



# Diasporic Discourse in Aga Shahid Ali's *A Nostalgist's Map of America*

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**Abstract**— *The present paper has been specifically designed to examine diasporic discourse in the selected poetic collection of Aga Shahid Ali's A Nostalgist's Map of America. Indian Diaspora literature has emerged as an academic body of writing and become an integral part of Indian English literature. Many Indian origin authors have migrated in abroad and restored their diasporic experience in their literary compositions. Agha Shahid Ali was a prolific diasporic poet of Indian subcontinent belongs to Kashmir region. Ali has penned many poetic collections throughout his literary career. He has fruitfully presented his diasporic sensibility in his celebrated works. A Nostalgist's Map of America is a conspicuous diasporic work that comprises different diasporic symptoms like sense of loss, exile, dispersion, nostalgia and collective memory. The selected poetic composition will be scrutinized through the lance of diaspora study.*

**Keywords**— *diaspora, exile, nostalgia, dislocation, diasporic.*

## INTRODUCTION

Diaspora literature has emerged as an independent academic discipline in the literary canon of world literature. It is also termed as 'expatriate writing' as it is composed by migrated authors of particular continent. In recent years, diaspora study has developed unprecedented interest among the scholars, researchers and academicians worldwide. Homi Bhabha in his critical work *The Location of Culture* puts critical observation regarding the legacy of diaspora literature as follows:

The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of 'otherness'. Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational stories of migrants, the colonized or political refugees- those border and frontier conditions may be the terrains of world literature. (Bhabha: 12)

Indian Diaspora literature has become an integral part of Indian English literature. The galaxy of Indian diaspora literature is enriched by its notable male and female writers who have migrated in abroad for different reasons. V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, A.K. Ramanujan, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Amit Chudhuri, Vikram Seth, Ved Mehta have occupied significant position by composing well acclaimed works. On the other hand, women writers have also marked their notable presence in the literary canon of Indian diaspora literature. These women writers have fruitfully projected the issues and complexities of abroad life in their self narrative works. Jumpa Lahiri, Bharti Mukherjee, Meena Alexander, Bapsi Sindhwa, Sunetra Gupta, Manjula Padmavanan, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Kamala Markandey, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni etc. are well acclaimed female writers. They have gracefully projected the mental turmoil and psychological suffering of migrated women through their fictional works. Hareshwar Roy observes,

The Indian Diaspora is so widespread that the sun never sets on it, because it across the globe and stretches across all the oceans and continents. It is the third largest Diaspora next only to the British

and the Chinese. It is playing very significant role in various fields. The field of creative writing is one of them. Once upon time people of world were devouring the novels of Walter Scott and Charles Dickens; now, both the novel and the English language, have been enlivened in the hands of the writers of Indian Diaspora- M.G.Vassanji, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, V.S.Naipual, Rohinton Mistry, Bharti Mukherjee and Anita Desai. (Roy: 138)

Migration might not be a pleasant experience for everyone. Emigrant as an outsider does not assimilate easily in new society, new culture, new people, and new geographical land. Contrary, their host land also doesn't allow them to be a part of their society. Therefore diaspora people stuck in many issues and challenges in their host land. Feeling of homelessness, identity crisis, alienation, loneliness, nostalgia, cultural conflict, racial discrimination are the prominent challenges faced by diaspora community.

#### **Portfolio of Agha Shahid Ali:**

Although not an American poet, Agha Shahid Ali is one of the finest young poets in America; in that sense, he is in the tradition of Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and Paul Muldoon. His poems notable for their wisdom and grace, are elegant but never affected. Ali so artfully sustains his contemplation that upon entering his work we experience the play of light through the many prisms of his intelligence.

Ali was born in well educated Muslim family in 1949. His father was a well known educationalist of his time. His grandmother was considered as the first woman of Kashmir region to have education upto metric level. Shahid Ali had a brilliant command over Urdu, Kashmir and English. After completing his graduation from Kashmir, he went to Delhi University for his post graduation degree. Ali migrated to U.S.A in 1976 to obtain a Ph.D degree. He served teaching positions in different colleges and universities in India and the United States. He has penned many poetic compositions throughout his literary carrier. *The Country Without a Post office, Rooms Are Never Finished, Velited Suit and A Nostalgists Map of America* are well acclaimed works. He was also a brilliant translator. He had translated poetic collection of Faiz Ahmad Faiz. Ali's translated collection was published as *The Rebel's Sillouette; Selected Poems*. Ali's last literary composition was *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, a collection of English Ghazals.

Ali has shown his deep concern and love for his homeland in *The Country without A Post office* and *Memory of Beghum Akhtar*. *The Country Without a Post office* was originally titled as *Kashmir Without a Post office*. Ali has narrated cultural and political violence through lyricism. Ali has recalled the political event of 1990 in this poetic volume. Post offices of Kashmir region were remained closed for seven months because of political tension. *Rooms Are Never Finished* evokes both personal and political tragedy. Ali reconciles the sense of exile as he was far away from his home and culture. *A Walk Through Yellow Pages* exemplifies his sense of loss. *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* is a Ghazal collection. Ali's Ghazals are contemporary, vibrant and simple.

#### **Diasporic Discourse in A Nostalgist's Map of America:**

Travelling literature includes outdoor literature, guide books, nature writing and travel memoirs. Travel itself is an independent literary genre to be practiced by many writers. In western literature, the early travel memoirist was Pausanias, a Greek geographer belong to 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. Initially Ali travelled from Kashmir to Delhi and from Delhi to America. So travel had put deep impact on Ali's mind. Ali travelled at many places and survived under multi-culture.

Ali composed *A Nostalgist's Map of America* in 1991 that unfolds his position as an outsider. In this poetic series, Ali's expressions truly recall his mother land. Ali has represented both American and Kashmiri culture through vibrant images. Ali's diasporic sensibility is expressed

through past memory, sense of loss and nostalgic expressions.

### **Nostalgia:**

Ali was a poet of exile. Exile is the hallmark tendency of his poetic compositions. Although Ali's migration to United States was enforceful and self willing still he survived under the plight of exile in the host land. Ali had admitted that, he was exiled from Kashmir, India and from his mother tongue, Urdu. It is also said that he was exiled from Kashmir, from India and from United States.

Agha Shahid Ali is known as *the poet of exile*. The sorrow, pathos and the melancholy of the nostalgia about the homeland become prominent and impressively personified on the blank paper by Ali. *Exile or diaspora* is a vital activity of people in the context of human civilization. Exile or diaspora means the travelling of habitats of a new place because of various needs. The economists consider it as an *industrial process* but in the case of literature it is all about *nostalgia, sorrow and past memories* (Naghibi *et al.* 2020).

The memories are the main theme of the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali. The nostalgia about his Himalayan Homeland is shown in a very well maintained pathos which has illuminated the poetry with an artistic way. The melancholia is prominently proven by the poet regarding the comparison that he had made about America and his homeland Kashmir (Chatterjee, 2017). The poet talks about the color of Jhelum in the following words, "The Jhelum's water is so clean/ so ultramarine". On the other hand he says, "*There is again memory at my doorstep/ Jasmine crushed under departing feet*". These lines are the indications of nostalgia in a form of poetic letters. The memory and the devastations happened to his Homeland are defined in this book with a mixture of traditional style with a free verse.

The articulation of the various crude experiences of poets and writers around the world gives rise to artistic expressions, metaphors and oxymoron's. Nelson (2020) stated that Agha Shahid Ali is different in the approach and analysis of nostalgia in generalised cognitive terms.

### **Element of Memory in A Nostalgist's Map of America**

Memory elements in Ali's poem are scattered throughout with depictions of mountains and different elements of nature being attributed to having memories. It is necessary to note in this regard that the life experiences of the poet are often expressed through the memories of the landscapes. For example, "Snow on the desert" is said to have a memory of when he drives his sister through the desert. He wrote, "... for they are human, the Papagos say...". The personification of the various elements of the

landscapes through which he is driving is also a token of memory to remember the various travellers that cross it. The plants in "Souvenirs of Evanescence" are termed to be keepers of the Dead Hotel which have significant memory. The contemporary belonging to the landscape as well as journeyed through the various seasons are also signified by the journey of the writer himself. As a planet perseveres and groups through different extremes of the climate, the writer as a traveller from Kashmir to America is also signified by a similar notion. The idea is to allow imagining the plants as people with short memories that forget just like human beings do. There is also the personification of the sky that is taking notes and documenting the various activities that are going on in the landscape on grass. This indicates the poet's imagination and personification of nature with people to have their individual memories and capable of remembering.

Conversely, "Snow on desert" also indicates the fluidity and flexibility of human memory. Due to the various experiences of human life, past memories are often blurred and forgotten. The desert also goes through a similar process when it is quenched by rain and turns into an ocean followed by turning back to the desert again. The cyclical process is determined to be similar to memory as remembrance freshens up events just like the rain but people again forget them during their daily commotions of life. Ali has also described the changes and shifts in the landscape as similar to memory itself. Memory also changes gradually- knowingly or unknowingly for humans (Chatterjee, 2017). The set ice is representing memory itself which is finite and solid, however just like the rays of sunlight melts the ice, people also have to try to remember and turn memory into a fluid for accessing it. The memory elements in the poem are also reflected through the title which represents Nostalgist's Map of America. The map itself is built to have significant memory that can and be remembered to the embodiment and personification of various elements of nature and landscapes making it easier for the writer to remember events of his life through the journey. This map is not only for directional purposes but the various memory elements to be associated with the memories and events of the life of the writer being personified in the natural elements such as mountains, trees, deserts and others. Hence, it can be stated that the poem by Ali consists of comprehensive memory elements.

### **Self-dispersion in Alien land:**

The next theme which can be identified in the poem is self-dispersion into alien land. Ali had basically travelled from Kashmir to America and has an amalgamation of Islamic and American culture of looking at nature.

Imagination of Ali connects prehistoric oceans and modern desserts of India and America and the personification of various elements of the landscape is considered to blur the line between his memories of his boyhood in Kashmir and his present home in America. The utilisation of various colours and paradoxes is an actual representation of the individual experiences of the writer. While the personification of nature can be profiled into having memory, the shelf dispersion is represented through events such as the sky taking notes on the grass. Here, the writer intends to identify himself with the sky that is observant and mindful of the events that are going on around. Highly distinguishable characteristics which can also be found is memory itself, being present at the doorstep of the writer being represented through Jasmine which was crushed under the departing feet (Ali and Vuille, 2020). The feelings of the poet have also been articulated and give life to alien voices and imaginations in his head to portray his feelings being an individual person in itself. The poet has lost his memory to transcend reality and observe marriages of reassurance and closures. Through the self-dispersion into alien voices, the writer consolidates his broken world into alien voices that are in the opposite pole. The idea of self-dispersion into alien voices is to shatter the comforting illusions of life.

On the other hand, the history of the past has also been broken down which is exemplified by "Eurydice". The myth has been transformed and contextualized into the events of the holocaust where Eurydice is depicted as limping to hell. The travel of the writer is also described as a journey through hell. Past the Howl Choked Dog, this poem by Ali has also put on trial the aestheticization of violence in cultural history. While the permutations and limitations of art in the modern state cannot be refuted, the writer describes disengaging from life itself and transforming into alien ideologies that are not in alignment with the social construct (Sharma, 2018). The false securities and shelters are being betrayed by the modern wasteland and alienated feelings and emotions being constituted through the personification of elements in nature itself. The arms of the beloved are departing from the limitations of human nature to have constructive and obvious attempts of incarcerating divine powers. This is also an example of alienation and alien voices of the right to represent the struggles of human life in order to meaninglessly and vaguely reflect nostalgia. People of today are not accepting the true nature and establish fall interpretations to present an alienated description of their individual self being projected in society. Thus, through the depictions of lives separate turns through its journey, the personification of the emotions and experiences have

been vested into an alienated form through self-dispersion.

### **Loss and Forgetfulness**

Sense of loss is another striking diasporic feature in A Nostalgist's Map of America. After settling in U.S.A, Ali had lost socio-cultural connection from India and Kashmir. He was trying to assimilate in western culture and society. The forgetfulness and loss which has been repeated throughout the poem is also another theme that needs to be analyzed and discussed in detail. The personification of the elements of nature having separate memory is also attributed to the disadvantages of human memory itself. Just as people tend to forget life events in due course of time, the plans and elements of nature are also similar. Through the perseverance of nature traversing different weather conditions, nature also forgets. Ali stated that Saguaros have veins and termed them as plants about to be massacred but has a memory that soon passes out. The plants in the deserts are also signified as tribes due to their collective growth in the desert landscape. The personified Saguaros have also forgotten and the snow on the desert is taking its time to remember (Bhattacharya, 2019). This is also noted in regards to the release of the sun which falls on the snow as being reflected to be the process of remembering. A notable comparison is also in relating the prehistoric events with the current state while travelling through America. The poet has attributed himself and his human nature to lend a willful voice of unknown. The generally perceived nature of human interventions is notable for connecting with nature and the environment but the current condition of human infidelity is regarded as alien to the writer and his life reviews. The lights of the village Tucson has also faded that also depicts forgetfulness in the poem by Ali.

On the other hand, the significant losses which are suffered by the poet in his lifetime have also been described in detail. The recollection of memory is also a risk and causes significant danger to forgetfulness. It should be noted that the losses in life are some things that people do not intend to forget. The description of losing a friend has also been compared to the summertime when he was alive while the poet tries to redeem himself and keep the promises he has made to his friend. This loss of his friend is also indicating the struggles of life which are sometimes lost and sometimes won. The intermittent notion of the life itself to present a mixed bag of emotions goes to show that although the service of the memory is to remember and recollect the events, the loss and forgetfulness always springs from the fundamental issue of life itself (Chatterjee, 2020). The basic idea is that

forgetfulness is reminiscent of the hopelessness that exists in the world today. It is posited by the writer that people has forgotten history and are on a path that generally forgets and losses itself in the tenets of life. Just like various histories and myths that have been forgotten, the writer is also of the opinion that the losses of life will also be forgotten and the travel journey will discover the left behind scenes in the mirror.

### CONCLUSION

It can be concluded from the above discussion that the poet is reminiscent of his journey from Kashmir to America and is also comparing the various experiences of life with the intermittent characteristics and memory of the scenery elements of nature. This is also indicative of the personification of the natural elements that have been given a form of memory by the writer to remember albeit for a short period of time. The fluidity and flexibility of memory and cyclical process of remembering and shedding light upon it is compared to the rays of the sun itself melting the ice. The desert and ocean from prehistoric times have been linked to ideologically present the opposite nature of human expectations and emotions that is presented in an alien form

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