



Portrayal of 'Identity', 'Situational Consciousness' and 'Hybrid Voices' in South Asian context: A reading of Agha Shahid Ali's poems

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ABSTRACT

South Asian literature embarks on a pedestal where there is an amalgamation of varieties of Culture, Tradition, Adaptation and Survival. The South Asian Diasporic writers have often struggled to relocate and decipher their 'existence' in the context of Post colonialism. Consequently, the difficulty of asserting one's recognition becomes challenging when the Nations witness a change in the growth of Capitalism, especially when it is Multinational Capitalism. Due to the assimilation of Cultures and Existence, their actual identities have been deconstructed. The paper attempts to explore the portrayal of a person's Self and his or her conflict of adaptation of 'Home' in the growing Capitalist economy, as envisaged in Agha Shahid Ali's poems. Being a Kashmiri Muslim, settled in America, his poems display the instances of Diasporic sensibility, where the readers witness a crisis in Identity, Nostalgia for the Past, Longing for the roots and Disintegration of Kashmiri handicrafts and Textile industry amidst the disturbances of Terrorism. Under such circumstances, Agha Shahid Ali reflects the 'Situational consciousness' which is evident in the present Capitalist economies and their unrelenting Conflict in the present scenario.

In the wake of Globalisation, there has been a sea change in the perspectives of understanding the interchanging aspects of Capitalist economies. Due to the over surging changes in the economy after the

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Imperial rule, the responsibility of handling the issue of the private enterprises belonged to the independent nations. As such, the advent of Globalisation and the Neo-colonialism has intertwined the concept of Capitalist enterprises in a newer context. As a result, there has been a rigorous intermixing of Cultures in multi national scenario. In the South Asian context, the expatriate writers have been exploring varied reflections of Power dynamics, Questions of Home, homesickness and nostalgia, Cultural assimilation and crisis of identity.

Agha Shahid Ali's unique creativity in poetry lies in his portrayal of Home, Place, Identity and variegated voices in his poems. Being a Kashmiri Muslim, settled in America, Agha Shahid Ali displays a deep rootedness and admiration for his birth place, Kashmir. A sense of nostalgia and yearning for the motherland is evident when he talks about Home. Home refers to his nostalgic childhood days spent in Kashmir and America becomes his 'Adopted home', when he migrates to America for his work permanently. His poems display the angst and suffering of a Diasporic writer, when he is alienated from the Birth place in person, but his Memory never fail to glorify the remembrance of the Glorious Past. His yearning for his motherland, his remembrances of Culture and Tradition of the place makes his poetry worth remarkable.

Kashmir becomes a crucial landmark for Agha Shahid Ali's poetic sensibility, as Kashmir appears to be the indomitable and inseparable entity of his Memory. The political instability and the alienation of the Self occurred after 1990, when there was political conflict between India and Kashmir. The inhabitants of Kashmir suffered a devastating crisis of their Self, as majority of the Kashmiris were suspected to be the members of the terrorist groups. In this scenario, the Government failed to safeguard the well-being of the Kashmiri settlers. In "The Country Without a Postoffice", the condition of the inhabitants are expressed as-

"The lost are like this:/They bribe the air for dawn,this their dark purpose. / But there's no sun here. There is no sun here." ("The Country without a Postoffice", Lines 86-88)

The reference of the absence of the sun indicates a lack of authority where the individuals find only darkness in the the context of governance. They cannot even rely on the government for their present and future. Because of this, they have displayed different opinions regarding their safety in the terror-stricken environment. Some residents decided to leave their home while the others embraced the 'darkness' to protect them and refuge in the midst of the debris of their destroyed 'home'.

Consequently, the hand woven handcrafts of Kashmir also suffered an excruciating loss. This anxiety is beautifully stated by Ali in the same poem, where he says-



“ There's almost a paisley / against the light, sometimes white, then black. ”

(“The Country without a Postoffice”, Lines 51-52)

Here, in this line, the poet expresses his dismay for not being capable of selling the Paisleys- which symbolizes the unique designs in Kashmiri handloom. In the poem, Agha Shahid Ali describes the unbearable pain and suffering of the Kashmiris, when the service of Post office was slackened due to the Kashmir Uprising. The inhabitants were in a state of extreme peril and violence, and apart from it, the Terrorist groups were unleashing unending tortures upon the inhabitants by occupying their properties and households. The inhabitants are portraying the ‘Situational Consciousness’ where they are aware of their circumstances, but , still , they are hopeful of a ‘hopeless’ future. The inner turmoil of the citizens expresses the crisis of Identity, where their world is torn apart between Love and Hatred. They are even trying to seek shelter amidst the darkest rubbles, thinking that darkness can only give them some refuge. Moreover, they are fighting the inner battle of whether leaving this war-torn Kashmir or stick on to their love and affection for their motherland. The readers experience the ‘Hybrid voices’ in the context of the poems written by Agha Shahid Ali. He addresses the varied voices of the Kashmiris who are in the threshold of the disjointed ‘Identities’- foremost , being the migrants’ despair of leaving their ‘place of origin’ and secondly, the inhabitant’s choice of leading their lives in Kashmir amidst violence. Some voices are trying to adapt to the current situations by embracing the chaos, whereas some voices are reflective of the ‘nothingness’ that evade the country.

The situation of the Kashmiris as reflected by Agha Shahid Ali can be understood in the context of Homi Bhaba’s concept of Hybridity, where the third space is being enunciated and considered as viable in a situational crisis in Kashmir. There is a constant conflict and disagreement between the ‘ruler’ and the ‘ruled’ and one has to adapt to the chaotic circumstances only through the presence of an ambivalent sign of cultural identity which shapes out of its Culture and Tradition. The Paisley is one of the most striking symbol used by Ali in his poems. In the poem, “A History of Paisley”, a paisley is identified as a saviour or a pathfinder for all the Kashmiris to rise and acknowledge their age-old reputation. He writes -

“A weaver kneels,/gathers falling threads. Soon he will stitch the air.”

(A History of Paisley, lines 21-22)

The poet manages to put an optimistic note to the disruptive environment that revolves around the Kashmiris and the disintegration of Kashmir’s handloom industry can only be safeguarded and protected



through the resident's hybrid voices of the 'third space'. This third space can be created by focussing on the talents and capabilities of the Kashmiris, irrespective of the difficult situations faced by them.

Similarly, Agha Shahid Ali says in the poem "Land" as-

" Why must the bars turn neon now when, Love, /I'm already drunk in your capitalist land?/ If home is found on both sides of the globe,/ home is of course here—and always a missed land."

Here, the poet focusses on a migrant's implication of the Idea of Home, where, he feels alienated and separated. This brings out the varied voices of an individual when he is oppressed with the sense of Identity and Exile at the same time. As a migrant, Agha Shahid Ali too feels a sense of Crisis and also reveals his love for the Motherland. The birth place of Kashmir remains to be the Utopia for Agha Shahid Ali, where he shows his obsessed fascination for his land.

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