CULTURAL PLURALITY AND REVIVAL: A STUDY OF THE POETRY OF AGHA SHAHID ALI

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

The thesis is an attempt to study the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali in detail trying to cover almost whole of his poetry. The thesis has attempted to examine Agha Shahid Ali’s multicultural upbringing and its influence on the themes and techniques of his poetry. Ali sees himself as a part of many cultures—Kashmiri, Indian, Islamic and Western, and his poetry gives glimpse of his journey from one culture to another, and from one home to another. He writes about his home, both old and new, and tries to retrieve the loss of his culture and home through poetry. I have approached my thesis reading whole of his poetry together, and not forming titles of the chapters based on the title of his books, but on the various themes and concerns that become subject of his poetry.

The thesis has been divided into five chapters besides Introduction and Conclusion. Chapter I of the thesis is “Agha Shahid Ali and the Modern Indian English Poetic Tradition.” The chapter deals with Ali in context of the post independence modern Indian English poetic tradition; particularly with reference to the poets like Nissim Ezekiel, A K Ramanujan, Kamala Das, Arun Kolatkar, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Gieve Patel, Meena Alexander, Shiv K Kumar etc. The chapter argues that Ali was less influenced by his senior contemporaries in India and more by English modernists like D E Hume and T S Eliot. The chapter has focused on Ali’s earlier poetry, Bone Sculptor (1972) and In Memory of Begum Akhtar(1978) which he wrote while living in India. In Bone Sculptor influence of Eliot is quite vivid as he sketches an atmosphere of a wasteland where he appears to be as skeptic and hopeless as “Gerontion” and “Hollow Man” of T S Eliot. The chapter further discusses his engagement with the Indo-Islamic tradition, and his poems on Faiz, Begam Akhtar
and other connoisseurs of Indo-Islamic art and literature. In these poems he laments the loss of the Indo-Islamic Urdu tradition which suffered a great deal in India due to partition and the post partition politics. The chapter further discusses marginalization of Agha Shahid Ali by the Indian critics. The main reasons being that his writing focuses more on the Indo-Islamic tradition and culture which, strangely, is not seen as typically Indian tradition by many critics. The chapter has also tried to explain how Ali has been doubly marginalized, both at the societal and spatial level.

Chapter II "Agha Shahid Ali and his Kashmir Agony" deals with Ali's engagement with Kashmir in diaspora: how he feels to be away from his home and how he relies on memory to seek home. Ali considered himself to be a mélange of multiple cultures which have affected his identity, but he always liked to be called a Kashmiri-American. He was passionately linked with his home and in the last days wished to die there. This is quite well reflected in his poetry, while away from home he banks on his memories which, in exile, seem to be the only comfort to remunerate the loss. But with the rise of violence in Kashmir Ali's vision shift from diasporic longing to the pain of fellow sufferers in Kashmir. The chapter has read Ali's poems as elegies on Kashmir, Srinagar and Rizwan. The chapter reads Ali's poems using Carolyn Forche's concept of "The Poetry of Witness" where to bear witness is to protest against the atrocities, as these poems might be the only evidence that the incident has taken place. These witness poems of Ali are marked with strong sense of the hidden anger, protest, fractured language and gothic imagery. In addition, the chapter has tried to read these poems in the framework of Ghassan Kanafani's concept of Resistance Literature. In addition, the metaphor of letters and messages, which overwhelm the book The Country Without a Post Office, has been analyzed from Austin's theory of the Performative language.
Chapter III “America in the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali,” attempts to situate Agha Shahid Ali in context of the Asian American poetry, particularly in relation with the South Asian American poets. America for Ali, like for many other diasporic writers, became his second home. His two books, A Walk through Yellow Pages (1987) and A Nostalgist’s Map of America (1991) focus entirely on America. The chapter reads Ali as a travel writer, who works as a cartographer, set out to sketch geographical and psychological map of America. The chapter has particularly focused on Ali’s engagement with the politics of mapping, and has tried to show how Ali’s mode of sketching the map is actually an attempt to deconstruct the colonial project where the politics of mapping was one of the power structures. In addition, Ali has focused on the plight of Native Americans: destruction of their lives, culture, places and languages in the post Columbian times. Ali has talked about vanishing of the Native American tribes and has mainly focused on their dying languages. In his poems, “A Nostalgist’s Map of America” and “In Search of Evanescence”, while describing the tragedy that befell the Natives, Ali uses Emily Dickinson’s metaphor of “evanescence”: a tendency to disappear, to vanish away, to fade away to evaporate in order to portray the Holocaust of their disappearance. Agha Shahid Ali has carried on this idea in some poems parodied from Grimms tales. The chapter has read these tales in comparison with earlier readings by some critics like Jack Zipes, Talairach-Vielmas, Carol Mavor, etc. to show how Ali’s use of parody is an attempt to tell how the violence and ideology are used in a language by the dominant to augment power.

Chapter IV of the thesis “Transnationalism, Cultural Plurality, and Sufism in the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali.” discusses Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry in relation with the postcolonial concepts like migration, diaspora, transnationalism, hybridity, cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, identity, cultural plurality, etc. The chapter
discusses how Agha Shahid Ali, in diaspora, while trying to strike a balance between the home culture and host culture attains a hybrid or pluralistic identity. The chapter, while discussing poems like “From Another Desert”, and “Rooms are Never Finished” attempts to show how, in Ali’s poetry, there is syncretism of various cultures and traditions, which make his identity, like his poetry, pluralistic and transnational. The space in which the diaporic writer like Ali exercises his craft is termed as third space; it is a space which contains mixture of different cultures where cultural meanings not only differ but, to use the poststructuralist term, also defer. The Chapter also attempts to show the influence of Sufism on the poetry of Ali. The chapter argued, in the backdrop of Amitav Ghosh’s statement that Agha Shahid Ali writes in the tradition of Rumi and Kabir, that the Sufi influence on Agha Shahid Ali is mechanical and not as a result of any lived experience as is the case with Rumi and Kabir. The chapter has further discussed some aspects of Sufism and Mysticism to mark the difference between mysticism, mystic inclination and mystic influence. In case of Agha Shahid Ali, the chapter argues, it is the cultural influence of Sufism which has shaped his poetry. The chapter has also discussed in detail various Sufi symbols and Sufi concepts used by Agha shahid Ali.

Chapter V “Translation and Transcreation: A Note on Agha Shahid Ali’s Craft.” has concentrated on the formal aspects of Ali’s poetry mostly with reference to his ghazals and translation of Faiz Ahmad Faiz. Besides, the chapter has attempted to show how Ali, like a postcolonial writer abrogates, appropriates, subverts and rejects the Standard English; and this mode of language is quite syncretistic where sounds and modes of Urdu language get conjugated with English. His use of language is eclectic where one finds a mélange of different styles which in turn affects the semiotics of his poetry. His Indo-Islamic cultural background has helped him to
achieve this. One of the most important forms that have become quite popular is his ghazals in the English language. The chapter has discussed evolution of ghazal in English literature which started from the translation of Persian classics in Victorian times, but came into limelight with Aejaz Ahmads Ghazals of Ghalib, then Ghazals by John Hollander and Adrienne Rich. Agha Shahid Ali’s Ghazals are unique in their kind for he is the first one to write ghazals in proper formal and thematic pattern with maqta, matla, qafia, radif, takhaluss, etc. In addition, Ali has written these ghazals in Indo-Islamic tradition of Ghazal writing called Sabke-Hindi and he borrows his metaphors and symbols from this tradition. The chapter also deals with Ali’s translation of Faiz Ahmad Faiz which Ali published as a book entitled The Rebel’s Silhouette. These translations are more of a transcreations, and Ali transcreates the essence in free verse which is poetic and effectual; as a result it is among the best translations of Faiz along with that of Naomi Lazard and V Kiernan. Thesis has also discussed some other forms used by Ali like canzone, Sapphic stanzas, villanelle, pantoum, etc. Moreover, thesis has attempted to throw some light upon the formal evolution in Ali’s poetry: how he moved from free verse in his earlier poetry to strict forms in his latter poetry.

Thesis has concluded that Agha Shahid Ali is a poet of loss and nostalgia, and whatever may be theme and form of his poetry it is always tinged with loss. People who mostly become subject of his poetry are the underprivileged be it people of Kashmir, Bosnia or Native Americans. Language of Ali is not typically a postcolonial use of language where a writer deliberately and consciously alters the standard language; but his alteration or juxtaposition is confluence of the language which he achieved by living and accepting the different cultures without privileging any of them.