Chapter II

Agha Shahid Ali and his Kashmir Agony.

The chapter will attempt to discuss Ali’s relationship with his home, Kashmir, vis-à-vis his life in diaspora. It will further try to show how, with the rise of violence in Kashmir, his attitude towards homeland changes from memory to mourning. The chapter will further try to discuss Ali’s poetry in the light of Carolyn Forche’s concept of the Poetry of Witness.

Diaspora as a term has become ubiquitous in our day; and like many other concepts it also dates back to the Greeks. For them diaspora was horticulture term “derived from the Greek verb speiro (to sow) and the preposition dia (over)” (Cohen viii), referring to the scattering and dispersal of seeds. The term was later used for human migration as this “etymology of seeds and sperm as carriers of both culture and reproductive capacity is central to this description of diaspora, too” (Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk 9). But diaspora until the recent past has been specifically used for Jewish displacement when they were forcefully exiled from Babylon in the 6th century BC by Nebuchadnezzar II. But with the advent of globalization, migration is the norm and people willingly travel in search of a job, an education, a business etc. making the term more general. Diaspora, in simple words, as an anthropological term, can be defined as dispersal or migration of a people, by will or force, from its homeland, where the reason may be business, war, natural disaster, forced labour, finding a job, pursuit of better education etc. This dispersal results in desire, separation, nostalgia, and inclination towards homeland; and this nostalgic condition for the roots is one of the peculiarities of diaspora. Home thus becomes a centre of focus and it haunts like anything. Yet, it is more
of an abstract idea which doesn’t have a particular given signifier: it could be a faint image of memories in the mind, a past that will no more return, loss of something that cannot be gained, in short, it is something more than a house which we miss in exile, and which we feel like a hunch or an inkling. As Lim puts it “Home’…could be a domestic site of comfort and security… [or] mythic homeland left behind… [or] multilocal, yet it is, paradoxically, never fully ours for all times … [and] Lacan would call “the never-here,” since “it is here when I search there; [and] it is there when I am here” (xiii).

Diasporic writers idealize home like a beloved who is praised like a beautiful woman, cruel when wooed, and lost when searched; therefore, never to return. Home thus becomes centre of writer’s imagination and nothing substitutes it; or it becomes, as Avtar Brah would say, “... a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination” (Brah 188). Writers in exile try to rebuild the lost home through their creative energies; and through their engagement with letters and words they try to substitute it with the house of bricks and stones. Amato notes that “Home is the site of natural epiphanies: the sky and the earth touch in a certain way, horizons are vast or impeded, light has a certain quality of radiance, rain comes in steady drizzles or downpours” (17).

Agha Shahid Ali, being an émigré living in America, feels the same way about his lost home, Kashmir. “Postcard from Kashmir” is one of the exemplary diasporic poems. In the poem Ali tries to view his past, present and the future relationship with home; and the relationship and engagement is via memory, where the poem, as Ramazani notes, “suggests that memory and artifice transform the very past he pursues” (602). He further says that “The postcolonial poem, like a postcard, risks miniaturizing, idealizing and ultimately displacing the remembered native landscape.” (603)
Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox;
my home a neat four by six inches.

I always loved neatness. Now I hold
the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.
This is home. And this the closest
I'll ever be to home. When I return,
the colours won't be so brilliant,
the Jhelum's waters so clean,
so ultramarine. My love
so overexposed.

And my memory will be a little
out of focus, in it

a giant negative, black

and white, still underdeveloped. (Ali, The Veiled 29)

Kashmir's shrinking in the mailbox for Ali is attenuation of Kashmir as an artifice
or illustration in the mind which is imagined, created and unreal, but always there to
enable the writer to be ever home. Image is based on distant memory which is blurred
and when the writer will revisit the "imagined community" he will be shocked to see the
contrast between the real and the imagined. Imagined is idyllic, pristine and beautiful, but
reality is that Jhelum won't be "so clean, so ultramarine." (Ali, The Veiled 29). The
picture in the mind through the eye of memory is like a child's fearful ghostly image,
which is surrealistic, and poet cannot find any descriptive metaphor to explain the aberrant, save “a giant negative, black/ and white, still underdeveloped” (Ali, The Veiled 29). Home thus becomes a gothic or surrealistic mental image which “exists in a fractured, discontinuous relationship with the present” (McLeod 211). Ali’s concept of home is similar to that of Salman Rushdie, who talks about a black and white photograph hanging on the wall which was taken before his birth in 1946. The photograph created a mental image of home in his mind and when he visited the house, the black and white memory in his mind was startled to see the colourful reality:

The photograph had naturally been taken in black and white; and my memory, feeding on such images as this, had begun to see my childhood in the same way, monochromatically. The colours of my history had seeped out of my mind’s eye; now my other two eyes were assaulted by colours, by the vividness of the red tiles, the yellow-edged green of cactus-leaves, the brilliance of bougainvillea creeper. (Rushdie 9)

Likewise, in “Prayer Rug” memories take Ali back to revisit the faith of his grandmother and other women, and we come to know about their prayers and pilgrimage of his grandmother to Mecca. However, between the intervals of prayers, we find women busy “pulling thick threads/ through vegetables/ rosaries of ginger/ of rustling peppers/ in autumn drying for winter…” (Ali, The Veiled 40). This putting of vegetables together by threading is essential so that they will useful in harsh winters when getting fresh vegetables become difficult. Likewise, piling up memories helps him to survive in exile, away from home. Now away from home he banks on stockpile of these memories which are the only solace in homelessness; and by revisiting these archives of memory, he
creates beautiful poems. As Rushdie puts it: “The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols and the mundane acquired numinous qualities” (10). Ali’s memories do not disown him but they remain with him and enable him, what Rushdie says, to “look back in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties— ... that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind”(10). In a poem like “The Season of the Plains” Ali’s memories take him to the memories of his mother, when she once remembered the plains of Lucknow in the mountainous valley of Kashmir, recollecting songs of thumri-singers in the monsoon rains. Ali is mixing his memories with the memories of his mother; and these memories, which he adapts into poems, become a kind of memorabilia which banks on these metaphors. And “Through metaphor”, as Cynthia Ozick says “the past has the capacity to imagine us, and we it.”(qtd. in Seyhan 23)

Given the particular feelings of the people in diaspora, however, the experience of diaspora is relative: everybody has his own particular experience. As Amato says, “All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way” (1). Accordingly, Agha Shahid Ali’s diaspora is different in its own way. Agha Shahid Ali’s engagement with his home is twofold: one, like any other diasporic writer he longs for the return; and second, it is mourning of violence and terror in his homeland, Kashmir. The poems discussed above sketch his simple longing for home and in some other poems he laments the violence in Kashmir.

“The Blessed Word: A Prologue” is a prologue to the book *The Country Without a Post Office*, indicating what the book will be about and the events it will cover, a kind
of "a preliminary discourse" (Prologue). The prologue tells us about the atrocities in Kashmir, and it quotes an epigraph from Osip Mandelstam’s untitled poem, "We shall meet again in Petersburg." Mandelstam (1891-1938), was a Russian poet and essayist, during Stalin’s rule (1927-1953) in the Soviet Union. He was an anti-conformist and wrote against Joseph Stalin’s dictatorial rule during which more than twenty million people were killed, many of whom were starved to death, and more than a million executed for opposing the government rule. He was detained for being “anti-government” in May 1938 and sent to five year imprisonment where he died of starvation the same year.

Thus, Ali juxtaposes violence under Stalin’s rule in Russia in the 1930s with the atrocities in Kashmir in the 1990s. Here Ali is not merely parodying Mandelstam’s poem, but he is also trying to bring the point home by hinting towards the catastrophe in Russia so as to portray, for his readers, the sheer height of tragedy in Kashmir. He quotes the Quran as a second epigraph to the poem (the verse which speaks about the resurrection) to sketch the image of apocalypse by juxtaposing it with the biblical apocalyptic image “burned sun” (Mandelstam) used by Mandelstam. The would-be-apocalypse promised by the scriptures, for Ali, seems to have already captured Srinagar, and Petersburg having already gone through it.¹

Ali’s promise to meet his friend, Irfan, seems to remain unfulfilled as he has made “it in Mandelstam’s velvet dark, in the black void.” (Ali, The Veiled 171) Thus Srinagar like Soviet is now black and dark due to atrocities, to the extent that “When you leave in the morning, you never know you’ll return” (Ali, The Veiled 171); which is a daily tragedy in Kashmir, now. Now grief of Habba Khatun, 16th century Kashmiri poet, Ali
feels, becomes everybody’s grief; and everybody seems to sing her poignant longings which “hills have reechoed for four hundred years” (Ali, The Veiled 172) and have passed from generations through oral tradition—a hallmark of Kashmiri poetic culture.

In henna I have dyed my hands,

When will he come?

I die, while he roams distant lands,

My heart is numb!

O, where is now the day’s delight?

I’ve waited long. (Khatoon)

Mandelstam “invents Petersburg and [Ali] invents Srinagar an imaginary homeland”; (Ali, The Veiled 172) imaginary for Mandelstam because Petersburg is no more there, neither in name nor as a capital and revolution has made it worse. “No writer”, says Berman, “was more obsessed with Petersburg’s passing away, or more determined to remember what was lost, than Osip Mandelstam.” (272). For Ali Srinagar is imaginary because he is living in the US (imaginary homeland from Rushdie), and he imagines the destruction and catastrophe of the city in diaspora.

Structure of “The Prologue” is quite different from the structure of other poems in the book. It is a prose poem, written as prose with all necessary elements of poetry like rhythm, rhyme, repetition, imagery etc. Juxtaposition with Mandelstam’s poem has an important role to play in the structure of the prose poem, i.e. to create a poetic effect, as Bertens remarks that “Parallelism and juxtaposing go hand in hand to create a ‘poetic’ effect in a prose text” (48). The poem is divided into five parts. Part I introduces Mandelstam’s untitled poem and we come to know about Petersburg, its velvet void and

60
velvet darkness. Petersburg is juxtaposed with Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir, the latter reflecting what the former has already gone through in the 1930s. In first section of the part II he cries in the void, the way he can pronounce the name of his motherland, Kashmir—may be some one hears in the void. The different ways he cries in the void reflect his desperate longing and lament for the tragedy in his motherland.

Let me cry out in that void, say it as I can. I write on that void:

kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir, Cashmir, Cashmire,

Kashmire, Cachemire, Cusmee, Cachmiere, Casmir. Or Cauchemar

in a sea of stories? Or: Kasmir, Kaschemir, Kasmere, Kachmire,


Geetha Dore comments on the Ali’s cry in the void:

The homophonic play with the name “Kashmir”... is at once a childish sputtering symbolically manipulating the presence and absence of the mother figure, a loud and repeated cry from depth of adult poet’s soul that echoes in the valley. ... (Dore 37)

In second section of the Part II, he compares the condition of Srinagar with the bleak portrayal of Petersburg by Osip Mandelstam, quoting almost half of the Mandelstam’s poem in indirect speech. In Part III, he does away with Mandelstam and Petersburg, and Srinagar becomes the point of focus. The astrological imagery used by Mandelstam, however continues here and “Guns shoot stars into the sky, the storm of
constellations night after night" continues. It's proximity on Earth (Srinagar), is sketched through the reference to curfew, identity pass, crackdown, torture etc. Ali alludes to the Quranic story in which God "must melt sometimes" to save Ibrahim's son Ishmael (Ali, The Veiled 172). The day is celebrated by Muslims as Id-uz-Zuha, but in Kashmir the festival is marked by curfew, and unlike Ishmael's miraculous escape, parents in Kashmir are no prophets, and consequently, "Son after son- never to return from the night of torture- was taken away." (Ali, The Veiled 172). Part IV talks about the blessed word, Habba Khatoun, and the continuing atrocities, with allusions to Mandelstam continuing. Allusions continue in the part V where "Srinagar hunches like a wild cat" (Ali, The Veiled 173). The poem ends with a hope that Kashmiris will surely sometime in future speak the blessed word for the first time. "The blessed word with no meaning" (Ali, The Veiled 173) might refer to Kashmir's yearning for "those days of peace when we all were in love and the rain was in our hands wherever we went" (Ali, The Veiled 195). It could also mean a peaceful solution to the issue. It can mean anything as "Mandelstam gives no clue" (Ali, The Veiled 174). It can be what Marshall Berman says: "The "blessed word with no meaning" is surely "Petersburg" itself, which has been emptied of meaning by "the black velvet void" of the Soviet night" (Berman 273).

Given Agha Shahid Ali's angry and poignant response to the bloodshed in Kashmir, his engagement with home, particularly with reference to violence and counter violence, seems to be, to a large extent, nationalistic. His nationalistic inclination, however, is not chauvinistic, but a natural inclination of love towards his homeland. As Portuguli would tell us that the "main elements of nationalism are 'territory, place and environment' (i.e. spatial entities) in relation to people and their collective memories (i.e.
temporal memories)" (qtd in Schulz and Hammer 15). Ali’s spatial memories hover around Srinagar, river Jhelum, the Dal Lake, Saffron fields etc. Similarly, his temporal entities are engaged with the memories of family, childhood etc. But, with the rise of violence in Kashmir, his spatial vision shifts from beautiful and pristine image of the homeland to the horror of bloodshed in Srinagar; and his temporal entities now imagine the “naked boy screaming” (Ali, The Veiled 174), “emptied Srinagar” (Ali, The Veiled 174), “homes set ablaze” (Ali, The Veiled 175). Thus the mood of his poems changes from song to suffering in diaspora.

“The Last Saffron” is one such poem in which he mixes song and suffering. Here Ali recollects both sweet memories and the ongoing harsh conditions in Kashmir; moreover, he is obsessed with a desire to die in Kashmir. The poem opens with the line “I will die, in autumn, in Kashmir” (Ali, The Veiled 181). The poem was published in 1997, four years before he showed his desire to die in Kashmir in a chat with Amitav Ghosh, “I would like to go back to Kashmir to die” (319). His desire to die in his homeland explains his love and affection towards it. The poem is divided in three parts; part first deals with his desire to go back to his homeland and ecstasy of his return. Describing places like zero Taxi stand, Gridlays bank etc. show his love for the city of his birth, Srinagar. There is a mixed mood of happiness of the return and terrible situation in Kashmir where he tries to “look for any sign of blood/in captions under the photos of boys, /... killed in fluted waters...” (Ali, The Veiled 181).

Part II and III of the poem deal with Ali’s obsession with death. The poem mingles past, present and the future, built around poet’s memories and imagination. Part III deals with the actual death that will take place in future, in Kashmir, “Yes, I remember
it, /the day I will die” (Ali, The Veiled 182). He seems to juxtapose his death with the killing of boys whom he laments in part I of the poem. The poem ends with a famous couplet which Jahangir (the Mughal Emperor) spoke when he had a first glimpse of Kashmir. “If there is heaven on earth/ it is this, it is this, it is this” (Ali, The Veiled 183). The couplet takes him to the idyllic past which is heavenly, but this past is also burdened with terrible history of oppression, therefore he finds the present as an outcome of the history of the successive oppressive rule.²

Agha Shahid Ali notifies us with a historical fact that since the invasion of Akbar in the 16th century “Kashmir has never been free” (Ali, The Veiled 173); and the invasion, as Schofield notes, marks “the beginning of Kashmir’s modern history” (3). The rule does not end with the end of Mughals but, as Agha shahid Ali writes, it led to the “future / into wars of succession,” (Ali, The Veiled 224) which further led “an era into/ another dynasty’s bloody arms” (Ali, The Veiled 224). That was the rule of Afghans, Sikhs and Dogras.² In addition, in the post 1947, Kashmir has been a flash point of war, and in the post-1990s, with the rise in militancy, situation has worsen with thousands of people dead. Sumantra Bose sums up the post 1947 scenario: “For the last six decades Kashmir has been a paradise lost, its people trapped in the vortex of a bitter sovereignty dispute between India and Pakistan over their lives and land” (154). Ali writes in the context of this troubled history and bloody present of Kashmir, sketching pain and tribulations.

Nevertheless, Agha Shahid Ali struggles with the subject matter of his poetry: he tries to grapple with the question whether he should continue to sing of the beauties and happy times in Kashmir, or should he write the songs of suffering, “of what shall I sing/
and not sing" (Ali, The Veiled 241). Ali chooses the latter, as Ghosh would say that he
did not take the role of victim which could have been easily his (318). Therefore, he
writes back. However, Ali was not a political activist but, as Ghosh would tell us, he was
a “secular left leaning intellectual of the Nehruvian era” (314). Ali himself acknowledged
in a chat with Ghosh that he would rather be a national than a nationalistic poet (318).
Although, he was not nationalistic in the strict sense of the word, but was resistant to the
violence in Kashmir. Therefore, in the description of the apocalypse in his poetry there
are, nevertheless, undercurrents of resistance. Schulz and Hammer say about resistance in
diaspora that “Nationalism in diasporic settings is, rather, to be seen as strategy of
resistance by the marginalized.” (17). Likewise, as Eliot says that no art “is more
stubbornly national than poetry” (qtd in Ramazani 597). Therefore, to find this national
perspective of resistance in his poetry is quite natural.

The term “Resistance Literature” was first used by Ghassan Kanafani in his book
_Literature of Resistance in the Occupied Palestine: 1948-1966_. Resistance literature
represents an “arena of struggle” (Harlow 8) for the people who are fighting and resisting
the authority and oppression. Resistance Literature cannot be pigeonholed as propaganda
literature; it is fairly a struggle with pen. It is not only a struggle against the apparent
oppression, but against the oppression of negative representation or the absence of
representation by power structures like media which, in the twenty first century, has
become one of the most powerful tool for the authority. Thus Ali's poetry is to be seen in
this context where he tries to resist the atrocities by penning them down and pining for
hope.
"I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight", one of the most poignant poems in the anthology *The country Without a Post Office*, is one such example of resistance in his poetry; where Agha Shahid Ali tries to imagine violence in Kashmir, in diaspora. He talks about the curfewed night in which shadow of a boy “is running away to find its body” (Ali, The Veiled 178). There is no body but shadow which turns into nothing inside interrogation centre where we can only hear a cry “I know nothing” (Ali, The Veiled 178). Ali tries to give us a glimpse of interrogations Kashmiri boys underwent which have been ghastly and full of horror, as they were subjected to unbearable conditions like staying in the light for the days together, electric shocks etc.

Rizwan suggests to Ali: “Each night put Kashmir in your dreams” (Ali, The Veiled 179), and he has, in fact, tried to do the same in *The Country*. Rizwan, who has been “cold a long time now” (Ali, The Veiled 179) tells Ali not to tell his father that he has died: “Don’t tell my father I have died” (Ali, The Veiled179). This is one of the most pathetic lines of the poem, in view of the fact, that even today, some parents in Kashmir seek to know whereabouts of their children, given the number of the disappeared to be about eight thousand (Essa). Similarly “pairs of shoes the mourners” is from a historical incident, when, after the assassination of Molvi Farooq, mourners were fired upon and they left hundreds pairs of shoes (pic. at Faheen58).

... 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. (Ali, The Veiled 179)

Snow falling like ash projects a very apocalyptic image: it can be literally falling of snow during winters, and ashes could be from the burning houses, set afire by soldiers. It could also be, as Faheen says, "a reference to a scene in Steven Spielberg’s Schindler’s List where ash flying from the burning bodies of Jews appears for a moment as snow" (58). It sketches an image of holocaust and apocalypse.

Agha Shahid Ali, while writing the poem, seems to have a mind of winter as he is echoes Wallace Stevens’ poem “The Snow Man”. The poem has the same mood: it is set in winter and we find a lot of references to snow, ice and cold juxtaposing harsh climatic conditions with the terrible repression.

One must have a mind of winter

To regard the frost and the boughs (Stevens)

One must wear jeweled ice in dry plains

To will the distant mountains to glass (Ali, The Veiled 178)

Likewise we also find references to other things in the poem like “His hands crusted with snow” (Ali, The Veiled 179), “I have been cold a long, long time” (Ali, The Veiled 178), “it shrinks almost into nothing, is/ nothing by interrogation gates” (Ali, The Veiled 179). They have their echo from Stevens’ following verses “Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;” “And have been cold a long time”, “who listens in the snow, And, nothing himself” (Stevens).

Perkins says about “The Snowman” that it “embodies Stevens’ central theme, the relation between imagination and reality. ... Perhaps the snowman beheld nothing only
because he was "nothing himself," Ali also talks about imagining: "to will the distant mountains to glass" (Ali, The Veiled 178) because when he "see[s] Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight" (Ali, The Veiled 178) he imagines rather sees the violence. Perkins says about Stevens' poem "We may note that the poem posits two types of listener. One would hear a "misery in the sound of the wind. . . . The other listener would hear nothing more than the sound of the wind" (Stevens). Ali's poem also has two persons, one who faces the reality, and other who imagines the reality; one who cries "I know nothing", other is who imagines the cry from the far-off place. Rizwan represents the former and Ali represents the latter.

In 'I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight', Rizwan is depicted as a shadow, roaming the streets of Srinagar, searching for his body. The boy's troubled ghost witnesses further atrocities, such as the torturing of a prisoner by dripping molten tyre on his back. Intimations are given that Rizwan is the poet's double; his Other, who stayed in Kashmir and was killed. Shadows also intimate menace and threat, as with the shadowy figures of the Indian security forces, but also the shadows of boys 'disappeared' from their homes, their bodies never found.(Chambers)

Rizwan is an Arabic word which means gate keeper of paradise, and with his death, paradise on earth, Kashmir remain dilapidated, consequently in search of peace. 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 (Nayeen). Ali laments his death referring to the tomb of a saint, where the restless shadow which was “running away to find its body” (Ali, The Veiled 178), must be resting after it could not find its bullet-torn body, which remains unburied on a mountain.

... where has your shadow fallen, like cloth
on the tomb of which saint, or body
of which unburied boy in the mountains,
bullet-torn, like you, his blood sheer rubies
on the Himalayan snow (Ali, The Veiled 180)

Mirza Waheed’s novel The Collaborator talks about the boys who met such fate. Towards the end of the novel, nameless narrator of the novel burns the dead bodies of the boys who are rotting near the borders. He talks about many such boys.

Boys from the city, boys from the village, boys from towns, boys from saffron fields, boys from the mountains, boys from the plains; rich boys, poor boys, only-child boys, and boys with sisters at home; weak boys, strong boys, big boys, small boys, singer boys, thinker boys, lonesome boys, naked boys, scared boys, martyr boys, brave boys, guerrilla boys, commander boys, soyeth winnable sidekick boys, orphan boys, unknown boys and famous boys, boys— ... (Waheed 298)

Rizwan represents them all: all the boys of Kashmir who went missing, who were interrogated, who died while crossing the border and others. At last Ali ties a knot with green thread at Shah Hamdan’s shrine, only to be untied when the atrocities end.
Agha Shahid Ali's poetry can also be read from Forche's perspective of the Poetry of Witness: a kind of poetry that gives us a different version of some happening which the harsh times fail to provide. Carolyn Forche's anthology *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*, 1993 is a massive collection (812 pages) of about 145 poets from around the orld which took her 13 years to compile. The poems cover the events like two World Wars, the Holocaust, struggles in the Soviet, South Asia, Africa, Middle East, Vietnam, the US, China, etc. The poems bear witness to the catastrophic events like genocide, prosecutions, terror, torture, exile, tyranny and repression around the world over a period of years. The volume has been very much praised; Weinberger calls it "The Quran of the witness subgenre" (Weinberger), and Nelson Mandela calls it as "itself a blow against tyranny, against prejudice, against injustice" (qtd. in Weinberger). First part of the title, *Against Forgetting*, implores us not to forget the past, so that the gory events of history may oblige us to resist the inhuman events likely to happen in the future. *Poetry of witness*, the second part of the title, asks us to bear witness to the ruthless happenings of the past, which would certainly be piled up in the books of history and journalism; but poetry provides us an alternative to visit it in touching and compassionate way, so as to empathize with the fellow sufferers of history. Poetry at the same time describes the events poignantly, therefore, emotionally attracts the reader; as a result, endowing with experience which the history is not able to offer.

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. During the troubled times in Kashmir most of the news would focus on
the city, Srinagar and news from the villages would get lost, and most of the times it was delayed or failed to make in the local newspapers. Oppression of the military was sometimes full of terror and horror in the villages, and there was nobody to record the human rights violations. Ali, in the following lines, tries to portray or witness the state of violence in the villages:

Rumors break on their way to us in the city. But word still reaches

us from the border towns: Men are forced to stand barefoot in snow

waters all night. The women are alone inside. Soldiers smash radios

and televisions. With their bare hands they tear our houses into pieces (Ali, The Veiled 194).

Ali tries to present a scene of border areas where grave human rights violations like target killing, fake encounters, etc were rife; the dead would be later on buried in the unmarked graves about which the Amnesty report came in 2011. (Thousands Lost) Ali would record it as following: “the dust still uneasy on hurried graves/ with no names, like all new ones in the city?” (Ali, The Veiled 196). Ali’s poetry, therefore, records the events in the times of terrible disaster and sketches the violence with utmost gloom. When he puts the scream of a naked boy, “I know nothing” (Ali, The Veiled 176) in writing, he in fact records the voice of the boy whose voice was silenced by the severe interrogation. When we read the poem, it seems that we must listen to the cry as sound recording rather than line on a page. It plays in our ears long after the cry has vanished into thin air, forgotten as if it never existed. The poem obligates us to remember.
Therefore, we are supposed to approach the witness poetry in such a way that it surfaces the elements hidden or forgotten, that is, to delve deep with a certain bent of mind. Forché herself tells us something about it when asked what really poetry of witness means? She says that it “had been written out of conditions of extremity. The phrase suggests a mode of reading rather than of writing. It is a way of considering a poem in the context of the poet’s experience.” (Forché, by Erin) Therefore, by giving such remarks, she makes reading a political act, suggesting an active involvement rather than passive reading i.e. reading with historical sense and humanistic vision.

Agha Shahid Ali’s poem “A History of Paisley” is one such example which is to be read or approached from historic and political sense. The poem apparently talks about a myth regarding Hindu god Shiva and her consort Parvati who reconciled after a quarrel, which Shiva commemorated by carving river Jehlum in the paisley shape. Ali, however, is implicitly foregrounding the violence in Kashmir in the backdrop of the myth. While talking about anklets of Parvati he juxtaposes it with men fleeing from soldiers: “... her anklets/ still echoing in the valley, deaf to men/ fleeing from soldiers into dead-end lanes” (Ali, The Veiled 218). Trails of blood on streets formed by feet in blood also form paisleys, and they appear like carpet at dusk in backdrop of dim light. This suggests awfulness of Mughal diadem which is being reinvented by the soldiers. But people turn blind eye to the atrocities and do not “hear bullets drowning out the bells of her anklets” (Ali, The Veiled 219). The sound of anklets, which is replaced by bullets now, is a relic of Parvati; a relic which holds a position of devotion and attachment is now replaced by a sign of terror and horror.
Language is an important tool for writing: it is the use of language which makes a work of art peculiar in some sense; like Romantic poetry is lyrical, absurd writing is full of silences and ellipsis, etc. Same is the case with Forche’s anthology where language is fractured and broken; it seems that writers have struggled to deal with language as they have not been able to articulate the thought fully.

Forche identifies fragmented language as the binding feature of her anthology. She notes that the fragment, neither new to poetry nor limited to poetry of witness, “gains urgency in the face of extremity.” Extremity leads to “shattered, exploded, or splintered narrative. The story cannot travel over the chasm of time and space. Violence has rendered it unspeakable” (Twentieth-century)

“Return to Harmony 3” by Agha Shahid Ali is one of the finest examples of the Poetry of Witness. The poem is fragmented and according to Forche fragmentation of a poem is one of the distinctive features of the poetry of witness. The poem talks about “the fate of Paradise” (Ali, The Veiled 199) when he “eavesdrop[s] on Operation Tiger” (taken from Bosnian catastrophe, which he has sketched painfully in the poem “The Correspondent”). He listens to the terrible future that “Troops will burn down the garden and let the haven remain” (Ali, The Veiled 199). Kashmir has become a house which has been put “under a spell” (Ali, The Veiled 199) by a bunker where Big B is always watching you: “Shadowed eyes watch me open the gate, like a trespasser” (Ali, The Veiled 199); and one becomes trespasser in his own house. The poem is prosaic with sentences breaking up, and two and a half page poem has about twenty paragraphs and some of them are single sentences of few words. It asks some questions which remain
unanswered. The poem is not only structurally fragmented but in terms of thought process it starts with something and the ends with something else, as conditions which the poet faces have “rendered it unspeakable.” (Twentieth-Century)

Ali’s poetry, therefore, is what Berlort Bretch calls “singing about the dark times” (qtd. in Kapsaski) that becomes an archive of miseries and sorrows, and the poets’ record. As Carolyn Forche marks “The poem might be our only evidence that an event has occurred: it exists for us as sole trace of an occurrence” (qtd in Ilesanmi 460). Thus Ali becomes the recorder of the troubled times.

During the early 1990s when militancy was very much on the rise in Kashmir, it was not only Muslims who suffered but Hindus, popularly known as Kashmiri Pandiths, were forced to leave the valley. They were caught between the militants who killed some of them and the state which failed to protect them. Many Kashmiris mourned the departure of Kashmiri Pandiths, and Agha Shahid Ali is doing the same in exile (which is voluntary unlike forced exile of Hindus). The poem “Farewell” laments the departure of Kashmiri Pandiths and reminds them of the sorrow which the poet is feeling for the people who “became refugees there, in the plains” (Ali, The Veiled 202). The poem uses the epigraph “They make desolation and call it a peace” which Calgacus said about Romans during their colonization of England. By quoting it Ali aims to deconstruct the notion of peace which the authorities try to make up. Plass notes that “By saying that the Romans make desolation and call it peace Calgacus is stripping the façade from Roman ‘peace’ and persuading the Britons to resist oppression” (33). Ali is also trying to do the same. The word desolation has a very bleak and sorrowful connotation assigned to it
which Ali tries to put against peace. *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels* tells us something about the meaning of the word “desolation”.

**DESOULATION** — The history of Israel had given to this word in a line of Christ a peculiar and sinister significance. ... [—] the idea of a wasted and depopulated land. ... To understand the full force of the term ‘desolation’, we have to add to the feature of war, as known to us, something which was then frequent accompaniment of conquest—the carrying away of a whole population captive (Desolation 453).

Thus Agha Shahid Ali’s allusion to the line is his attempt to portray the tragedy facing the whole population, be it Muslims or Hindus. The poem begins with personal pronoun “I”, “At a certain point I lost track of you” (Ali, The Veiled 175). The feelings are personal, and whole of the poem is addressed to them using “I” — the poet; however, in “The Country Without a Post Office” this “I” turns into “Us” where the poet represents all Kashmiris who, like the poet, lament the exile of Hindus (Ali, The Veiled 205). Images and symbols used in the poem are very surreal. Burying of stones so as to leave the defenseless without weapons symbolizes the height of oppression. (Ali, The Veiled 175) Image sketched by the line “army convoys all night like desert caravans” (Ali, The Veiled 175) is very pathetic as desert represents a morose metaphor for the poet (c.f. next chapter); in contrast with silence and darkness of desert, army convoys are noisy with their “smoking oil of dimmed headlights”( Ali, The Veiled 175). Image of gloom which the desert signifies is replaced by the apocalyptic image of army convoys which gives Kashmir the look of a military state. But even in this state of oppression Agha Shahid
Ali's wants to tell the Pandiths that we have not forgotten you, and we your fellow suffers, feel your pain as memory and history mingles together. Ali says that, "In your absence you polished me into the perfect Enemy" (Ali, The Veiled 176). Enemy, because he couldn't stop them from leaving, therefore this memory haunts him and a sense of guilt overwhelms him. He cannot forget the history and feels that he cannot be forgiven.

Your history gets in the way of my memory.

I am everything you lost. You can't forgive me.

I am everything you lost. Your perfect enemy.

Your memory gets in the way of my memory:

.................................

My memory keeps getting in the way of your history.

There is nothing to forgive. You won't forgive me. (Ali, The Veiled 176-77)

Ali would always turn sad when somebody would talk about Kashmiri Pandiths. He was very sad about what had happened and always wanted the Hindus to return home. He would miss the food that was particular to this community, as it became extinct with their departure making Kashmir less than it used to be. Amitav Ghosh tells us about this in his conversation with Agha Shahid Ali:
He had a special passion for the food of his region, one variant of it in particular: “Kashmiri food in the Pandit style.” I asked him once why this was so important to him and he explained that it was because of a recurrent dream, in which all the Pandits had vanished from the valley of Kashmir and their food had become extinct. This was a nightmare that haunted him and he returned to it again and again, in his conversation and his poetry. (314)

When worshippers fled the city, Hindu temples became desolate, similarly, “When the muezzin died, the city was robbed of every call” (Ali, The Veiled 202). Ali wants the temples and mosques to be full of people so that they will usher in an era of peace and harmony again. The following verse sketches a bleak image of desolation as a result of the conflict which have left the places of worship desolate.

In the lake the arms of temples and mosques are locked

In each other’s reflections.

Have you soaked saffron to pour on them when they are

Found like this centuries later in this country

I have stitched to your shadow? (Ali, The Veiled 176)

Given this bleak and desolate situation Ali feels that he is “being rowed through Paradise on a river of hell” (Ali, The Veiled 177); coining the oxymoron “Exquisite
ghost” which suits the situation as the Paradise on earth has turned hellish. And he has to row through the river of hell using his heart as paddle which is doomed to “break the porcelain waves” (Ali, The Veiled 177). He is trying to portray the pain which is so acute that he says: “I hid my pain even from myself; I revealed my pain only to myself” (Ali, The Veiled 177). In this ghostly night painful heart becomes the paddle to row the boat, and then lotus becomes the paddle as he is being “rowed- as it withers –towards the breeze which is soft as/ if it is having pity on me” (Ali, The Veiled 177). The word “lotus” gives the image of beautiful Dal Lake on which it blooms giving an aura of beauty in the Paradise on earth, but now “as it withers” it symbolizes the gloom which the valley is going through. Moreover lotus is a Hindu symbol and its withering away also connotes the withering away of community from the valley. Ali ends the poem with what seems to be a translation of Momin Khan Momin’s couplet. “If only somehow you could have been mine, / what would not have been possible in the world?” (Ali, The Veiled 177) The couplet heightens the grief as he finds no way out to return back to peace; hence there is only a wish. Agha Shahid Ali’s lament of the Hindu exodus is somewhat similar to the lament which Mahmoud Darwaish has written about the exodus of Moors from Andalusia which has been translated by Agha Shahid Ali with Ahmad Dallal. “Violins weep for a time that does not return/ Violins weep for a homeland that might return” (Ali, The Veiled 312).

In the poem “The Country Without a Post Office” he imagines the exile of Pandiths and compares it with the conditions of Muslims in the state. He finds “... each house buried or empty. /Empty because so many fled, ran away, /And became refugees there, in the plains” (Ali, The Veiled 202). He is trying to imagine the exile of Hindus
and how they would be viewing and imagining their own home. Ali can imagine it better as he has firsthand experience of exile; and “they must now will a final dewfall to turn the mountain to glass” (Ali, The Veiled 202). He now differentiates between “they” and “us”; they will see us through them, “we [who] are faithful” (Ali, The Veiled 203). Ali is trying to juxtapose two tragedies one of the Hindus in exile and other of the Muslims under oppression.

However, Agha Shahid Ali is not a political analyst who would debate the discourse of exile. He is a poet and his concerns are humanistic. Even though we find a lament for the exodus of Hindus, but there is hope of return: return of Kashmiri Pandits, and the return of peace. Feeling the agony of division between “they” and “us” (Ali, The Veiled 205), he has no prayer but “just a shout, held in, it’s US! US!” (Ali, The Veiled 205) whose letters are cries that break like bodies in the prison, echoing the cry “I know nothing” (Ali, The Veiled 178). Ali wants the return to be permanent, peaceful and possible. Even in the lament there is the agony which cries for return. In “A Pastoral” Ali is trying to garner a hope of this return: return of Hindus from exile, return of peace, and a return to the old life full of love and sharing which is symbolized by the phrase “blessed word” (Ali, The Veiled 174). The place of return is Srinagar where they will meet “by the gates of the Villa of peace”; (Ali, The Veiled 196) but the homecoming is only possible when “the soldiers return the keys and disappear” (Ali, The Veiled 196), that is when Kashmir becomes free. Ali uses the last line of Zbigniew Herbert’s poem “A Halt” as an epigraph, “on the wall the dense ivy of executions” (Ali, The Veiled 196). Herbert was a Polish poet, essayist and dramatist and an active member of the Polish resistance movement and one of the most translated poets of the post World War II period.
Herbert’s poem is full of Christian symbolism: the breaking of bread echoes the last supper, gallows echo crucifixion. In addition the setting is pastoral given the words like garden, star, cricket, thick smell of earth, the bustle of insects, violet, hill, ivy etc. (The Halt). Ali uses the symbol of ivy, as used by Herbert, saying that we will “bind the open thorns, warm the ivy/ into roses” (Ali, The Veiled 196) or “Pluck the blood: My words will echo thus/ at sunset, by the ivy, but to what purpose?” (Ali, The Veiled 197).

“Ivy has long been emblematic of death and resurrection, but is also associated with fidelity and memory. A plaque in the Mehrinplatz, in Berlin, quotes Herbert as saying “The loss of memory by a nation is also its loss of conscience,” and it’s not much of a jump to see how ivy, in that context, might come to be associated with executions, especially by someone involved in political struggle.” (The Halt)

For Ali the meaning is the same, he too wants the resurrection. He wants to undo the idea of apocalypse he sketched in “The Prologue” and wants to turn it into the resurrection of peace. But the pain of “ivy of execution” (Ali, The Veiled 196) is very severe which memory can’t undo, and he refers to it ironically in the voice of a bird: “Human beings can bear anything” (Ali, The Veiled 196). Tearing shirts into tourniquets and warming “ivy into roses” will be the end of bloodshed and Kashmir will return back to its old cultural ethos; a state of peace. In the whole poem he describes the future, but in the future he gets obsessed with the past, which actually is the present. This obsession with the present even while describing the future shows his concern with the catastrophe in Kashmir. Therefore, like Herbert, he wants to keep the memories of nation intact.
Similarly, Ali talks about the old Kashmiri syncretic culture and the burning of the shrine of Sheik-ul-Alam who was one of the harbingers of the traditional culture. The Kashmiri culture has been fashioned by old Hindu and Buddhist civilizations, and later on by Rishism. With advent of Islam in 14th and 15th centuries Sufism got introduced in Kashmir. The most important among the Sufis was the man who laid the foundations of Islam in Kashmir, Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani, popularly known as Shah Hamdan. He along with Lal Ded and Sheikhl Alam have influenced Kashmiri culture through ages. The trio represents the Sufi-Secular culture of Kashmiris where people have lived together in peace and mutual understanding which is usually called kashmiriyat. Burning of Char Sharief symbolizes the destruction of that culture at the hand of Indian military and militants. Shrine represents the spiritual centre which has shaped Kashmiri culture for over five centuries and when “Fire moves on its quick knees-/ through Chhrar-e-Sharif” (Ali, The Veiled 186) it becomes “too late for threads at Chhrar-e-Sharif”(Ali, The Veiled 187). Threads represent faith, hope, wishes and aspirations which were all turned down as the tragedy would have it, and whole village is turned into ashes including the shrine with threads tied to it. Now instead of threads we touch ashen tarmac which lays the roads of destruction (Ali, The Veiled 187). The devastation of shrine symbolizes the destruction of Kashmiriyat. Anaya Kabir talks about Ali’s “A History of Paisleys” (which has been discussed above) as a poem in which Ali is lamenting the loss of kashmiriyat by juxtaposing Kashmiri shawl with Paisley shaped embroidery with Shiva and Parvati myth:

This suturing of myth, nature and traditional Kashmiri craft— weaving embroidery—into a memorial for Kashmir, and for Kashmiriyat retrieves a
"history of paisley" that is actually a counter-history to the limitations of narratives that are not preserved in language but splintered through multiple scripts and multiple linguistic legacies" (145)

However, of late, Kashmiriyat is seen as a political discourse than a sociological or an anthropological term. For some it is impossible to return back to the old harmonized mutuality between Hindus and Muslims. For example, Neil Aggarwal says that "Kashmiriyat acts as an empty signifier, a truth beyond representation and falsification which reflects an imaginary rather than actual phenomenon" (6). For some like Hamidah Nayeem it is a "colonial discourse" constructed to pacify the resistance in Kashmir (qtd. in Ganai). Nevertheless, Ali is still hopeful for the return of mutual brotherhood and existence whatever it may mean and be.

Ali does not only lament the loss of Muslims and Hindus and their mutual living culture, Kashmiriyat; but also the incident about Hans Christian Ostro a Norwegian traveler who was taken as hostage by AL-Farhan militants in August 1995 and later on beheaded. "Hans Christian Ostro" has been described by Daniel Hall as "the most poignant of Shahid’s political poems" (Ali, The Veiled 18). The poem exemplifies Ali’s humanitarian concerns and his lament is full of pathos: "I cannot protect you: these are my hands" (Ali, The Veiled 236). In the lament Ali represents all Kashmiri people, who like Ali are grieved by the death and feel that it is unjust. And to make his point he quotes the Quran “Whosoever gives life to the soul shall be as if had to all mankind given life” trying to say that there was no religious sanctioning of the death rather it was unjust and
painful. Daniel Hall further writes about the poem and grief of Kashmiris due to death of Ostro.

Kashmiris the world over were traumatized by the news: after all, theirs is the culture in which generosity and hospitality are elevated to high moral principles. Much of the poem is oblique, but ends with a particularly haunting image, perhaps of the Kashmiri people themselves mourning the young man’s death (qtd Ali, The Veiled 8)

In describing all this violence and tribulation in Kashmir Agha Shahid Ali has used the concept of letters and messages over and again, so much so that he entitled his book dealing with atrocities in Kashmir as The Country Without a Post Office. There are many poems which deal with this subject including the poem from which the book has been given its title, “The Country Without a Post Office”, “The Floating Post Office”, “Dear Shahid”, etc.

The poem “Dear Shahid” is either a letter written by somebody to Agha Shahid Ali, or Agha Shahid Ali is addressing it to an unknown addressee, or writing an open letter where everybody becomes the reader. He quotes from Elena Bonner’s open letter to Boris Yelsen in the epigraph. In both cases Agha Shahid Ali is shahid (Arabic equivalent of witness), that is, bearing witness to the atrocities in Kashmir. The letter comes from the “far-off country, far even from us who live here” (Ali, The Veiled 194). The letter informs about the world’s unknown conflict from the place where no news escapes the curfew, and death is very common; and identity is nowhere, but in one’s pockets: “Everyone carries his address in his pocket so that at least his body will reach home” (Ali, The Veiled 194). By using the metaphor of letters and post cards and Post Office,
Ali is trying to find messages and information from the place from where no information comes out, and everybody is desperate to share the sorrow. The epigraph of the poem “...letters sent/ To dearest him that lives alas! Away.” is from G M Hopkins’ sonnet, “I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day” (Hopkins). The sonnet longs about spiritual darkness, and Ali talks about similar spiritual messages which find no answer. Spirituality has something to do with minarets which adjoin the mosques from where muezzin gives call to prayers. Now because the “minarets have been entombed” (Ali, The Veiled 202), therefore, there is nobody to invite the people: “When the muezzin/ died, city was robbed of every Call.” (Ali, The Veiled 202) Climbing the stairs of the tomb “to read the messages scratched on the planets” gives astrological imagery: as if he is trying to find a ray of hope in the darkness, for which he has nothing to light but clay lamps. He now compares spiritual messages with the messages sent via post to the persons who no longer live there. Thus the metaphor of letter for Ali is an act of witness, protest, and longing for peace.

These letters and reference to the letters and messages is Ali’s performative act, where Ali is disseminating information, even if, letters are barred and restricted. J L Austin in 1950 introduced a term called “performative utterance” to differentiate it from “constatives”, which are the expressions describing a statement as true or false. Performative utterances are statements that in talking about an action enact it. As Austin says “it seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to describe my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it” (qtd in Royle 22).” There are many types of performative utterances, for example, Derrida considers letter writing “as performative
written text, which anticipates, speaks to, and even “produce” its absent, “mute” and
“hollowed-out” addressee” (32), of which “Dear Shahid” is the best example. Similarly in
“The Floating Post Office” the post office is a floating house-boat, an attractive carriage
carrying terrifying messages of death and destruction, as the boat is “being rowed through
the fog of death, the sentence passed on our city” (Ali, The Veiled 207). The boat comes
“close to reveal smudged black-ink letters” (Ali, The Veiled 207) — an image of a blood-
stained city as in the next stanza we find “blood, blood shaken into letters” (Ali, The
Veiled 207). The whole poem seeks to carry this message across waters, “the one open
road” that seems to be closing now. The struggle to row the boat continues till the end
where he feels that letters will reach the destination “through olive/ canals, tense waters
no one can close” (Ali, The Veiled 208). In the last line he actually pledges to carry the
burden of messages from this unknown conflict, and disseminate them to the world, and
he succeeds.

Thus, to sum up, Agha Shahid Ali’s relationship with Kashmir is both: nostalgia
for the lost home and a lament for the catastrophic events taking place there. 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. He wants the end of violence and
return of peace in Kashmir, hence he resists the oppression.
Notes

1 Name of St. Petersburg was changed during the 1917 Russian revolution because they wanted the name to sound more Russian rather than German. They named it Petrograd but it was changed back to St. Petersburg in 1991 after the fall of communism.

2 Akbar invaded Kashmir in the 16th century and Mughal rule lasted from 1587 to 1752. Afghan rule (1752–1819) followed when Ahmad Shah Durrani invaded the valley in 1752, a period remembered as one of severe oppression. This was followed by a period of Sikh rule (1819-46), considered to be the darkest period ever in the history of Kashmir. Continuing this legacy of tyranny was the Dogra rule (1846-1957).

3 Paisley is a pattern used in Kashmiri shawls and called boet in the local language.

4 Parvati is believed to wear lot of jewelry including anklets which has been praised by many Hindu devotional poets. (Upamanyu)

5 There is no consensus on the number of Pandiths killed; some organizations put the figure as 399, others say that about 650 were killed. However, figures by the state say that 219 Kashmiri Pandiths were killed and about 200,000 were forced to leave the valley. Most of them lived in refugee camps in Jammu for over a decade; they have now been given permanent houses there, and many live in Delhi and other Indian cities. (Essa, Kashmiri Pandits) 19

6 Lotus is regarded as one of the holiest flowers for Hindus. It symbolizes detachment with the world, as lotus flower grows in the water without touching it.


Works Cited


