THE SELF AND THE OTHER IN THE POETRY OF AGHA SAHID ALI

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Abstract

Agha Sahid Ali, a Kashmiri American poet, is known for his experiment of English Ghazal form to bring together the East and West to negotiate experiences, personal and collective. Though Sahid Ali draws enormously from the history of India, he transfigures such history into experiences that can be associated universally. One such strong found theme in his poetry is the self and the other dialectic. His dispersal from his native country and the hyphenated identity into which he was absorbed are the basis from which his relational view of the self and the other springs. The submerged self re-emerges into the relation to the other into an alien experience. The theme of exile is connected inherently to his experience of the self in relation to the other. He has the ability to glance into the “heart of loss and not flinch” and defy the continuous presence of the idealized and ingenuous making of the separation of the self and the other. His poems are reflections of an internally battled sensitive and affirmatively presented tales of existential quandary. This paper is an attempt to study the theme of the self and the other in the poetry of Agha Sahid Ali.
Subcontinent. The experience of crossing borders or being a diasporic does not, for Shahid Ali, a cause of rupture between self and the other but a continuum that combines within the search that is at once local and communal experience. Within the monolithic temporal, Shahid Ali’s poetry favors an abstruse association with the plural voices of time and space. His personal tale, the communal narrative of Husain, Zainab’s despair and the pains she undergoes as she is shifted to Damascus and the contemporary situation of Kashmir provides the diasporian intent to search the self that is detached in relation to the other.

Shahid Ali wrote in ghazal form, a seventh century Arabic literary genre. Ghazal, when written in English, rests on the principle of stress—the long and the short in the stressed and unstressed order. A minimum of five shers are expected within the paradoxical unity of the poem. Ghazal is composed of autonomous or semiautonomous couplets (called beit [bait] in Arabic meaning “house” and sheir [sher] in Persian and Urdu tradition, which means “something composed or versified”) that are united by a strict scheme of rhyme (qafia [qāfiya], refrain (radif) [radīf] and line length (bahar) [bahr]. The opening couplet (matla) [matla] sets the scheme by having it in both lines (misra) [misra] and then the scheme occurs only in the second line of every succeeding couplet (58).

Self corresponds to ‘home’ in Sahid Ali’s poetry, the identity in the making and search. The imaginary homeland often appears in Shahid Ali’s poetry is search for the retrospective self that is revealed by the interconnection of the self and the other. Self is communicated transversely through inbetween spaces—home and away, past and present, suggesting the homelessness that compels in the formation of imaginary space identifying the dream of an impracticable arrival and the recognition of an unassociated space: “Inhabited space transcends geometrical space” (Bachelard 47). The desire to be back ‘home’ in all its aptness continues to be intangible and evading space that can only be achieved through imagination. Such imaginary homelands offer transient glances of a lost self that cannot re-narrate and re-live the sense of abundance. Shahid Ali writes:

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox  
My home a neat four by six inches  
I always loved neatness. Now I hold  
The half-inch Himalayas in my hand  
This is home. And this is the closest  
I’ll ever be to home (Ali, Veiled Suite 29).

The return to the self through a wistful engagement with the past refers to the search for the identity through symbols and images of the native land that provides a flowing multiplicity of locating the self in the in between space that tag along a concord heterogeneous memories. The memories of the self suppose a cooperative importance where a symbolic identification of the multicultural other is imagined through fresh experiences. The irreparable loss and sequences of violence that the poet experienced in Kashmir has left the self mourning for the overwhelming clashes between the self and its other:

At a certain point I lost track of you.  
You needed me. You needed to perfect me:  
In your absence you polished me into the Enemy.  
Your history gets in the way of my memory.  
I am everything you lost. Your perfect enemy…  
If only somehow you could have been mine,  
what would not have been possible in the world? (Veiled Suite 176-7)
The sad tales of history engraved in the poet’s cave of the heart reflecting upon the human loss and anguish that did not burdened the marking of the nation states. Ali states: “relocations mean loss. Each of them also meant creating a rhetoric of loss and through loss, the illusion of belonging—to something, to anything. That dismal word: roots” (Ali Darkly Defense 148). The poet appropriates the self in a position that demonstrate sympathy towards those who suffered. Identities in “diasporas do not have a teleology then they invariably disturb narratives of national identities, and their particular utopias, by failing to register such local, invariably ethnically bound, future” (Chambers 53). Shahid Ali’s poetry involves articulation of such transnational spaces:

the Alexandria that is forever leaving.  
I’m running toward a barbed-wire fence  
And someone is running after me (Veiled Suite 230).

The constitution of a borderland position comes from the articulation of the varied local issues that directly helps in the making of a transnational space which functions crossculturally as a “veritable of metamorphoses and permutations” (Deleuze 56). Such intercultural relations aids Shahid Ali to outline the natural features of partition that is transcultural, the latent interaction of the self that is moving within and between the nations:

So what is separation’s geography?  
Everything is just that mystery  
everything is this roar that deafens:  
this stream has branched off from the Indus,  
in Little Tibet, just to  
find itself where Porus  
miles down (there it will join the Jhelum)  
lost to the Greeks. It will become  
in Pakistan, the Indus again (Veiled Suite 276).

Within these amalgamic experiences and situations, an assertive position brought into existence through the interconnections of the consciousness to the natural world that assimilate the global and the local in relation to the other. The temporal space becomes the eloquent moments of set of connections that is personal and collective in nature.

India always exists  
Off the turnpikes  
of America  
so I could say  
I did take the exit  
and crossed Howrah  
and even mention Ganges  
as it continued sobbing  
under the bridge (Veiled Suite 123).

“The transnation is both global and local. It not only interpenetrates the State, but interpenetrates the multiplicity of states in their international and global relationality” (Ashcroft 11). Shahid Ali enters into a search of the self, rather a dialogue with the self in terms of an ambivalent excess. The ambivalence corresponds to “both and neither,” which is “partial and plural”:

Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight
before you agonize him in farewell tonight?
I beg for haven: Prisons, let open your gates-
A refuge from Belief seeks a cell tonight (Ali, *Country without a Post Office*).

The transnational consciousness of the *self* fabricates fresh ways of coherent reasoning of identity that traverses through the imaginary of “non-limited locality” and streams beyond the borders into a profound localized itinerant space: “Who will protect us if you leave?” is the call.

I am mere dust.
The desert hides itself in me.
Against me the ocean has reclined from the start (Ali, *Call 42*).

The space, thus, becomes encompassed with a ‘contrapuntal’ element that passes through the thoughts that continually traverse between the “root and routes.” The discourse which is inevitably subjective offers the imagination of a postcolonial positional *self* that moves into the immobilization of the rhetoric of terrorism, clash of cultures, a space that becomes comprehensive flowing together of heterogeneity breaking the unilinear configurations of parochial identities and national demarcations. The diasporic *self* “evokes an interaction among different cultural passages, challenges homogeneous modes of belonging, and suggests a de-territorialized construction of new identity that is both immediately local and yet mediated by the wide world” (Zhang 151). Shahid Ali’s poetry functions as an appropriation of the meeting point of the suffering *self* that is placed in a historical-geographical position jointly configures the foundation of such paths of integration whose intention is to relation with the other as a transformatory medium.

**Works Cited**


