgia for Kashmir, flirting with her name eighteen times in different ways:

Let me cry out in that void, say it as I can. I write on that  
void: Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir, Cashmire,  
Kashmere, Cachemire, Cushmeer, Cashmiere, Casmir, or  
Cauchemer in a sea of stories? Or: Kacmir, Kaschemir,  
Kasmere, Kachmire, Kasmir. Kerseymere? (2009: 171).

According to Salman Rushdie, “the writer who is out-of country and even out-of language may experience this loss (of exile) in an intensified form.” (1991: 12). I would argue that the predicament of the exile writer's native homeland is another turn of the screw. Had Ali been a native to any other safe spot of the world, he would not have suffered all this intensified agony during his exile in America. In other words, the bloody conflict in Kashmir and the different forms of brutality that inflicted on its people left an unhealed wound in Ali's heart which consequently doubled his sense of grief, loss, and thirst for his homeland.

Ali condemns the violation of the place and the human in his city which is cut off from the world and recognized in its curfewed nights. In a poem entitled “*I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight*”, the violation of human rights is manifested in the most horrible forms. The poem touchingly narrates the murder of a victimized innocent boy in the riots of Kashmir. At the beginning of the poem, Rizwan, already dead, appears running in the form of a shadow searching for his lost body: “a shadow chased by searchlights is running/ away to find its body” (Ali, 2009 :178). After being captured and imprisoned in the camp, Rizwan sees the torture of the prisoners, crying “I know nothing.” (Ibid.). Indeed, Rizwan's heartbreaking cry is a symbol of threatened innocence that represents many other children, men and women who faced the same horror and unbearable torment. Did such an innocent boy commit a crime to see all this cruelty? His only guilt is that he was born in Kashmir. In the second part of the poem, Ali reveals the ghost's identity which belongs to Rizwan. Here, a dialogue starts between the two, and the images of death, morning and grief are at the highest:

Don't tell my father I have died,” he says,  
And I follow him through blood on the road  
And hundreds of pairs of shoes the mourners  
Left behind, as they ran from the funeral,  
Victims of the firing. From windows we hear  
Grieving mothers, and snow begins to fall  
On us, like ash. Black on edges of flames,  
It cannot extinguish the neighborhoods,  
The homes set ablaze by midnight soldiers.  
Kashmir is burning (2009: 179).

The pain of separation and nostalgia for home obliges Ali to go back to Kashmir. This time the journey is not real, but a dream. The poem “*I*

*dream I am the only Passenger on Flight 423 to Srinagar*” is an imaginary journey from America to Kashmir, Srinagar in which the poet poignantly depicts the burning of the shrine of Shiekh Noor-ud-din (Jahangeer, 2017: 12). Ali mourns the destruction of this shrine which belongs to the fifteenth century as the holy place is not only a source of peace and worship but also a part of the religious heritage of Kashmir. He invokes the spirit of the reversed Shiekh Noor-ud-din which accompanies him on his journey. While Ali is sitting beside the Shiekh's spirit in the plane taking a bird view, the ruins of the shrine appear mingled with the burning autumn leaves of Chinar to him:

The landing gear roars, we touch the ashen tarmac  
He holds my hand speechless to tell me if  
Those smashed gold flying past petrified  
Reds are autumn's late crimsoned spillage  
Rushing with wings down the mountain side  
Or flames clinging to a touched village. (2009: 187).

Ali seems on a continuous journey back to his native country and forwards to his host one trying to find a refuge to his diasporic self in this troubled world. The title poem *The Country Without A Post Office* is complex and highly allusive. It is abundant with recurring images of yearning and desire that evoke the agony of the exiled poet who struggles to grasp what is happening in his homeland and heart.

The poem's title refers to the impossibility of communication due to the absence of the post office. The opening lines suggest the poet's preoccupation with coming back to his hometown, only to find that its cultural icons have been obliterated: “Again I 've returned to this country/ where a minaret has been entombed” (Ali, 2009: 202). The minaret, a tower usually built at the corners of mosques, is used by the muezzin to call for prayers. The obliteration of the minaret not only refers to the physical decimation, but also symbolizes the loss of contact between the muezzin and the believers. The images of mass exile permeate the first section of the poem. The speaker of the poem finds out that the houses of Kashmir are empty, the people fled because of the turmoil. The plains and mountains become a shelter to the displaced Kashmir people:

Empty? Because so many fled, ran away,  
And became refugees there, in the plains (2009: 202).

Furthermore, Ali seems not only exiled from his country, but from his self as well. He is lost to himself and his homeland. Whereas in the first

part of the poem he speaks on behalf of the collective voice of his exiled people, in the second part, Ali gets through describing his personal emotions as a returning exile, searching for a nameless lost lover. He writes:

... Phantom heart,  
Pray he's alive. I have returned in rain  
To find him, to learn why he never wrote (2009: 203).

The speaker goes on a quest for a lover to whom Ali wrote many letters, but desperately did not get back from him. He keeps the name and identity of this person anonymous. The speaker looks for through the smolder and ruins of the destroyed houses, but in the vain. Interestingly, the speaker uses silence instead of voice to guide him to the right direction. Here, Ali introduces the synaesthetic phenomenon of seeing a voice.

However, in the third part of the poem, Ali's speaker does not find his loved one; instead he finds his own letters sent to him from America. It could be said that at this point, Ali finds his lost self, when he says: "The entire map of the lost will be candled" (Ibid.), indicating that self-knowledge will be possible. Addressing his own heart, Ali pleads with himself to take power from the letters:

This is your pain. You must feel it. Feel it,  
Heart, be faithful to his mad refrain—  
For he soaked the wicks of clay lamps,  
lit them each night as he climbed these steps (2009: 205).

The poem ends where all the collection starts, with the cries that the poet wants to convey to the deaf world. Finding his own letters and his friend's unsent responses to them, the poet calls for prayer, expressing his lament in "cries like dead letters." (ibid.). Ali realizes that his cry will not be heard by those who are across the continents, but the attitude itself carries real love and devotion to his beloved.

As a Shia Muslim, Ali conjures up stories from his religious and traditional heritage in order to show the world the immensity of the struggle in Kashmir. For example, in his poem *Muharram in Srinagar, 1992*, he utilizes the battle of Karbala, a central event in the Islamic history which narrates the story of Imam Hussein's martyrdom and all the men who fought by his side. Happened on the 10<sup>th</sup> of Muharram in the year 61 AH, the battle has a strong symbolic meaning; it is a battle that is fought for freedom and righteousness against the oppressive regime of



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Yazid, the Umayyad Caliph. "The poet equates the massacre at Karbala with the struggle for Kashmiri freedom. The political scuffle of Kashmir gets equated with the uprising against Yazid ... in the battle of Karbala" (Rath and Parveen 79):

Break their hands." Will ours return with guns, or a bouquet?  
Ice hardens its fat near his heart. We're cut to the brains.  
He memorizes, clause by clause, the contract for Doomsday.

We mourn the martyrs of Karbala, our skins torn with chains.  
Ice hardens its fat in his heart, and we're cut to the brains.  
Near the ramp colonels wait with garlands by a jeep.  
(O mourners, Husain bleeds, tear your skins with chains!)  
The plane lands. In the Vale the children are dead, or asleep.  
(Ali, 1997: 97).

The powerful feelings and the enormously poignant images that Ali invoked in the lines above find their way easily to the hearts of the readers. The catastrophes that happened in Kashmir echo the calamities of Imam Hussein and his family in Karbala. In both cases, the shelters are burned; men are tortured and killed while women and children are captivated. Ali invited the whole world to share with him his feelings of loss and sadness over his town. The American poet, W.S. Merwin writes: "Agha Shahid Ali's Kashmir, in his poems, is our own lost but inalienable hometown." (qtd. In Sharma and Monika, 2015: 216).

### Conclusions

Agha Shahid Ali is the poet who carries the burden of his country on his shoulders searching for a remedy to heal his wounds. Kashmir represents his case which he defends restlessly. The poet's exile from his beloved (Kashmir) created a rift which he strives to fill using poetry. His poems become the way via which he let loose his tragic feelings, pain and anguish.

The poems discussed in this paper explored the relationship between the poet and his hometown. While some poems (i.e. *the blessed Word* and *The Country Without A Post Office*) focus on the inner feelings of the poet's sadness and nostalgia due to being exiled from his country, others

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(i.e. *I see Kashmir from New Delhi* and *I dream I am the Only Passanger*) shed light on the external physical scene of Kashmir. In fact, both sides are not different since Ali and his hometown are suffering a huge turmoil. The imaginary meeting between the exiled poet and his native country which happens in *The Country without a Post Office* creates the final union between the lovers amid the total chaos and destruction.

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