

Cosmopolitan Ethics in the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically analyzes the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali to demonstrate how Ali's poetry envisages a cosmopolitan ethos. Though the politico-legal ramifications of a cosmopolitan philosophy cannot be underestimated but the moral and cultural substratum is significant for the development of cosmopolitan attitude. Literature is a site where the real and imagined boundaries are continuously transgressed. It makes possible the ideological exchange across the most rigid and formidable borders. Agha Shahid Ali's poetry is an illustration of such a site of exchange. Though Ali writes from a specific spatial and temporal location, his poetry encompasses more than one place and speaks from a position of cosmopolitan empathy. This paper attempts to demonstrate how Ali's poetry weaves cosmopolitan ethics into its thematic and formal structure. It is further argued that he weaves his concern against oppression, violence and injustice into the cosmopolitan empathy without creating a 'contemptible other'.

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, poetry, Forgiveness, Hybrid, dialogic, transnational.

INTRODUCTION

In the heart's wild space lies the space of wilderness.

What won't one lose, what home one won't give forever.

—Agha Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite*

Contemporary theory has questioned the possibility of exact and absolute definitions, particularly in the socio-cultural domain. However, one can identify certain characteristics that mark a particular idea. When the idea of "cosmopolitanism" is elucidated, it is described in terms of multiculturalism,

multiple identities, tolerance, openness, and an acknowledgement of difference and hospitality. Immanuel Kant considers “cosmopolitan right” as a rational necessity for perpetual peace in the world. By “cosmopolitan right”, he means that a human being has the right to be free from hostility if one enters a state of which one is not legally a citizen (Kant, 1996). Hegel (1991), in his *The Philosophy of Right*, declared that cosmopolitanism was a matter of immense importance because human beings had value as human beings irrespective of their group identities based on their religion, race and nationality. Sociologist Emile Durkheim (1992) envisioned cosmopolitanism as a state of being “the most just, the best organised and in possessing the best moral constitution” (p. 75). Robert Audi (2009), writes in his essay that cosmopolitans “tend to give priority to specifically human concerns”. He further adds that “although those concerns have high priority in the ethical frameworks of the world’s major religions, the human concerns central for understanding the contrast between nationalism and cosmopolitanism do not normatively depend on values that are intrinsically religious” (p. 366). Therefore, Audi (2009) astutely remarks that cosmopolitanism “gives more priority to the interests of humanity over those of nations, and the stronger the priority, the stronger the cosmopolitanism” (p. 372).

In its relation with the concepts of nation and nationalism, the politico-legal ramifications of a cosmopolitan philosophy cannot be underestimated, but the moral and cultural substratum is significant for the development of a cosmopolitan attitude. Literature, whether oral or written, plays a significant role in shaping the cultural and moral consciousness of a people. Literature is a site where the real and imagined boundaries are continuously transgressed. It makes possible the ideological exchange across the most rigid and formidable borders. Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry is an illustration of such a site of exchange. In fact, cosmopolitan philosophy is the fundamental framework of Ali’s poetry. Thematically and formally, his poetry can be seen as a metaphor that translates cosmopolitan awareness into the very fabric of its poetic being. Ali’s poetry envisages the values of tolerance, openness and hospitality towards all, as opposed to cruelty, inhumanity, intolerance, conflict and communalism. Ali is seen as an Indian English poet, but his themes and style do not establish specific identities, for instance, national and religious, of the poetic persona. He fuses the symbols, metaphors and images in his poems in such a style that it is impossible to pin it down as Indian or American.

One of the challenges to the notion of cosmopolitanism is the insistence on, or the preference of one single identity over others. The insistence on a single identity, be it national, religious or communal, often leads to conflict. It is this preference

that overrides the cosmopolitan oneness of human concerns. Hence, the foremost feature of cosmopolitan attitude is to endorse a plural identity that is transnational. Ali claims a “translocal identity” for himself when he refers to himself as a “multiple exile” with many hyphenated identities—Kashmiri-American poet, Indian American poet, South Asian-American poet, Muslim-American poet—but he always refuses to be circumscribed within any one of them. For him, all these identities designate him partly and the moment they restrict him, he loses interest in them (Benvenuto, 2002). This is captured beautifully in his poem “In Arabic” in which he writes:

They ask me to tell them what Shahid means-

Listen: It means “The Beloved” in Persian, “witness” in Arabic. (Ali, 2010, p. 226)

This couplet is from one of Ali’s ghazals. Ghazal is an Eastern form of poetry in which it is customary to use the poet’s name or alias in the last couplet. Agha Shahid plays on this “alias” of the poet himself. By utilizing the semantic ambiguity of the word “shahid”—being a beloved and a witness—in the signature line of the poem, Ali categorically refuses the restraints of a single selfhood, thereby endorsing a plural identity. That Ali believed in a cosmopolitan world becomes particularly vivid in the poem “The Veiled Suite”, in which the poet meets his own death. In the faceless ghost of his death, he does not see any particular place, rather he sees death with “...sky from Vail/Colorado and the Ganges from Varanasi in a clay urn (his heart measures like the sea)” (Ali, 2010, p. 23). When Ali was asked about his philosophy, he replied, “I don’t have a philosophy; I have a temperament” (Ali, 2010, p. 23). This is a statement that best describes his poetry. Ali is writing himself as a cosmopolitan.

One of the ways in which Ali’s poetry comes across as endorsing human concerns is the way he humanizes his poetry through inscription. Ali inscribes his poems to a variety of his friends ranging from Kashmir to America. This practice of inscription is, on the one hand, a personal statement of gratitude, appreciation, and a confession of being touched by another human being in a certain special way. The practice of inscription serves another motive in Ali’s poetry. Dedicating the individual poems to individual people humanizes his poetry beyond group affinities. It consecrates poetry as an affect rooted in human emotion rather than as serving any particular ideological affinity. The reader might not know the relation of a particular inscription to the poem but it suggests an immediacy of a human emotion that the poem endorses. The emotion by being related to a proper noun can be read as a syntactic feature of Ali’s poetry through which group affinities

such as that of nationality are undermined and a cosmopolitan ethics is endorsed. His cosmopolitan spirit not only flows through the themes but also through the very form of his poetry. Ali's poetry can be described as dialogic, heteroglossiac and hybrid; one that challenges clear distinctions about national boundaries and personal identities. He is aware of distinct cultural traditions, yet he imagines a universal condition shared by all cultures, races and times. T. P. Sabitah (2002) reiterates that Ali was not fond of any particular national, ethnic or religious identity, and made the very form of his poetry a statement of his cosmopolitan attitude. She aptly remarks:

He is no nativist; he blended Western and Indian formal traditions in his poetic oeuvre. He was as much a master of complex forms like the canzone or sestina as he was of the ghazal. He owed his lineage as much to Emily Dickinson and James Merrill as to Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Mirza Ghalib (p. 182).

The blending of different traditions of poetic form in his poetry reveals Ali's tendency of being at home in different cultures and acknowledging different ways of life. Employing different elements of poetic tradition from different cultures and fusing them into a new form is an endorsement of cosmopolitan ethics. This is further endorsed through the use of personal memory and transforming it into a metaphor for a collective human concern. Ali begins a poem with a personal memory and gradually fuses it with different events, breaking the constraints of time and space so that a collective human concern is brought into focus. The poem "Lenox Hill" demonstrates this aspect of Ali's poetry. Lenox Hill was the name of the hospital where Ali's mother, suffering from cancer, breathed her last. The poem is a poignant expression of the personal loss of the poet. It is a cry of a son at the loss of the mother without whom "the paradise . . . is a tomb." (p. 248). Ali has brilliantly woven this personal emotion into the human anguish resulting from any kind of oppression. Through the story of his personal loss, the death of his mother, Ali retells the history of oppression suffered by the Kashmiri people through the ages. This memory is interwoven with the historical memory of a tyrant king Mihiragula who, as legend has it, was so pleased at hearing an elephant's cry as it fell off the mountain cliff that he ordered more elephants to be thrown off the cliff.

The Hun so loved the cry, one falling elephant's
He wished to hear it again. At dawn, my mother
heard, in her hospital-dream of elephants,
sirens wail through Manhattan like elephants

forced off Pir Panjal's rock cliffs in Kashmir:
the soldiers, so ruled, had rushed the elephants. (Ali, 2010, p. 247)

This extension of personal memory into the historical memory of oppression makes the poem a technical feat. Mihiragula was a tyrant king from the Hun dynasty in the 6th century, who was given refuge in Kashmir and in turn, he usurped the throne of his benefactor. In this poem, even God is seen as a tyrant who has taken the poet's mother away. Further, the history of the "massacred elephants" is rewritten in the bloody history of massacred Kashmiri people during the 1990s. Ali writes, "the punishing khaki whereby the world sees us die/out, mourning you, O massacred elephants!/Months later, in Amherst, she dreamt: She was, with dia-/monds, being stoned to death . . ." (p. 247). The image of "the massacred elephants" becomes the image of grief and loss across the borders of time and space. The grief of the poet, that of the Kashmiris, and the elephants crying by the bones of their mother is envisaged in a single image that could accommodate the poignancy of loss of any human being irrespective of any particular group identity.

The cosmopolitan character, "a sense of boundarylessness" (Beck, 2003, p. 3) in Ali's poetry, is further entailed in the concept of mourning which is undeniably universal. In the tragi-comedy of life, mourning lies at the heart of universal brotherhood because human beings are vulnerable to loss. As Judith Butler puts it, "Despite our differences in location and history, . . . it is possible to appeal to a 'we', for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody" (p. 20). Ali appeals to this collective human "we", when he weaves multiple historic and personal events of mourning into a cosmopolitan ethos of empathy. In his long poem "From Amherst to Kashmir", Ali mourns the death of his mother, whose body is brought from Amherst to Kashmir for burial. He uses "Karbala" as a frame for mourning because it enables him to absorb into personal grief the grief of others and vice-versa, breaking through the boundaries of time and space. He has used the "Karbala metaphor to communicate his own hyphenated existence, his personal pain, his experience of exile, a communal loss caused by political apathy (strife-stricken Kashmir), and the universal phenomenon of pain" (Zaidi, 2007, p. 153). "Karbala" is a city in southern Iraq. It is the site of the tomb of Hussain, grandson of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who was killed there in 680 A.D. "Karbala" therefore becomes a figure of speech to designate "intense grief and sorrow". To express the sense of grief at the loss of his mother, the poet evokes the grief of Zainab, Hussain's sister, who was taken prisoner along with the other women of her clan in the caravan, after all the men, except for one who had been ill, were killed by the Caliph Yazid and his military. Zainab laments:

Over Hussain's mansion what night has fallen
 I alone am left to tell my brother's story
 On my brother's body what dawn has risen
 Weep for my brother
 World, weep for Hussain. (Zaidi, 2007, p. 255)

In these lines, Ali is trying to find expression for his own grief in Zainab's lament, but he does not stop there. The lament is not enough to carry the intensity of his grief at the loss of his beloved mother, which has created what he calls the "geography of separation". He forages for the possible images of grief in the personal, public, literary and mythic memory, to express its poignancy. While Zainab's lament continues as the refrain in the poem, it is merged with the tears of Jesus and Abraham for the prophesied martyrdom of Hussain, and is further intensified with the longing of Radha for Krishna in bhajans, the Hindu devotional songs, in which Radha entreats, "Dark blue god don't cast me into oblivion" (Zaidi, 2007, p. 256). In the same poem, using the technique of intertextuality, Ali invokes the laments of Faiz and Ghalib for the separation of the beloved. This personal geography of loss and trauma is further intertwined with the trauma that people in the sub-continent suffered during Partition, and the people in Kashmir suffered during the 1990s. Ali mourns the suffering of people during Partition when he writes:

. With thunder, a train –
 from Pakistan? – would crash and bring down the refrain,
 and your tears. The train's whistle, years later, would rend
 the heart. (Zaidi, 2007, p. 256)

Reflecting on the suffering that the memories of those who depart create, Ali remembers visiting Kashmir where, "In every home, although Muharram was not yet here/Zainab wailed. Only Karbala could frame our grief/ . . . Karbala was chosen for Kashmir's seasons" (Zaidi, 2007, p. 265). As he establishes suffering as a cosmopolitan emotion in which one is all and all is one, he writes:

. . . For
 where there is farewell,
 You are there. And where there's a son, in any
 Language saying *Adieu* to his mother, she is
 You and that son (*There by the gate*) is me, that
 Son is me. Always. (Zaidi, 2007, p. 263)

Pain has no identity It is a sense shared by all. Even when Ali is comparing his pain with those of others, he does not underestimate others' pain but rather

brings it into sharp focus, as when he writes, “for compared to my grief for you, what are those of Kashmir . . .” (Zaidi, 2007, p. 249). Through comparison, he is not exhibiting his pain as more serious than others’, but he invites the reader’s attention and focuses on the larger aspect of it. Thus, in writing the story of his mother’s separation, he depicts in poignant detail, the “geography of separation” that is inhabited by all. The “geography of separations” makes all equal and gives way to what Ulrich Beck (2006) calls “cosmopolitan empathy” (p. 7). Ali finally brings the memories of personal and public suffering and mourning together in the trope of God as “the only and final assassin” to create a homogenous space in which the tyrant is the one that forces the beloved apart from the lover. Ali writes:

And the Beloved Leaves one behind to Die

.....

They are not the dead, we are the poor at dawn. (Ali, 2010, p. 274)

What enables Ali to create the topography for this cosmopolitan emotion in his poetry is his ability to break free from the constraints of self that remains mired in narrow identities. It builds within the very form of the poetry a possibility of cosmopolitan ethics that respects human survival.

Ali writes about diverse subjects such as memory, death, history, family, ancestors, nostalgia for a past he never knew, dreams, Hindu ceremonies, friendships and self-consciousness about being a poet. One of the persistent concerns in his poetry is human rights and their violation. Ali’s poetry is constantly haunted by oppression, injustice and crimes against humanity. The guarantee of basic human rights lies at the heart of cosmopolitan human coexistence. Ulrich Beck (2006) in *The Cosmopolitan Vision* writes:

Faith in the secular religion of human rights makes no distinction between Germans and French, *citoyen* and *bourgeois*, Christian and Muslim, circumcised and uncircumcised, men and women, people of colour and those whose skin is white. All positions involving the negation of individuals—of ethnicity, caste, class, religion and gender—are transcended in the equality of the basic rights of all human beings. (p. 141)

The concern for human rights in Ali’s poetry again goes beyond the boundaries of ethnicities and nationalities. In his poem, “A Wrong Turn”, the poet sees himself in a massacred town and writes:

In my dream I’m always

In a massacred town, its name

Erased from maps,
No road signs to it

Only a wrong turn brings me here . . . (Ali, 2010, p. 60)

The “massacred town” becomes a symbol for all those who have died in or lived through atrocities and tyrannies. The citizens of this town are not just Kashmiris, with whom Ali shares an ethnic bond, but it includes those massacred in Las Cruz, Jews, Palestinians, Chechens, and those deported in the Bisbee Deportation. The fact that this town has no name and no road signs leading to it is significant. It is an assertion of oneness, of the oppressed beyond the narrow identities of race, color and creed. “In Arabic” Ali addresses the Israeli writer, Yehuda Amichai:

I too, O Amichai, saw everything, just like you did—

In Death. In Hebrew. And (please let me stress) in Arabic. (Ali, 2010, p. 373)

Bringing in a single verse the expression against injustice in the two languages, Hebrew and Arabic that stand for the two identities in conflict, Ali empathizes with those who suffer, irrespective of their identities. What is striking about Ali’s poetry is that he creates a cosmopolitan space of speaking for victims without creating a “contemptible other”. When he writes of injustices and human rights’ violations, he does not create any scope for hatred and violence. This is particularly revealed in the tone of his poems. Recounting the tales of interrogation centres in Kashmir, Ali writes:

. Yesterday at Hideout
Café . . . a doctor who had just treated
a sixteen-year old boy released from an interrogation centre—said: I
*want to ask the fortune tellers: Did anything in his line of Fate reveal that
the webs of his hands would be cut with a knife?* (Ali, 2010, p. 194)

We can see the grief and pathos in these lines, but not the passion that evokes hatred. The use of “fortune tellers” and “fate” is significant here to get across the point that the poet is making. It is not the expression of helplessness of man in front of the vagaries of what is referred to as “fate”. The use of the words “fortune tellers” and “fate” is deliberate, to turn the reader’s focus more on the wrong than the wrongdoer. When he writes about the Palestinian suffering and the Civil War of Lebanon, he uses the images of grief of the legendary lovers Laila and Majnoon to express the anguish:

And Majnoon . . . with bare hands

Digs graves in the desert

Crying out for his dead Laila

His back broken by a giant teardrop

Inside it the ruins of Jerusalem and Beirut. (Ali, 2010, p. 149)

Using the symbols of Majnoon and Laila, Ali reiterates oppression as a hurdle in nourishing one of the primary human necessity, that is, love. Ali deliberately leaves the space occupied by the oppressor empty, so that the tyrant is not fossilized in any group identity and violence is not exhorted. In the poem “Wrong Turn”, the poetic persona, while surveying a place of total massacre wonders:

Who were these people

Who finished them to the last?

If dust had an alphabet, I would learn. (Ali, 2010, p. 60)

The alphabet may as well proclaim the tyrant, but Ali’s motive is not revenge but forgiveness. Therefore, even if the tyrant is proclaimed, the responsibility of forgiveness does not need it. The empty space is allowed for the tyrant to come into the fold of a collective humanity where he will not be alone. This is emphasized in the couplet in which Ali writes, “If my enemy’s alone and his arms are empty/Give him my heart silk-wrapped like a child by exiles” (Ali, 2010, p. 298). The refusal to create a “contemptible other” is the beginning of forgiveness. According to Molly Andrews, “the responsibility to forgive is directed towards something outside and greater than the forgiver and the would-be forgiven” (Andrews, 1999, p. 112); and for Ali, the basis of his forgiveness lies in his loyalty to the wider community of humanity rather than to a religious or national one. Going beyond the constraints of absolute identities allows him to create the possibility of imagining the enemy as part of the self. Ali wonders:

Will the Enemy smile as I pass him on the street?

I’m still searching for someone to forgive forever. (Ali, 2010, p. 370)

Ali makes forgiveness an important necessity of human nature as human beings are vulnerable to their own fallibility and the capacity to transgress. He is an artist who stands for “healing” rather than for vengeance. He sees forgiveness as the “first condition of humanity”. That is why, instead of creating a contemptible other, he turns to prayer in the face of the overwhelming anguish triggered by violence and bursts out: “Outgunned Chechens hold off Russian tanks—/They have a prayer. Are you listening, God? (Ali, 2010, p. 368). Prayer is evoked as

a source of power that will not destroy but preserve what is human. Ali is a poet of hope, hope in the goodness of human heart. No matter how many identities struggle to constrain his poetic spirit of cosmopolitan ethos, he promises to forcefully break free from such heritage of rigidity:

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 (Ali, 2010, p. 23).

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