



Article Type: Review Article

Article Ref. No.: 21022700523TF

<https://doi.org/10.37948/ensemble-2021-0301-a010>



THE ANXIETY OF ALIENATION: OBSERVING 'TRAUMA' AND 'EXILE BLUES' OF INDIAN DIASPORA IN SELECT POEMS OF AGHA SHAHID ALI

Kakoli Debnath¹✉

Abstract:

Agha Shahid Ali is one of the most celebrated modern poets of Indian diaspora whose poetry echoes the sense of trauma, loss of 'home' and identity and deals with major concerns of dislocation, fragmentation from ancestry, nostalgia, and rootlessness. The sense of alienation is more evident in the works of diaspora writers who are constantly caught up between the cultural spaces of the 'host' land and creating a hyphenated identity. The diasporic self finds comfort only in memory rather than the existing contemporary realities hurtful to the 'exiled' individual and find themselves possessing a fuelling desire to go back to their homeland. Trauma is a response of a distressing event that affects an individual's ability to cope with life situations and triggers certain traumatic markers. The 'trauma' of exile is a psychological phenomenon while the geographical dislocation is more of a physical one. The paper is an attempt to observe the trauma question and exilic state of the diasporic subject in Ali's poetry and their attempt to live in the 'host' land through disintegration from the familiarity of the 'native' homeland. The paper seeks to observe how Ali's poetry is charged with his multicultural hyphenated identity- rendering him a nameless entity. His separation from nativity and ancestral roots showcases the anguish, dilemma triggered in the immigrant in varying degrees and progression of trauma in three select poems- "Postcard from Kashmir", "Snowmen" and "Cracked Portraits".

Keywords: Cultural alienation displacement, Identity, Nostalgia, Rootlessness

I

Both 'home' and 'homeland' occupy the center stage in the vast body of literature of exile. Life in 'exile' from the 'native' land is a devastating experience that instigates a response of trauma which breaks continuity in one's life. The notion of dislocation leads to cross-cultural encounters that affect the lives of the immigrants who are caught between boundaries, identities and an extremely complicated web of memories. Dislocation presents an anxiety of alienation since "through migration, diaspora members have lost their material relationship to the territory of origin, but they can still preserve their cultural or spiritual relationship through memory (Bruneau, 2010, p. 48). Indian English diaspora poetry showcases the extreme nostalgia of past roots where poets in spite of their glorious academic achievements are reminiscent of their ethnic Indian roots; their poetry is fuelled by theme of exile. Writers of Indian diaspora often try to voice the agony of emptiness, trauma of exile and the vagueness of identities. Such intense feelings of nostalgia and exile blues are found in Agha Shahid Ali's poetry which is fuelled by nostalgia and alienation. Agha Shahid Ali is one of the most celebrated modern poets of Indian diaspora whose poetry is charged with the multicultural milieu and political over tones. Brought up in a multi-cultural environment, he is a "product of many events—Indian Independence and the subcontinent's

1 [Author] ✉ [Corresponding Author] Alumna, Tezpur University, Napaam, Tezpur, Sonitpur, 784028, Assam, INDIA. E-mail: kakolidebnath2@gmail.com

© 2021 Ensemble; The author



This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License



Partition . . . education in literary modernism, participation in contemporary literary styles — which make him post-colonial” (King, 2001, p. 258).

Ali is a part of a group of postcolonial immigrants with a hyphenated cultural identity who migrated to a first world country and as such his writings are characterized by nostalgia, loss and exile blues of his ‘native’ land that witnessed violence, unrest and political crisis. What fuelled the rubric of Ali’s poetic discourse are the political troubles of his homeland and thus his poetry is an account of the socio-political history and the explicit grief of the whole Kashmir.

While Ali’s poetry reveals the exile blues, fantasies about roads not taken, longings for the securities of family and old friends, its idiom is often American and without defensive need for cultural assertion, revenge for humiliations or self-congratulation for having made it in a strange land. (King, 2001, p. 259)

II

The quest for identity, nostalgia for the past and the perpetual search of roots has always been the focus of diasporic narratives. Diaspora is a Greek word meaning “to scatter about” or the ‘dispersion’ of a mass of people from their original homeland. Diaspora can be referred to a broad category of migration ‘forced’ or ‘otherwise’ present throughout history. Diasporas take many forms beyond the obvious victims who are forced to flee their homelands. Diasporic memories are coloured by nostalgias of imagination. With a blend of memory and desire of the ‘imaginary homeland’, the immigrant wishes to return ‘home’, which remains to be a haunting presence in diaspora writings. In the words of Homi Bhabha:

The nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin and turns that loss into the language of metaphor. Metaphor, as the etymologically of the word suggests, transfers the meaning of home and belonging... across those distances, and cultural differences, that span the imagined community of the nation-people. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 139-140)

The word 'Diaspora' therefore is an implication of the “notion of a center, a locus, and a home — from where the dispersion occurs” (Brah, 2006, p. 443). By invoking the imageries of journeys and displacements, the word ‘diaspora’ eventually implies diasporic journeys putting down roots in ‘alternative’ homes. The sense of belonging and the unifying experience of displacement and trauma have established strong ties among scattered communities. Both the situations of leaving home and the arrival in a new land are determined by class, race, ethnicity, racism, gender and sexuality are important factors that configure a diaspora, and subsequently its literature, in a certain manner (Yadav, 2012, p. 9-10). William Safran equates the term ‘diaspora’ to “expatriate minority communities which have dispersed from an original center to two or more peripheral or foreign regions, to people who retain their myths about their motherland and feel alienated in the new land.” (Safran, 1991, p. 83-89)

Reading diaspora literature in light of ‘trauma theory’ proves to be the most engaging exercise because diasporas “are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories; collide, reassemble and reconfigure” (Brah, 2006, p. 190). In order to reconstruct an ethical response to the existing human sufferings, trauma theory gained a steady momentum as an independent theoretical field. Born out of the confluence between deconstruction and psychoanalytic criticism, trauma studies prioritizes to witness traumatic histories like dislocation, exile, segregation or migration where the suffering of the ‘other’ is voiced. Prior to the critical analysis of the novel, the term ‘trauma’ was used to suggest mental pain. However, with the evolution of trauma theory, trauma has expanded its horizon through the inclusion of diverse viewpoints to regard to the traumatic representation as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.” (Caruth, 1996, p. 11)

The Indian diaspora is the largest community of diaspora in the world who suffers the 'trauma of exile' in anticipating the 'host' land and 'home' land. Although diaspora or exile is generally observed in terms of 'forced' or 'involuntary' migrations however in more recent decades, immigration usually occurs through willful choice of economic, academic or social advantages. Exile is a complex phenomenon- whether forced or taken willingly, it marks a unique journey. The diasporic self undergoes a traumatic response while leaving one's homeland whether forceful, self-imposed, or undertaken for artistic and academic purposes where one's identities are widely impacted for being 'out of touch' with one's language, traditions, and ethnicity. Delineating the meaning of trauma, Jeffrey Alexander remarks that events are inherently traumatic; rather it is the socially meditated attribution that responds as the events unfolds. He states "cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks on their consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable way." (Alexander, 2012, p. 6)

The sense of exile is a psychological phenomenon while the geographical dislocation is more of a physical one. The diasporic/exilic belonging is split between the culture of origin/'native' land and the culture of current location/'host' land. Since they inhabit interstitial spaces, their experiences in the 'host' land constitute them as hyphenated hybrid subjects. This hyphenated identity marks a traumatic response in the diasporic subject experiencing double or plural identification. The concept of diaspora/exile and its subsequent affiliation with trauma has been significant and unavoidable. Ananya Jahanara Kabir comments on diaspora to facilitate the link between diaspora and trauma by stating that "diaspora consistently open up spaces for individual reflection on the divergence between official histories and private traumas" (Kabir, 2010, p. 146). Prominently dealing with the concepts of 'home' and 'memory', both diaspora/exile writings create an endless flux of reminiscence through myriad interpretation of a text. Brah notes "the word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation" which is certainly an important aspect of migratory experience (Brah, 1996, p. 190). In both cases of forceful migration or self-imposed exile, the loss of home and cultural identity marks the trajectory of trauma, nostalgia and alienation for the diasporic subject who belongs nowhere.

III

Indian English diaspora poetry witnessed the prominence of a turning point following the post independent period. With a keen sense of interpretation and analysis of the socio-political and economic contemporary realities, poets of diaspora reflect through the flux of their own experiences. However there seems to be no escape for the diaspora poets from their pre-exilic state because they continue to struggle even in the aftermath of rootlessness and exile.

Ali's poems offer a diasporic sentiment to his readers by constantly bringing up Kashmir as a theme in his poems. Ali's poetic discourse emerges from a sense of intimacy and personal loss. It was only after Ali published *The Half-Inch Himalayas* that themes of exile became more relevant in his poetry. Most of his life, Ali lived in academic exile, yearning for a glorious past and although his academic recognition did not allow Ali to spend much time in the valley, thus his poetry is replete with the 'exile blues' and nostalgia of 'home' where Kashmir remains an alter ego for him. Each and every exile undertaken is a unique journey, whether forced or taken willingly. Exile is a complex phenomenon since the diasporic self undergoes an intense traumatic experience of leaving one's home, culture and language even when one does it out of their own choice. Thus, in modern exiles of privileges, a wishful longing to return to 'home' and homeland occurs. Commenting on the sufferings of exile,

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home; its essential sadness

can never be surmounted . . . the achievements of exile are permanently determined by the loss of something left behind forever. (Said, 2000, p. 173)

Ali's eponymous poem "Postcard from Kashmir" is suggestive of themes of exile, memory and loss of home that documents his eternal love for the 'past' Kashmir by observing it through a web of memories. 'Home' is the most intimate security a man has- socially, ethnically, emotionally and psychologically. Exiled from Kashmir, Ali was rendered with trials and tribulations which was the source of trauma for him. Ali, denationalized, waits to be relieved of his pain of separation from his 'home' and a reunion whether in space or memory. Although he tries hard to hold on to the images of a 'pure' and ultramarine' reminiscence, the dislocation/displacement from his 'native' land has made his memory a "little out of focus" like "a giant negative, black and white, still underdeveloped."

The 'post card' plays an important symbol because it is representative of 'home'. Ali builds a fanciful imagination of his glorious Kashmir through the 'post card' as a substitute for an actual visit- "and this is the closest I'll ever be to home." The typical diasporic voice is found in "Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox" and a neatness which is not desired by the poet. The urging political crisis of Kashmir has shrunken his glorious Kashmir and a vision of 'home' to a picture post dropped in his mailbox. This loss is observed in real sense through the loss of his homeland of Kashmir. According to Rushdie,

It may be said that writers in any position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge---which gives rise to profound uncertainties---that our physical alienation from India almost invariably 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, Indian of the mind. (Ashcroft et.al, 1981-1991, p. 428)

Ali undergoes a traumatic situation triggered by memories of nostalgia and being away from his homeland. Having all the privileges of a modern migrant could ever wish for, Ali's trauma lies in his 'victim diaspora' when his home in Kashmir was destroyed in the chaos of war and political turbulence has snatched its everlasting brilliance: "...When I return/The colours won't be so brilliant/The Jhelum's waters so clean/ so ultramarine. My love/so overexposed. (Ali, 2013, p. 1)

Ali's academic exile has led him to a sensation which is difficult to apprehend. His existence has become so meaningless because he is geographically distant from Kashmir. The urging political crisis of Kashmir has shrunken his glorious Kashmir and a vision of 'home' to a picture post dropped in his mailbox. This loss is observed in real sense through the loss of his homeland of Kashmir.

Ali's poetry reflects on the sensitizing question of loss and alienation which marks the basic constitution of his trauma. Trauma found a place in his family history since both his grandfather and Ali underwent a constant longing for home. Just like Ali's academic exile has led him to the US, Ali notes that Indian civilization is made up of migrators. Reflecting on his grandfather's journey from Samarkand to Kashmir, Ali notes that his ancestors were exiled immigrants from Central Asia who inherited the essential attributes of a mountain person, "carrying a bag/of whale bones/heirlooms from sea funerals"- selling the carcasses of sea animals that died underwater. 'Bones' refers to the 'past' rather than the physicality of roots present in the bones of Ali's physical framework. The condition of exile succumbed Ali to a perennial disassociation from 'home', 'roots' or 'ancestry'.

The sense of alienation is evident in Ali, recognizing the burden of his 'exilic' state, cultural alienation and disassociation from his ancestors rendered him as the rootless "heirloom" of the 'skeleton' under his skin "passed from son to grandson". Depicting his ancestors as snowmen

“carved from glaciers”, Ali is the product of the same ‘skeleton’ which suggests the temporality of roots. He finds his responsibilities as a Kashmiri to be burdensome, distanced from his ancestral roots and heritage. Discontent with his ancestry, Ali pledges to defy them through his choice of a ‘mental exile’ by establishing a progressive and liberal order that shall succeed generations. His diasporic identity lies in his attempt to disassociate from his past and break off all roots when he states, “even if I’m the last snowman/that I’ll ride into spring/on their melting shoulders.” (Ali, 2013, p. 8)

Ali cultivates a new discourse in diaspora studies moving through exile blues, nostalgia and longing of diaspora. Compared to other writers of diaspora, Ali moves in a backward movement in his affiliation with his homeland, language, culture and ancestry. His poetic fragments are not just personal memories of Kashmir but of a Kashmiri remembering places and spaces as imaginary maps for border crossings (Sajid, 2012, p. 89). Cut off from his ancestral Kashmiri roots, Ali’s attempt to connect with his grandfather and great-grandfather is at a loss; he only remembers them as a familial attachment and not spiritually. “Cracked Portraits” presents the family gallery of Ali’s - ‘exiled’ immigrant ancestors. Tracing the person’s lineage, Ali narrated how his grandfather “sauntered towards madness”, lost in hashish and verses while his great-grandfather was a drunkard who whipped his servants: “Great- grandfather? A sahib in breeches/He simply disappoints me/. . . he whipped the horses/or the servants. (Ali, 2013, p. 9)

As a diasporic individual suffering from the ‘trauma’ of willful exile, Ali wants to break free from his ancestral roots and disassociate from the past and patriarchy of his homeland. Cultural alienation and hybridity problematizes his connection to ancestral roots. His ancestors disappoint Ali through their codes and mannerism of living and as such, Ali laments the collapse of values of his forefathers who took on the role of a colonial patriarch. “Cracked Portraits” portrays the temporariness of his ancestors through cracked portraits or decaying family paintings. As a family of exiled immigrants, all three generations of his family tried to create an identity in the ‘host’ land. The “family graveyard” is a pre-planned ‘plot’ by his ancestors to dig their roots into the Kashmiri soil in creating a permanent identity- dissolving the fissure of their ‘exilic state’: “I find his will/He left us plots/in the family graveyard.” (Ali, 2013, p. 9)

IV

There can be various sources of trauma for the diasporic subject and thus the impact of trauma should not be narrowed down to the psychological aspect alone. The loss of ‘home’, ‘homeland’ and ‘identity’ creates anxiety and traumatic alienation for the diasporic subject that belongs ‘nowhere’. As such the diasporic self undergoes intense trauma of ‘not belonging anywhere’ and living in a ‘no man’s land’. Thus memory, for the diasporic subject shall always be burdened with the process of time for the exiled individual. Employment of strong metaphors or imagery provides prominence in evoking their lost identity and severed affiliation with their native land. Compared to other writers of diaspora, Ali rather moves backward in his involvement with his culture and homeland. Ali, burdened by the unending and unforgettable memories of home and the past unburdens himself through the language of obscure images, metaphors and allusions.

Ali’s poems seem to be whispered to himself, and to read them in as if to overhear. This is not to suggest that they are remote or in any way indistinct, but to underline the quietness of his voice and the clarity with which he speaks. (Mehrotra, 2006, p. 139)

There are various reasons for a diasporic individual to leave one’s homeland. In political circumstances and the realities of repressive regimes force hand of many diaspora voices that echoes their sense of exile and alienation in the form of verse or prose. As an individual who has undertaken ‘willful exile’, he has been blatantly criticized by the nativists for leaving the country

for good fortunes and opportunities. Thus, the sense of dislocation and trauma is evident in the works of Agha Shahid Ali.

Triggered by memory and trauma, Ali's geographical segregation and physical movement from India has deprived him of the cartographic presence of his homeland. Whatever may be the geographical location of the exiled writer, he is forever enmeshed in the mental landscape of 'exile' which is both a liberating and shocking moment for him (Saha, 2009, p.188). Ali's verses create 'imaginary homelands' with the assortment of memories he had in recreating the cultural subtleties. The sole reason of his traumatic experiences lies in his dislocation, exile, cultural hybridity and the nostalgia of 'Kashmir' because the diasporic writer's obsession with past memories turned into an omnipresent phenomenon. Replete with metaphors, imageries and human figures, Ali's poetry is a quest for 'located-ness' and a semblance of belonging. Thus, as a multicultural being residing in his own psychic residues of loss, Ali's diasporic identity and cultural hybridity renders him a nameless entity.

References:

- Ali, A. S. (2013). *The Half-Inch Himalayas: Miniature Version*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Alexander, J. C. (2012). *Trauma: A Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bhabha, Homi. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Brah, A. (2006). Thinking Through the Concept of Diaspora. In Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (Eds.) *The Post Colonial Studies Reader* (2nd edition, pp. 443-446). New York: Routledge.
- Brah, A. (1996). *Cartographies of Diaspora*. London: Routledge.
- Bruneau, M. (2010). Diasporas, transnational spaces and communities. In Rainer Baubock and Thomas Faist (Eds.). *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods* (pp. 35-50). IMISCOE Research: Amsterdam University Press.
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Kabir, A. J. (2010). Diasporas, Literature and Literary Studies. In Kim Knott and Sean McLoughlin (Eds.). *Diasporas: Concepts, Intersections, Identities* (pp. 145-150). New York: Zed Books.
- King, B. (2001). *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Mehrotra, A. (2006). *Twelve Modern Indian Poets*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Rushdie, S. (2010). *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991*. Vintage U.K.: Random House.
- Safran, W. (1991). Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return. *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1(1), 83-99. Retrieved from doi:10.1353/dsp.1991.0004
- Saha, A. S. (2009). Exile Literature and the Diasporic Indian, *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 1(2), 186-196. Retrieved from <http://rupkatha.com/journalvol1no2.php>
- Said, E. W. (2000). *Reflections of Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Sajid, N. (2012). The Transnational Cartography of Agha Shahid, *Rocky Mountain Review*, 66(66), 85-92. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/rockmounrevi.66.85>
- Yadav, P. (2012). Diasporic Literature: The Politics of Home and Abroad." *India Today and Tomorrow: Economic, Political, Cultural and Literary Perspective*, Retrieved from <http://cuh.ac.in/admin/uploads/files/0India%20of%20Today%20and%20Tomorrow.pdf>,