

CULTURAL KALIEDOSCOPE: AGHA SHAHID ALI'S POSTCARD FROM KASHMIR

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Abstract: Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001), one of the most prominent poets of the twentieth century, played a very significant role in the development of modern Indian literature. He was born in New Delhi in 1949, and brought up in Kashmir, while he was educated in America. He appeared on the literary scene with his debut collection *Bone-Sculpture* in 1972. Well acquainted with Persian, Urdu, Hindi and English and undoubtedly, the respective cultures, he is treated as a harbinger of cultural globalization. The language, eloquent references, symbolic, farfetched and complicated imagery result into the creation of magnificent picture coloured with multi-cultural experiences.

Keyword: Ali's Postcard , Cultural Kaliedoscope , Prominent Poets , Literature.

INTRODUCTION

His poetry collections include *Bone-Sculpture* (1972), *In Memory of Begum Akhtar and Other Poems* (1979), *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* (1987), *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987), *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991), *The Beloved Witness : Selected Poems* (1992), *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997), *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001) (Finalist for the National Book Award, 2001). His last book was *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* (2003), a collection of English ghazals. He is also the author of *T.S. Eliot as Editor* (1986), translator of *The Rebel's Silhouette: Selected Poems by Faiz Ahmed Faiz* (1992), and editor of *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English* (2000). Agha Shahid Ali died on December 8, 2001. Ali came in contact with multiple social groups and received a wide range of experiences that shaped his life and art. The experiences figure out in his poetry in the form of cultural references because every human society has its own specific culture or socio-cultural system. An individual's attitudes, values, ideals and beliefs are greatly influenced by the culture (or cultures) in which he or she lives. Agha Shahid Ali is also influenced by Hindu, Islamic, and Christian cultures in which he lived. While studying Ali, it requires tremendous efforts to explore his world of cultural experiences that find expression through his poetry. As a result, in the present paper the study of cultural aspects in Agha Shahid Ali's poems is attempted.

Ali, well-cultured in India and scholastic in approach, is studied on the basis of the wide range of experiences viz. Hindu culture, Islamic culture, Christian culture and such other cultures that he came across directly or indirectly. Culture, according to a British Anthropologist Sir E.B. Tylor (1832-1917) in his *Primitive Cultures* (1871), is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. The present paper corresponds to such definitional aspects of investigation. He came in contact with a variety of cultures, directly or

virtually, and his poems are the manifestation of those life experiences.

The *Half-Inch Himalayas* was published in 1987. It is a rich blend of multi-cultural experiences. As the present paper aims at the cultural aspects, it attempts to synthesise and generalise ethnicity, nationality and identity. Intentionally, an attempt is made to consider racial, national and emotional integers as a platform to find out multiple cultural experiences. The present collection contains numerous such scattered ethnic references.

The poem *Postcard from Kashmir* contains the critical reference of Indian chaos in Kashmir which is the Muslim density area. There is severe strife between India and Pakistan regarding the ownership of that region. Ali belongs to Kashmir where he was nourished and brought up. He underwent the culture of Kashmir but presently he writes this poem as an Indian – American poet. His remarks on his feeling are suggestive. He says,

“This is home. And this the closest
I'll ever be to home. When I return,
the colors won't be so brilliant,
the Jhelum's waters so clean,
so ultramarine. My love
so overexposed.” (Ali, 1)

It shows that there is duel in his mind because of the Kashmiri uncertainties the people of his community faced, and his deep and warm relations with that part of the world. More than rational, he feels the issue to be emotional and communal. So he refers it as “a giant negative black and white.” (Ali, 1)

Postcard from Kashmir opens with the indirect reference to the closed post offices in Kashmir. To state its theme is quite simple for it has several references that lead the poem to the theme of exile. Ali labelled as a Kashmiri poet belongs to India and has tremendous affinity to his motherland. In spite of chaos and uncertainty, he glorifies

Kashmir, Himalaya and Jhelum. His proud statement,

“This is home. And this the closest
I'll ever be to home”. (Ali, 1)

It means still at the bottom of his heart, he has privileged position for India and Kashmir. It is his Indian identity.

The Half - Inch Himalayas is the eloquent title of the collection because it stands for India and its significant role in the history, life and culture. Geographically, it stands as a pride of India. The sacred river, Ganga has its origin in Himalaya, Gangotri and Yamunotri play a vital role in Indian Economy. Jhelum, Ravi, Satlaj, Sindhu, Bias have their origins in the heart of Himalaya. Kashmir is the paradise on the earth, it is situated in Himalaya. Perhaps, Agha Shahid Ali due to the racial discrimination and religious conflict between Hindu and Muslim finds the place uncomfortable and difficult to live there. Another important interpretation that can be assigned the title is that Ali lives in America, and feels his exile and to communicate his motherland. He visualises the length of Himalaya in terms of the length of the word Himalaya or its position in the world map.

Postcard from Kashmir deals with emotional and intellectual war in the mind of the poet that makes him restless. He belongs to India and is proud of Kashmir. He celebrates the glory of Kashmir and intimacy that forces him to keep it at his heart. On the map or in his dream or vision, he sees the Jhelum's water as clean and ultramarine. But he realizes that the actual scenes and situations in Kashmir are contradictory to his perception. He says there is,

“---- in it,
a giant negative, black
and white, still undeveloped.” (Ali, 1)

There are three different references that hold this poem Indian stamp mark. The first one is Kashmir, second is Himalaya and third is Jhelum. Kashmir is the north-western region of the Indian subcontinent. It also denotes a larger area that includes the Indian, the Pakistani and the Chinese administered regions. Himalaya, mountain system, forms a barrier between the Tibetan plateau to the north and the plains of the Indian subcontinent to the south.

Jhelum River is the largest river that flows in India and Pakistan. It passes through Jhelum District and its origin is Kashmir. The poem is dedicated to Pavan Sahgal which is an indicator of his attachment to Indian people and his friends. His reference to Kashmir through postcard at the time of closed post offices signify his zeal for communication with his country.

CONCLUSIONS:-

- 1) Agha Shahid Ali's cultural aspects reflected in his poetry deal with multiple cultures in the world. He deals with life, art, philosophy, literature, rites, rituals, ceremonies, festivals, geography, history etc.
- 2) Ali attempts to integrate cultural experiences in his poetry.
- 3) Ali's poems are full of far-fetched images like metaphysical poets that aim at creating universal culture.

4) With his poems, Ali figures out to be a global citizen because of his wide range of cultural experiences.

5) Ali's poems are rich in multi-cultural references widening the sphere of national integrity to universal brotherhood.

6) Multi-cultural references in Ali's poetry distinguish Ali from other contemporary poets.

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