



Home in Agha Shahid Ali's 'Postcard from Kashmir'

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Abstract

Agha Shahid Ali's poem, "Postcard from Kashmir" is a poignant reflection of his love and attachment for his homeland, Kashmir. The poet, Agha Shahid Ali left his homeland Kashmir, to live in the United States of America. Although he lived in the adopted land America, he remained deeply attached to his homeland Kashmir. This poem we note, not only describes the joys but also a sense of nostalgia and a sense of loss when he receives a postcard from Kashmir and reflects about his homeland. Hence, through this paper what we seek to argue is that even if an immigrant goes and settles in America, the love for his or her homeland persists and refuses to die down. The diaspora subject, we note, in such a scenario emerges as a transnational subject who lives in the adopted land, America and at the same time also remains attached and maintains close emotional ties with the homeland, Kashmir.

Keywords: Immigrant, home, adopted land, longing, loss, memory, return, nostalgia, transnational

1. Introduction

Makarand Paranjape once commented: "While European settlers spread across the world as colonizers and conquerors, the natives of Africa and Asia were sent across the dark waters initially as slaves and indentured laborers. At the end of the imperial period many more colored people occupied their former masters' countries, thus creating the new or second diaspora of the affluent, upwardly mobile, professionals emigrating to improve their prospects" (2001 p.1). It is against the backdrop of this comment that we focus our attention on the diaspora poet Agha Shahid Ali, who left his native home Kashmir, to pursue his higher education in America in the year 1974. Hence, through this paper we endeavour to unearth as to how in the poem, "Postcard from Kashmir" this new diaspora subject Agha Shahid Ali thinks of the homeland or the land that he was born into and grew up in, once he leaves his original home Kashmir, to go to a foreign shore in search of a better and prosperous life.

In order to undertake such a study, we have divided this paper into three sections. The first section

discusses the way the diaspora subjects, in diaspora literature, depict their homeland or the land that they were born in and grew up in, before they move to an alien land. The second section is a discussion and analysis of how the diaspora poet Agha Shahid Ali views his homeland, Kashmir. The third and concluding section is our understanding of Agha Shahid Ali's idea of a home and how the diaspora subject emerges as a transnational as he tries to negotiate the idea of home while living in an alien surrounding of America, far removed from his original home, Kashmir.

2. Analysis and discussion

I

Home in diaspora literature is portrayed as the house, a place, an area, a state, a region or a country which formed a part of the diaspora lives before they immigrated to America from India. This house, place, or area remains vividly etched in the minds of the diaspora subjects and forms an integral part of their lives as they negotiate a new chapter of their lives in the distant and alien shores of America.

Home for the diaspora in diaspora literature,

connotes a place which is in the past and which is now very distant and far off. This distant land, it is apparent, becomes an important part in the lives of the diaspora subjects. This distant and far off land always constitutes a significant part of the diaspora consciousness. Though distant and far off, none-the-less it continues to exert a bearing on the life of the émigré.

In diaspora literature home is viewed as a constant source of comfort and consolation in the minds of the diaspora subjects. The diaspora subjects tend to look back at the home country for their comfort and consolation as they lead their lives as immigrants in America. In such a mode of existence, the diaspora always tend to make a comparison between the original country from where they came from and the adopted country of USA where they seek to make a new home after moving to that country.

Home, as noted in diaspora literature is the place or the country of birth for which the diaspora long for and wish to return to. The diaspora always feel that the home country or the country of birth possesses many merits, which they feel they cannot enjoy anymore since they live far away. Hence, they long for this place and feel its immense loss in their everyday existence in the United States of America.

Home in the diaspora literature, is a place which can be construed as a sacred site, a sacred image or a symbol which remains close to the diaspora feelings and understanding. At this juncture it is important to remember what Makarand Paranjape says about the diaspora subjects' idea of the home through the following words: "... the motherland remained frozen in the diasporic imagination as a sort of sacred site or symbol... their homeland in a series of objects ... that they keep in their heads or in their suitcases. a dog-eared copy of the Gita or the Quran, a photograph ..." (2001 9). This brings to light the fact that the diaspora regard the home as a symbol which they intently preserve and keep close to their heart. This association helps them to remain close to the home that they left behind in their country of origin.

In diaspora literature, the home is considered the focal point which evokes in the diaspora many memories of their home and their past life which now eludes them as they have moved to the country of their destination. Home for the immigrant is intertwined with thoughts, feelings and memories of the distant past which makes the diaspora appear not only happy but also nostalgic and makes them yearn for the home they leave behind in their country of origin. Pramod

K. Nayar captures this notion of home through the following comments as he mentions: "Home is ... a product of speculation and imagination. It can be retrieved, reached, or returned to only in memory" (2008 192). The diaspora brings to their mind the memories which are inextricably linked to a distant home to which they belonged and long for as they now live away from it.

In diaspora literature, home for an immigrant is adorned as an ideal place which keeps haunting the diaspora consciousness. This ideal place is replete with all good things and from which they now tend to feel deprived since they are away from it and live in alien surroundings. Pramod K. Nayar describes this idea of the diaspora in the following words. He says: "... the memory of the 'old' country is false in the sense that the exile tends to superimpose a memory that may not necessarily be coterminous with the 'real' one. That is, the exile idealizes the 'old' home country from snapshots, songs, and rather vague memories" (2008 192).

Home in the mind of the diaspora is a thing of the past and to which they keep looking back at. It is something to which they keep referring to and keep taking interest in the numerous developments and surroundings which involve it. Pramod K. Nayar informs us that: "Postcolonial diaspora literature can be read ... as presenting an analepsis – looking backward at past ... Looking backward at the past involves the extensive use of memories of the 'old' country, the point/place of origin and 'home' (2008 192).

Home as denoted in diaspora literature is a place which has a profound effect on the emotions of the diaspora. The home for the diaspora makes them emotional and fills them with love and concern for the home left behind. They feel a sense of belongingness to such a place. Abha Pandey surmises this characteristic of home in diaspora literature in the following way: "The most dominant emotion for all immigrants is love for their homeland" (qtd. In Upadhyay 2014 8).

The diaspora it is important to understand consider the home as the point of origin to which they always remain linked. This point of origin it is generally seen bears a strong influence on the lives of the diaspora subjects. According to Robin Cohen, the diaspora "acknowledge that 'the old country' – a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore – always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions ..." (qtd. In Nayar 2008 189).

Home in the mind of the diaspora is associated with some striking images. These images remind the diaspora of the homeland. However, it is significant that these pictures of the home in the diaspora mind fade away with the passage of time. Salman Rushdie comments on this feature of the diaspora home when he says, "It may be that when the Indian writer who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost" (1992 11).

In immigrant literature, the home that is created by the immigrants is imaginary. The immigrants imagine the home which they leave once they move to the distant lands. Rushdie comments on this idea of the home when he says that: "It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back ... But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge ... that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" (1992 10).

Home is the place to which the immigrants always feel and remain connected to. The place draws the immigrants who are always eager to relate to it and to connect with it. Sanjukta Dasgupta brings this characteristic of the home to the fore when she confides that the "... Indian home became a refuge of cultural security, validating the fact that though one was physically present in a foreign land for economic gains, so that one could invest back home or help one's progeny, the heart was in the motherland" (ed. Lal and Kumar 2007 77).

In immigrant literature the home is the place from which they derive their identity. The home helps them to form their identity when they remain far off and when they remain away from it. Though they remain alienated from it, yet what is significant is that the home anchors the diaspora subject and provides a sense of security and identity to the diaspora subject. Joseph A. Amato sums up this idea of the home when he mentions that: "A secure home allows a person to inhabit the universe safely. Composed of a singular set of objects, each home occupies space and anchors lifetimes in the same way a tuft of grass catches and holds particles of soil" (2002 17).

II

The second section of this paper is a depiction of how the diaspora subject, Agha Shahid Ali represents

his homeland Kashmir, through the poem titled, "Postcard from Kashmir". At the very outset what strikes us is that the diaspora poet Ali looks back at his home which for him is the place Kashmir. In his poem "Postcard from Kashmir", Ali talks about the place which he considers home as he mentions: "Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox ... This is home" (ed. Devi 2016 40).

In "Postcard from Kashmir" what stands out as far as the poet's view about the home is concerned is that home for him connotes a place which is in the past and which is now very distant and far off. This distant land which the poet considers as his home continues to exert an overriding influence in his diaspora existence and tends to remain a focal point of his diaspora consciousness.

In "Postcard from Kashmir" we note that The diaspora poet Ali considers Kashmir as his home for he writes, "This is home" (ed. Devi 2016 40). Kashmir is the place where he grew up, had his education, lived some years of his life and has very fond memories of it. This is the place which comforts him, brings him joy and solace and is very familiar to him.

Ali's idea of home as exemplified in "Postcard from Kashmir" is intricately linked to his feeling that the place that he calls as home is the place that he wants to return to after living in the US. He keeps the idea of return to his homeland open and would like to come back to it. For he informs us in the poem that: "When I return" (ed. Devi 2016 40). Home for Ali is hence a place to which he seeks to return because it is his home and despite living in foreign soil he longs to be a part of his homeland.

In "Postcard from Kashmir" we observe that home for Ali takes the form of an object i.e., the postcard which he receives in his mailbox. The image of his homeland Kashmir which he sees in a miniature form in the postcard, tells us that his homeland is the place which remains vividly sketched in his imagination. He enjoys seeing and holding this object in his hand. Makarand Paranjape takes note of such an idea of the home in the diaspora consciousness as he comments: "... the distance, both physical, but more so psychological, was so vast, that the motherland remained frozen in the diasporic imagination as a sort of sacred site or symbol, almost like an idol of memory and imagination" (2001 9). The postcard which the poet receives from his homeland is regarded as a sacred symbol of his homeland, which is preserved and enjoyed by the diaspora poet.

The diaspora poet Agha Shahid Ali in the poem

“Postcard from Kashmir” associates his home with a lot of memories. Seeing his home in the postcard, he travels back in time and remembers the beautiful natural landforms like the Himalayas and the river Jhelum with its ‘waters’ (ed. Devi 2016 40). In the poem “Postcard from Kashmir” the poet writes, “Now I hold the half-inch Himalayas in my hand” (ed. Devi 2016 40). He remains away from his home yet he revives his home in his mind through the memories associated with it.

Home for the poet signifies a sense of attachment to the land that he came from. This we get to know as the poet says: “This is home” in his poem “Postcard from Kashmir” as he holds the postcard from Kashmir in his hands (ed. Devi 2016 40). The poet we observe proudly expresses his love and attachment for his homeland. It appears that the poet considers his home as the ideal place to which he feels a sense of pride to belong to.

Home in “Postcard from Kashmir” is what the poet desires to belong to. In the poem “Postcard from Kashmir”, we find that the poet mentions about the desire to be closest to his home Kashmir. Hence, for the diaspora poet home is associated with a place which the poet desires to be in.

Home in the mind of the diaspora poet Agha Shahid Ali means the sights and surroundings of Kashmir which the poet was very used to seeing before moving to the US. In the poem “Postcard from Kashmir” he writes about the landscape and the objects that surround it, especially the Himalayas and the river Jhelum. Joseph A. Amato very clearly brings to our light the depiction of home in diaspora literature as he elaborates the idea of home of the diaspora subject in the following words: “Home also extends beyond the walls of a house and its garden. It gathers around itself orbits of sounds, smells, and sights” (2002 17). Ali’s depiction of the Himalayas shows that the sights of the land that he has left behind, before moving to America, forms an important part of his idea of home.

The diaspora poet Agha Shahid Ali sees the home as the place which adorns people with a sense of identity. Such a characteristic of Ali’s depiction of home can be illustrated through his words in the poem “Postcard from Kashmir” as he says: “Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox; my home a neat four by six inches. I always loved neatness” (ed. Devi 2016 40). This description of Kashmir instils a sense of identity, a feeling of possessing a home i.e., Kashmir even though he is physically far removed from it. This sense of identity provides the diaspora subject an anchor and a

sense of stability and security in an alien environment.

In the diaspora poet’s mind the home that he envisages is one where the surroundings will be pristine and beautiful and will continue to be static and in the same state without any changes. For Agha Shahid Ali, the home that he thinks about should be an ideal home without any changes and any differences.

However, what we notice is that for the poet home is also a place to which he thinks there will be no joy or happiness in returning to. This is because he feels that the place he regards as home is prone to change and to decay and deterioration. This idea of the home as a place which can suffer degradation, decay and change is vividly expressed in the following lines of the poem, “Postcard from Kashmir”: “When I return, the colours won’t be so brilliant, the Jhelum’s waters so clean, so ultramarine” (ed. Devi 2016 40).

In the poem “Postcard from Kashmir”, the poet feels that the home is the place which is attached with a lot of memories. However, in the mind of the poet these memories of his homeland seem to be fading and “a little out of focus” as Agha Shahid Ali describes in his poem (ed. Devi 2016 40).

Home in the mind of the diaspora poet is the place from where he feels uprooted and displaced as he immigrates to the US. Under such circumstances what the poet feels is that he is far removed and alienated from his home, Kashmir. This sense of alienation, pain and loss at moving away from his home Kashmir as he relates that his image of Kashmir is outdated and far removed from the reality and the changes that may have occurred in it is prominent through these words: “... in it a giant negative, black and white, still undeveloped” (ed. Devi 2016 40). The poet is completely aloof from his home, Kashmir and hence is not aware of any change or any progress that Kashmir has made over the years.

1. Conclusion

From the discussions in the previous sections, it becomes amply evident that being in his place of destination, the diaspora poet looks back at the place of origin which he considers his home. In such a situation we observe that the diaspora poet Ali emerges as a transnational who lives in the country of reception but maintains close links with the place of origin i.e., Kashmir.

According to Ajaya Kumar Sahoo and Brij Maharaj, “Increasingly, migrants are shuttling between countries and home, rather than settling in one state. Such migrants are referred to as transnationals who

create and maintain multiple ties across several national boundaries at free will” (2007 3).

The transnational we note maintains strong emotional ties with the country of origin or the place that they leave behind. The transnational subjects show that their families are spread in both the countries of India and America and the migrant maintains strong ties with the country of origin. According to Ajay Kumar Sahoo, “Transnational community generally refers to the migrant communities, living abroad in the host countries but they simultaneously maintain economic, political, social and emotional ties with their homeland and with other diasporic communities of the same origin” (2006 10).

A transnational maintains a strong and a vibrant relationship with the country of origin by undertaking movement between the country of origin and the country of destination. A transnational seeks to travel between his or her country of origin and the adopted country. The immigrants owing to the improved means of transport and communication travel back and forth between the sending country and the country of reception. According to Nancy Foner, “The immigrants now can fly home instantly for emergencies like funerals or celebrations like wedding or go back to visit their friends and relatives” (qtd. In Sahoo 2006 20-21)

A transnational creates and maintains long-distance networks between other diasporas living around the world. Such action helps maintain connection between the host nation and the country of origin. According to Saroj Kr. Mishra, “Transnationalism refers to sustained ties of persons, networks and organisations across nation –state borders, arising out international migration pattern and refugee flows (qtd. In ed. Majumdar 2014 229).

A transnational subject also maintains communication with families in the homeland through letters, sending of postcards etc. This kind of communication relives the memories and strengthens the ties between the diaspora subject and the home country. This facilitates the communication between the diaspora and the country of birth. As a result the transition of the diaspora into the host nation becomes easy and less stressful.

To be a transnational, the migrants must maintain strong bonds of emotion and loyalty with their families, traditions, culture and institutions. According to Steven Vertovec “Cheap telephone calls, faxes, email and internet sites, satellite TV, ubiquitous print media and inexpensive and frequent modes of travel have allowed

for continuous and realtime communication within global migrant networks” (2009 15).

In the poem “Postcard from Kashmir”, it is interesting to note that the poet depicts his strong emotional ties with the homeland Kashmir after immigrating to the United States of America. The poet looks back at his home country and experiences the feelings of nostalgia, love and concern for the home country. In the poem “Postcard from Kashmir” the poet’s love for his motherland is thoroughly expressed when he says: “My love so overexposed” (ed. Devi 2016 40). Such an expression of love for the place of origin points to the fact that though the poet lives in America yet his emotional ties to his place of origin remains strong and unabated. Agha Shahid Ali emerges as a transnational who maintains close emotional ties with two homes i.e., the place of residence and the place from where he immigrated to America.

The poem “Postcard from Kashmir” demonstrates that the poet Agha Shahid Ali maintains strong long distance networks with the place of origin, Kashmir. This is apparent as the poet talks about his ‘return’ to the place where he spent a good part of his life before immigrating to the United States of America. This clearly points to the fact that the poet does create and maintain long distance connections with Kashmir.

In the poem titled “Postcard from Kashmir” we find that there exists a communication between the migrant the poet and his family in the home country, India. This is because the poet demonstrates that such communication is maintained through the receipt of a postcard from Kashmir. In the poem, he mentions: “Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox; my home a neat four by six inches” (ed. Devi 2016 40).

“Postcard from Kashmir” brings to the fore the fact that the immigrant poet maintains strong bonds of emotion and loyalty to the families living in the homeland. This is so because the poet talks about his return to his original home, Kashmir.

Despite such demonstrations of transnational behaviour, we note that the poet expresses some reservations about returning to Kashmir, his much loved land. The poet feels that he would like to maintain connections with his homeland by undertaking some to and fro movement between the home nation and the host nation. However, he apprehends that: “When I return, the colours won’t be so brilliant, the Jhelum’s waters so clean, so ultramarine” (ed. Devi 2016 40).

In the final analysis we can say that there exists a sense of ambivalence in the feelings of the diaspora subject, Agha Shahid Ali. The love and feelings for

Kashmir still exists but he ponders about the condition of Kashmir before he visits the land he loves so much, having lived in America for a long period of time. Thus in the poem “Postcard from Kashmir”, the diaspora poet Ali emerges as a transnational, meaning he lives in America his present home, but his mind is preoccupied and tied down by the images, the sights and the scenes of Kashmir which is the home he leaves behind.

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