

Talking Long Distance to the Dead: Agha Shahid Ali's Poetic Genealogy

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Abstract: The family is a tissue of relationships and conventions, which provides a poet with a rich store of human feeling and a structure against which to trace and analyze it. As post Independence Indian English poets write about their families, they make for themselves an inner history and give a name to their past. The re-telling of one's own family story becomes an act of faith and sometimes, an act of exorcism. Writing after Independence, and at a time when the nation was becoming more pluralistic one of the reasons for the family becoming a primary site of personal identity for a poet could be the consciousness of the fact that their place in the cosmos is determined (at least partially) by their paternity. In the poems of Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001), his family has a very important place and is closely tied in with his memories of home. Because this is a home to which he cannot return, the memories take on an added poignancy and death becomes his adolescent password and a recurrent motif in the poems. The legacy that he inherits is heirlooms of sorrow/ left in wills of ancestors and a plot in the family graveyard. Through a close reading of his poems, this paper will look at Agha Shahid Ali's poetic quests of being and belonging and also in the process, arrive at an understanding of the contours of his home and homeland.

Keywords: Agha Shahid Ali, Family, Ancestors, Kashmir, Indian English Poetry

The family is a tissue of relationships and conventions, which provides a poet with a rich store of human feeling and a structure against which to trace and analyze it. As post independence Indian English poets write about their families, they make for themselves an inner history and give a name to their past. The re-telling of one's own family story becomes an act of faith and sometimes, an act of exorcism. Writing after independence, and at a time when the nation was becoming more pluralistic one of the reasons for the family becoming a primary site of personal identity for a poet could be the consciousness of the fact that their place in the cosmos is determined (at least partially) by their paternity¹. This genealogical method of enquiry into the complex web of relationships that constitutes the web of Indianness becomes a more helpful way of re(dis)covering the mystery of the Indian past and as national history cuts across personal narratives, questions of self-recovery and cultural identity acquire poignancy and pertinence.

This retrieval is not just an exercise in nostalgia and the past is looked at with irony, self-parody and detachment. The details are often quotidian and small things become important as they constitute the mundane materiality of everyday life, mocking in their earthiness the grand paradigms of history². For the urban-based poet the family becomes an important source of identity as the environment is one in which, in the words of

Hobsbawm, we encounter strangers: uprooted men and women who remind us of the fragility or the drying up of our own families roots³. The family is a means to connect the past, as the poets carry it in their heads, with the present as it exists, and a lot of the poems grow out of this tension. There is a persistent preoccupation with personal ties and a concerted attempt to reconstruct the building blocks of individual identity - name, family, ancestors and community.

The writers place themselves somewhere between 'rootedness' and 'restlessness' and 'reassemble fragments of family history and narrate interesting family sagas, with a recurrent 'backward glance'⁴. The idea of a home is a combination of memory and desire and the imaginative world of the poets is largely peopled by the community and family in which they were raised.

While there is a "psychic re-living of one's imagined origins"⁵, the poets are not univocal about the value of tradition. Tradition is seen not only as a chronology of past events, but also as something that continually impinges on the present in not always desirable ways. There is also no formula or time-span to determine the feeling of 'being at home' and as Said says, the contrast is between exile and "the sense of being extremely well-located in one's own home"⁶. It is evident in the poetry of these poets that the feeling of belonging is not contingent upon geography and depends mainly upon how well located the poet is in his/her own nation of the mind. An individual who is aware of his/her roots knows that these roots have many names - "heritage, tradition, moorings, belongingness". For the writer it becomes important to "return to the roots" when s/he realizes that "tomorrow (and in fact today) cannot be fully understood without yesterday and its equally valid dreams and despairs"⁷.

As each writer tells his/her story, the whole question of the reliability of memory also comes up. In a passionate defense of "imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind", nearly all the poets seem to echo the sentiments of Salman Rushdie who writes,

The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities. There is an obvious parallel here with archaeology. The broken pots of antiquity, from which the past can sometimes, but always provisionally, be reconstructed, are exciting to discover, even if they are pieces of the most quotidian objects. It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity.... The broken glass is not merely a mirror of nostalgia. It is also, I believe, a useful tool with which to work in the present... Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries... people hated, people loved.⁸

As each of the poets explores his/her personal history, they give a shape to the 'usable past' with which they negotiate as they try and define themselves in the present. As C. Vijayasree also points out, 'each of the writers use a variety of strategies of self-definition which is thematized and explored in a wide range of fictional tropes such as: anonymity or namelessness, search for home, renewal of family ties, evocation of imaginary homelands, interrogation of contemporary notions of nation and nationalism and a dialectic of cultural differences.' She adds that, in their general struggle to define their multiple and shifting identities, the writers display a 'persistent preoccupation with a deliberate reconstruction of the original guideposts of identity - name, family, community and country'⁹.

In the poems of Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001), his family has a very important place and is closely tied in with his memories of home. Because this is a home to which he

cannot return, the memories take on an added poignancy and death becomes his 'adolescent password'¹⁰ and a recurrent motif in the poems. The legacy that he inherits is "heirlooms of sorrow/ left in wills of ancestors"¹¹ and "a plot in the family graveyard"¹².

In the chapbook, *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages*, Shahid Ali has a piece titled "It's getting late. Do Your friends know where you are?" in which his reply to this question is

They know my debts are unpaid,
they won't look for me. But
if they call, say I'm at the phone booth
talking long distance to the dead.¹³

These conversations with people, whose absence is a powerful presence in his life, form the refrain of his poetry. As Lawrence D. Needham says,

Ali came to a strong sense of his familial and cultural resources as he dealt with separation and partial estrangement". He then goes on to say that, "In their absence the members of the poet's family are present in his memory; despite longing, however, he safeguards against nostalgia by refusing to sentimentalize the past. Nostalgia for an "authentic" time (the "real" past) or an "authentic" place (the "real" India) eventuates in a frame of mind that not only does violence to history, but also ultimately diminishes the value and uses of memory, Ali's primary resource and subject in *The Half-Inch Himalayas*. One of his chief objects is ...to avoid the frozen embrace of the past through exercising and emphasizing the re-creative powers of memory.¹⁴

Family ancestors are an "obsession" for this poet, according to Bruce King and he believes that Shahid Ali's continuous attempt is to find "links and continuity with origins". The burden of his poems is the tragic fact that he can never go back to his childhood home and the poems are "fantasies of the history of his family" and the "existential anxieties" of leaving 'home'. "While autobiography often starts in a golden age of childhood which is lost in growing up, Ali's obsession with expulsion from the womb, home and tradition is remarkably intense; it results in a poetry symbolic of the cultural and political changes of our time"¹⁵.

In "Cracked Portraits" Agha Shahid Ali writes of his paternal ancestors and traces his line of descent, saying

"My grandfather's painted grandfather,
son of Ali (...)
He's left us plots
in the family graveyard.
Great-grandfather? A sahib in breeches. (...)
He wound the gramophone to a fury,
the needles grazing Malika Pukhraj's songs
as he drunk, tore his shirts
and wept at the refrain,
"I still am young."
(...)
I turn the pages,
see my father holding a tennis racquet,
ready to score with women, (...)
He brings me closer to myself
as he quotes Lenin's love of Beethoven,
but loses me as he turns to Gandhi.
Silverfish have eaten his boyhood face.

Cobwebs cling
to the soundless
words of my ancestors.
No one now comes from Kandahar,
dear Ali, to pitch tents by the Jhelum,
under autumn maples,
and claim descent from the holy prophet.
Your portrait is desolate
in a creaking corridor.”¹⁶

Another poem in this volume, “*Story of a Silence*” talks about his grandfather’s death after he has been reduced to a shadow through loss and disappointment. More than his grandfather, it is the poet’s grandmother who is being talked of here, in terms of her courage while she was alive and the impact her example made on the poet. He writes

“my grandmother worked hard, harder
than a man to earn
her salary from the government and
deserve her heirloom
of prayer from God.”¹⁷

Shahid Ali’s progenitors participate in a continued legacy of loss and exile and “*The Dacca Gauzes*” are a symbol of this loss. In the poem the poet talks about how his grandmother inherited “an heirloom sari” made of

transparent Dacca gauze(s)
known as woven air, running
water, evening dew¹⁸

Like so many other legacies of the past, this art too is ‘dead’ and the poet’s grandmother tries hard to preserve it by making handkerchiefs for all the women in the family, but “those too now lost”.

In “*Notes from Autumn Wars*”¹⁹ the mood is autumnal and the poet mourns the passing away of his ancestors and all that gave him his sense of belonging. In *The Half-Inch Himalayas* there is a poem called “*A Dream of Glass Bangles*” in which the poet uses the image of the glass to mirror the image of his home. The earlier image is of a haven and the later one a ruin that has been shattered beyond recall. He writes

Those autumns my parents slept
warm in a quilt studded
with pieces of mirrors.
On my mother’s arms were bangles
like waves of frozen rivers
and at night
after the prayers
as she went down to her room
I heard the faint sound of ice
breaking on the staircase
breaking years later
into winter
our house surrounded by men
pulling icicles for torches (...)
till the cement’s darkening red
set the tips of water on fire (...)

as my father stepped out
and my mother
inside the burning house
a widow smashing the rivers
on her arms²⁰

The poet merges the images of his mother and motherland so inextricably that when he writes of the death of one, the destruction of the other is immediately evoked for the reader. This is a litany he will return to again and again until his mother symbolizes all that he cherished in the past and has now lost irretrievably. Another memory of the poet's parents includes one where he talks about their secular and liberal attitude to life, which the poet internalized and in "*Note Autobiographical – 1*"²¹ he writes about this in vivid anecdotal detail.

If it is perpetual winter in their lives and in Kashmir now, the poet remembers a time when the year had "four clear seasons". In this poem "*The Season of the Plains*" he contrasts those happier days to the present and writes

my mother
spoke of her childhood
in the plains of Lucknow, and
of that season in itself,
the monsoon, when Krishna's
flute is heard on the shores
of the Jamuna. (...)
My mother
hummed Heer's lament
but never told me if she
also burned sticks
of jasmine that, dying,
kept raising soft necks
of ash. (...)
She only
said: The monsoons never cross
the mountains into Kashmir.²²

Thinking of his mother as a young woman and with a history that precedes his birth, he imagines his parents on the day on which he was conceived and writes in the poem "*A Lost Memory of Delhi*"

"I am not born
it is 1948 (...)
There on his bicycle
My father (...)
My mother is a recent bride
her sari a blaze of brocade
Silverdust parts her hair (...)
They go into the house
always faded in photographs
in the family album
but lit up now".²³

In this poem and others, the poet talks about his legacy of exile as all his ancestors came from elsewhere and carried the memories of their home with them. His poems about his

family reverberate with loss and he returns again and again to them only to be left alone. In this and other poems, there is a curious reversal of traditional roles as the poet sees himself as the parent and his parents as children to be protected from harm and knowledge of evil and horror. In the poem "A Call" he writes

I close my eyes. It doesn't leave me
the cold moon of Kashmir which breaks
into my house
and steals my parent's love.
I open my hands:
empty, empty. This cry is foreign.
"When will you come home?"
Father asks, then asks again.
The ocean moves into the wires.
I shout, "Are you all happy?"
The line goes dead.²⁴

Separated as he is from his home, the poet thinks of it often and for him it is a haven which, he can keep intact only in his memory. The reality of what has happened to that haven and all those who inhabited it is too horrific for him to contemplate. In "Houses" he writes

The man who buries his house in the sand
and digs it up again, each evening,
learns to put it together quickly
and just as quickly to take it apart.
My parents sleep like children in the dark
I am too far to hear them breathe
but I remember their house is safe
and I can sleep (...)
I am thirteen thousand miles from home.²⁵

This image of security is shattered as soon as the poet gets news of home in which his friend's father is dead and the neighbour's house has been burned down. He dare not wake up or the illusion of a return to safety will be irrevocably shattered.

The poet will return to this house many years later in "Return to Harmony 3". The tragic irony implied in the title of the poem signals its mood as the poet realizes the impossibility of a return to the harmony of his childhood. As he reaches there he writes

"This is home – the haven a cage surrounded by ash – the fate of Paradise. (...)
A bunker has put the house under a spell. Shadowed eyes watch me open the gate, like a trespasser."²⁶

As he sees the dead roses "choked in their beds" and the piles of unopened mail he wonders what happened to the gardener and the postman. As he opens the door the poet finds

The Koran still protects the house, lying strangely wrapped in a *jamawar* shawl where my mother had left it on the walnut table by the fireplace. Above, *If God is with you, Victory is near!* – the framed calligraphy ruthless behind cobwebs.²⁷

He wonders at the protection that religion has given to the house, but not its inhabitants. The phone is also dead and "its number exiled from its instrument". When he picks up

the receiver all he can hear is a radio transmitting songs of loss and separation. He goes through the bedrooms upstairs and finds his books and his parents' wedding photograph in which they are "beautiful in their wedding brocades, so startlingly young!"

The sights and memories are too much for him and he says:

And there in black and white my mother, eighteen years old (...) so unforgivingly beautiful that the house begins to shake in my arms, and when the unarmed world is still again, with pity, it is the house that is holding me in its arms and the cry coming faded from its empty rooms is my cry.²⁸

In the same poem he also refers to the "Annex" of the house which was his grandmother's cottage and which he will return to in "*Some Vision of the World Cashmere*" [28]. While far away in Amherst, when he hears that his grandmother is dying and he pictures himself going to her house. Returning to the poem, the poet imagines his grandmother coming back to the house and with her presence making it a home again. He writes:

The mirrors have grieved in her absence. They run to greet her at the door. It is her home again! (...) And I'm holding her hand in that sun which is shining on all the summers of my childhood, shining on a teardrop in which windows are opening, amplifying her voice, and she is telling me, *God is merciful, God is compassionate.*²⁹

This image is as powerful, as it is heartbreakingly ephemeral. The poet's anguish is for the evanescence of his loved ones and of all that he holds dear and is now destroyed and lost. Even in a dream narrative he cannot escape to a world untouched by sorrow. Horror and death scar every imaginative reconstruction of his home.

In the poem, "*A Fate's Brief Memoir*" [29] the poet talks about his sisters who share his agony of loss and exile and he says

My sister should shortly
be here (...)
and in the stars' light each of us lonely. (...)
But we know nothing of our own birth.
Suddenly we were here – call us orphans –
beautiful certainly, with ties not worth
our while, each strand recalled by oblivion (...)
Do you also spin the threads of nations? (...)
My sister's hands – the youngest one's –
shook when she let a nation go.
Finally no one is ours (...)
Our ties are zero,
Thinned with melting dew.³⁰

In all the poems where Shahid Ali talks about his family, the most pronounced tone is one of loss and despair and regret. What he carries with him are memories of his parents and grandmother, who gave him his identity and sense of self. "Exile offers him unconfined and unpeopled space into which, one at a time, he introduces human figures....Just as exile provides each memory with its own space, absence gives high definition to that what is absent, be it landscape, lover or self."³¹

To better understand the hold of his family on his imagination, it is necessary to look at those poems where he talks about ancestors and genetic legacies. It is these ancestors who give him a sense of rootedness and belonging and the separation and severance of these roots is the primary cause of his alienation and his sense of being in exile.

In the poem "*Resume*"³² the poet sees himself as "the secretary of memory/ in chambers of weeds" and every application he makes, to find his own image even in a reflection, is rejected. In "*Legends of Kashmir*" he begins with a section called 'A Lost Tribe' and talks about the original home of his ancestors and their journey to Kashmir. He sees amnesia as a necessary part of making a foreign country home and says that "such forgetting" is "necessary to plant roots" and he writes "we forgot how or why we came here." He says in the poem

They saw we Kashmiris, one of Israel's
lost tribes, cut through acres of air
to this Himalayan vale, and wailed
at the frozen naked peaks. Our clothes
cold, we wore parchment till our past
burst at the seams, our hope of return
torn to shreds. No ghosts of our gods left.³³

The poet's ancestors could claim Kashmir as their home only by forgetting their original homeland and finding ways to adapt to the new landscape. Shahid Ali is not blessed with a similar amnesiac ability and memories of his home continue to haunt him all his life.

In *The Beloved Witness* Shahid Ali has a number of poems on death and in each of them he speaks of his ancestors. He believes that with the erasure of the symbols of his history has come the erasure of his self. In "*Bones*" he writes

I'm still alone.
Death filled the years, there
was no time to mourn. No time to remember
slaughtered martyrs or ancestors
who knew a history of miracles (...)
In this mosaic world of silent
graveyards the difference lies between
death and dying. Its
futile to light oil lamps here
and search for grandfather or
forgotten ancestors. Their
flesh must have turned soft as dust
and how can one complain to bones?³⁴

In "*Autumn in Srinagar*" the poet sees the death of all that was familiar and made up his home and writes

in this
terrible darkness
i hear
bangles break"³⁵

and in "*Another Death*" he wonders

"That stone we worshipped
long ago holds a savage emptiness.
Will we return to find it? In
the stone the buried shadow of time
that has passed to nowhere?³⁶

When the poet is surrounded by bones, skeletons, graves and shadows he thinks of the legacy left to him by his ancestors and resolves to transform it and writes in "*Snowmen*"

My ancestor, a man
of Himalayan snow,
came to Kashmir from Samarkand (...)
His skeleton
carved from glaciers, his breath
arctic (...)
This heirloom
his skeleton under my skin, passed
from son to grandson,
generations of snowmen on my back.
They tap every year on my window,
their voices hushed to ice.
No they won't let me out of winter,
and I've promised myself,
even if I'm the last snowman,
that I'll ride into spring
on their melting shoulders.³⁷

"Recognizing his forbear as a man of Himalayan snow", says Lawrence D. Needham, "the poet claims a legacy of change and transition. Exile is in his bones, and the poem serves as a justification for his current exiled condition. Re-creating the past, providing his own version of it, is thus enabling, unburdening him of generations of snowmen on his back who would press him into winter. At the same time, the past is the necessary ground for change; the poet rides into spring on the melting shoulders of the snowmen."³⁸

It is only when the thaw sets in that the poet believes he can find some place to call his own and in the poem "*Beyond the Ash Rain*" he writes

When the desert refused my history,
refused to acknowledge that I had lived (...)
You showed me the relics
of our former life, proof that we'd at last
found each other (...)
You took my hand, and (...)
vulnerable
to our suddenly bare history in which I was,
but you said won't again be singled
out for loss in your arms, won't ever again
be exiled, never again, from your arms.³⁹

This is only a temporary relief for the poet who realizes by the last poem in this collection, "*Snow on the Desert*"

a time
to recollect
every shadow, everything the earth was losing,
a time to think of everything the earth
and I had lost, of all
that I would lose,
of all that I was losing.⁴⁰

All the images of grief and loss coalesce in his final collection of poems *Rooms are Never Finished* where the poet talks at length about his mother's death and the way in which his world shattered when she was not in it. One of the earliest references we have is to the almost pre-natal bonds between mother and son in a piece called "*Hansel's Game*"⁴¹. When

the poet's mother is sick in hospital, he watches her suffering and prays for her death, so that she can be released from pain. All the family poems in his final collection refer to the death of his mother. For the poet the loss of his mother and his mother-land combine in a series of poems that resound with suffering and pain and the metaphor of loss applies to all that the poet has lost beyond recall.

In "*Lennox Hill*" he prays for his mother's death as a release from suffering and writes

I prayed: If she must die,
let it only be some dream. But there were times, Mother,
while you slept, that I prayed, "Saints, let her die."
Not, I swear by you, that I wished you to die
but to save you as you were, young, in song in Kashmir, (...)
Thus I swear, here and now, not to forgive the universe
that would let me get used to a universe
without you.

He then goes on to say

Mother,
they asked me, *So how's the writing?* I answered *My mother
is my poem.* (...)
"As you sit here by me, you're just like my mother,"
she tells me. I imagine her: a bride in Kashmir,
she's watching, at the Regal, her first film with Father.
If only I could gather you in my arms, Mother,
I'd save you – now my daughter – from God. The universe
opens its ledger. I write: How helpless was God's mother! (...)
I enter this: *The Beloved leaves one behind to die.*
For compared to my grief for you, what are those of Kashmir,
and what (I close the ledger) are the griefs of the universe
when I remember you – beyond all accounting – O my mother?⁴²

For the poet everything that he loves is linked to his mother and one of his passions, the poetry of Faiz, is also the legacy of his mother. In "*Summers of Translation*" he writes of his attempts to translate Faiz's poem '*Memory*' and of his memories of his mother's stories. Her voice resounds in his mind and he writes

For your voice could make any story so various,
so new, that even terrible pain would decrease
into wonder. But for me, I who of passion
always make a holocaust, will there be a summer of peace?
A mother dies. There's a son's execution.⁴³

At his mother's last request her family takes her body back to Kashmir for burial and the next set of poems in this collection talk about the poet's feelings as they all return to his mother's home, with her body. In "*New Delhi Airport*" he writes

How she longed for home, to return alive, go
home to light candles...(...)
We are such pilgrims
too, returning thus with her shrine. It enters
first the hold's, then memory's desolation.⁴⁴

After his mother has been buried and it is "*The Fourth Day*"⁴⁵ he writes of how "the flames deserted their wicks in the shrines" after she had gone. Even the moon seems to

mock at the poet's grief as it shines without care on the world in which the poet's mother is no longer there.

Finally, in the poem "*I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World*" the poet says his final farewell to all that he has loved and lost.

As he writes, "SO IT'S ANOTHER CHRONICLE OF LOSS.../AND LOVE". In a dream narrative he imagines being rowed across the waters of the Dal lake in Srinagar and arrives at

Shahid when you smile,
it seems your mother has returned to life. We all know
how you – you all – miss her. (...) Now *Khuda Hafiz*. I've
nothing more to say (...)
But let it not end" IT WON'T "this grief for your mother."⁴⁶

The poet imagines his mother telling him not to weep her for any more as she wants him to believe that she will always be with him in all that he does and all his love for her cannot fight the inevitability of loss. The poem ends with the voice of the poet's friend, who too is dead, saying "SHAHID, HUSH. THIS IS ME, JAMES. THE LOVED ONE ALWAYS LEAVES."⁴⁷

Since his grandparents, parents and siblings are the only family that Shahid Ali ever had, his attachment to them is all the more vital and essential for his poetic existence. This includes even those in the past, like his grandparents and thus memory plays a very important role in this poet's reconstruction of his home. For Shahid Ali then, the family is the cornerstone and fountainhead of his personal and poetic identity. This poet's incessant backward glance to the remote and recent past and his writing about the loss of all that is beloved to him adds to the poignancy of his poems. Notwithstanding the regret he expresses at these losses, there is no morbidity in the poems because the poet's memories are all happy ones. This poet does not need to search for a place to belong to; all he has to do is conjure up the memories of his family and he is home.

The role of the family in the articulation of the self in the context of the Indian nation is articulated by Agha Shahid Ali through the tropes of memory, genealogy and the materials and modes of experience. The poet resorts to various techniques to weave an idea of belonging even when he is away from the locations of his childhood. The warp and the weft of this tapestry are the past and the present between which he alternates. There is in this reconstruction a fear of forgetting and it is the intense attachment towards his personal past that enables a retrieval of those memories to reconstruct the past. In the final analysis, home is a vital component in Agha Shahid Ali's poetic identity and a vital constituent of his personal identity too. He knows that home is where the hearts is and he conjures it up in powerful kinesthetic images to remember who he is by recalling where he comes from.

Notes

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