

Anxiety and Homelessness ' in the poems of Agha Shahid Ali

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Abstract

Agha Shahid Ali's poetry and the cumulative trauma associated with the anxieties of the socio-political turmoil that prevailed in his homeland, Kashmir. Hence, they are often filled with themes of 'homelessness' and anxiety. are an outpour of his agonies as a exile in his own homeland. and the broader socio-political turmoil of Kashmir, his homeland. Through collections like *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987) and *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997), Ali delves into the existential and emotional struggles of displacement, articulating a profound sense of longing for a place that no longer exists in its original form. This article explores how Ali employs imagery, form, and metaphor to evoke the inseparability of personal identity from the concept of home, analyzing his portrayal of diaspora as a source of both pain and creative introspection.

Keywords: Agha Shahid Ali, anxiety, homelessness, displacement, diaspora, exile, nostalgia, identity, memory, political conflict, estrangement, migration, cultural disconnection, poetry of loss, human condition.

Agha Shahid Ali is one of the prominent diasporic writers of this century. Loss of identity and alienation are recurrent themes of his poems. He is a typical inside – outsider as revealed in his poems. The anxiety and uncertainty of his hybrid identity looms large in most of his poems. Diaspora writers express their identity crises and there is a quest for the lost historical – cultural roots as they travel backward in time. Agha Shahid Ali's poems are an outpour of anxiety of war in his homeland. The senses are the stimulators of memory according to Proust and Bergson and this can be seen in Shahid's poem 'Rain'. He is reminded of the rain in Kashmir, when in fact, it rains in America. Time and Space are inseparable features in diasporic narrations. Avtar Brah identifies a journey at the heart of the Diaspora. Home becomes an 'imaginary homeland' and it exists only in the imagination, as we see in a 'Country without a post office', where people are cut off from outer world due to war. In his poem, 'Land', we see Shahid's anxiety and "homelessness". History is closely related to time and the feeling of falling out of time is portrayed in Shahid's poem 'The Wolf's Postscript' where he pleads "First, grant me sense of history:" In 'Farewell', Shahid shows how one's memory is intertwined with history. In 'Beyond the Ash Rains,' one can read the agony and anxiety of an exile in search of history. The study is an attempt to explore the themes such as space, time, memory, history, in relation to alienation, anxiety and homelessness in Agha Shahid Ali's poetry.

Key terms: Alienation, home, homelessness, Diaspora, history, memory.

Anxiety and Homelessness in the Poems of Agha Shahid Ali

Weaving the pangs of uncertainty, loss and separation into the fabric of his poetry is the unique feature of Ali's poetry. His works condense the anxiety of displacement and the homelessness that arises from both physical dislocation and emotional alienation. Born in Kashmir, a region mired in political conflict, Ali's poetic voice is infused with the anguish of a homeland scarred by violence and separation. His poetry resonates with the broader postcolonial discourse on displacement, aligning with theorists like Edward Said, who suggests that "exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience" (Reflections on Exile 173).

Displacement and Fragmented Identity

Ali's poetry frequently emphasizes the fragmentation of identity that arises from displacement and the attendant trauma. In *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, he writes, "I follow them across continents / and it is still winter" (Ali, *The Half-Inch Himalayas* 21), capturing the perpetual emotional barrenness that follows diasporic individuals. The imagery of "winter" evokes the bleakness of exile, suggesting that the loss of home is not merely geographical but existential. Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity as a "becoming" rather than a fixed state, especially when it comes to individual identity, (*Cultural Identity and Diaspora* 236) offers a useful lens for understanding Ali's poetic voice. Ali's fragmented identity—caught between his Kashmiri roots and his life in America—finds expression in the multiplicity of his poetic forms, from ghazals to free verse. This formal hybridity reflects the disorientation and fluidity characteristic of diasporic existence.

Homelessness and Nostalgia

"Home is not just a physical space. It is where one feels attached to" (Poornaligham). Nostalgia pervades much of Ali's poetry, transforming the lost homeland into an almost mythic space. In *The Country Without a Post Office*, he writes, "I am being rowed through Paradise on a river of Hell" (Ali 29). The unambiguous juxtaposition of "Paradise" and "Hell" encapsulates the poet's sense of homelessness—a yearning for a place idealized in memory but irrevocably altered by violence and separation. In literary narration too, memory has diverse functions. It is used to interrupt the logical sequence of the plot and to introduce the polyphonic narration. In the postmodern narrative, memory is used by the subaltern writers to express the voice of the oppressed. (Poornaligham), *Time and Space*). Svetlana Boym's distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia (*The Future of Nostalgia* xviii) is particularly relevant here. Ali's nostalgia is reflective, dwelling on the irrevocable loss rather than attempting to reconstruct the past. The metaphor of a "country without a post office" itself symbolizes a rupture in communication and belonging, illustrating the poet's despair at being unable to connect with his roots. This sense of disconnection aligns with Homi Bhabha's concept of the "unhomely," where "the borders between home and the world become confused" (*The Location of Culture* 13).

Anxiety as Poetic Motif

Anxiety is a recurring motif in Ali's work, manifesting both as a personal response to exile and a collective reaction to the violence in Kashmir. His ghazal "Tonight" from *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* exemplifies this: "Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight?" "Before you let the world invent the end tonight?" (Ali 3).

The repetition of “tonight” heightens the immediacy of the speaker’s anxiety, underscoring the relentless uncertainty of diasporic life. This reflects Judith Butler’s assertion that “precarity exposes our sociality—the fragile and necessary dimensions of our existence with and for others” (Frames of War 25). Ali’s poetry captures the precarious nature of diasporic existence, where the loss of home destabilizes the individual’s sense of self.

The Ghazal as a Form of Belonging

Ali’s use of the ghazal, a traditional Persian form, reveals his attempt to bridge his Kashmiri heritage with his American life. The ghazal becomes a metaphorical home, a structured space where the poet can articulate his displacement. As he writes in *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, “My memory keeps getting in the way of your history” (Ali 15), the ghazal allows him to juxtapose personal memory with collective history, emphasizing the tension between belonging and exile.

Ali’s revival of the ghazal in English situates him within a transnational literary tradition, echoing Kamau Brathwaite’s idea of “nation language” (History of the Voice 13). The ghazal’s recurring refrain and couplet structure evoke the cyclical nature of longing and loss, mirroring the emotional rhythms of diasporic life.

Conclusion

Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry captures the deeply personal and universally resonant themes of anxiety and homelessness. Through his vivid imagery, innovative use of form, and poignant reflections on nostalgia and identity, Ali articulates the pain and creativity of exile. His work locates itself at the intersection of personal memory and collective history, providing a profound investigation of what it means to lose—and possibly never fully recover—a sense of belonging.

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