

# **Reflection of Kashmiri Cultural Tapestry and Landscape in Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry**

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Received: 2025-12-15

Accepted: 2026-01-16

Published online: 2026-01-19

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## **Abstract**

Agha Shahid Ali is a prominent figure in English poetry not only of Kashmir, India but also in Global literature. A Kashmiri by birth and a resident of New Delhi, he completed his education in the United States of America. A celebrated poet and a beloved teacher, he is mostly remembered for his English ghazals. Ali is credited with popularizing English ghazals, a new form in English poetry. Ali was a native of Kashmir but in his later life, he has lived in the United States and even buried there. It was a time when Kashmir was in the grip of conflict, many times he wanted to come back but was not able to return because of the chaos in his beloved homeland. Feeling nostalgic about his days in Kashmir, he reflected his anguish, love and longing in his verses which have become immortal. His poems are a true reflection of Kashmiri cultural tapestry and landscape and for which he has received many awards and honours. His two poetry collections; *In Memory of Begum Akhtar* and *The Country Without a Post Office* are fine examples of his love and concern for his homeland, Kashmir and its people. Witnessing a period during which he was facing turmoil, he has written poems in these collections while keeping Kashmir's conflict in the background. We can witness the pain and anguish of an individual living in exile while his people and his land are in tumultuous state. One thing which is common in Ali's poetry is its resonance with nostalgia, longing, memory and most importantly the loss of home. This we can find in almost all his poems and this is the greatness of his writing. In our paper, we are trying to showcase the reflection of Kashmiri Cultural Tapestry and landscape in Agha Shahid Ali's poetry.

**Keywords:** Kashmiri cultural tapestry, landscape, nostalgia, longing, memory.

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## **Introduction**

Agha Shahid Ali who is compared with Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish because of the similarities in terms of writing style is one of the most popular Indian diasporic poets with Kashmiri ethnicity. Being born in New Delhi on February 4, 1949 in a Kashmiri Muslim family, he grew up in Kashmir and New Delhi. He studied at University of Kashmir and Delhi University and later earned a PhD in English from Pennsylvania State University in 1984, as well as MFA from the University of Arizona in 1985. With his hard work and capabilities, he was able to win some fellowships which include; fellowship from the Pennsylvania Council of Arts, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, the Ingram-Merrill Foundation, the New York Foundation for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. He is also credited with winning the prestigious Pushcart Prize. He held teaching positions at nine Universities in India which include University of Delhi and also in the United States

including Penn State, SUNY Binghamton, Princeton University, Hamilton College, Baruch College, University of Utah and Warren Wilson College. His Books include poetry collections, translations and an edited volume.

***His Poetry Collections:***

1. *Bone Sculpture* (1972)
2. *In Memory of Begum Akhtar and Other Poems* (1979)
3. *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987)
4. *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* (1987)
5. *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991)
6. *The Beloved Witness: Selected Poems* (1992)
7. *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997)
8. *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001)
9. *Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals* (2003)

***His Translated Book***

10. *The Rebel Silhouette: Selected Poems by Faiz Ahmed Faiz* (1992)

***As an Editor***

11. *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English* (2000)

All these collections are masterpieces expressing his love for his native land and its people especially, *In Memory of Begum Akhtar* and *The Country Without a Post Office* which has Kashmir's conflict as a backdrop. So, in his poetic compositions, we can easily trace the reflection of Kashmiri cultural tapestry and landscape depicting his love for his homeland.

Kashmir has been a matter of discussion since ages, first it was its beauty but since the 90's for the conflict which has disrupted the peace of the valley since decades and the worst affected are the native people. The beauty of Kashmir has captivated the heart of Mughal Emperor Jahngir, who quoted the famous phrase in Persian, "Gar firdaus, ruhe zamin ast, hamin asto, hamin asto, hamin ast". In English the phrase is, "If there is paradise on Earth, it is here, it is here, it is here". He uttered this in the praise of Kashmir as he felt that the beauty of the land is divine. Since then, this quote has become a synonym for Kashmir and in the current times the Tourism industry in Kashmir uses it as a signature line defining the heavenly beauty of the valley. Not only Emperor Jahangir but many other famous personalities have mesmerized by the awe-inspiring natural splendour of the land, signalized by its lush green valleys, snow-capped mountains and pristine lakes which gives it a heavenly touch.

The heavenly beauty of Kashmir has inspired many poets and writers across the globe to pen beautiful verses on its beauty as well as spiritualism. But since more than two decades Kashmir has witnessed many chaos and conflicts resulting in the shift in narrative by poets and writers. In the contemporary scenario, many writers have also changed their narratives from mystical and romantic poetry to the realistic portrayal of the happenings in the valley. In English, the credit goes to the writers like Agha Shahid Ali, who being a Kashmiri has been an eye-witness himself. In Kashmir and New Delhi, Agha Shahid Ali has witnessed composite culture and later living in the West, he encountered Western culture. Being a part of both Oriental and Occidental world, he has witnessed traditions and cultures of religions like Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Christianity which is clearly visible in his writing especially in the poem, *Tonight*. When he says:

*Lord, cried out the idols, Don't let us broken;  
only we can convert the infidel tonight.  
Mughal ceilings, let your mirrored convexities  
multiply me under your spell tonight.*

Here he gives a glimpse of Hindu culture by using the image like 'idol' and of Muslim by giving the description about Mughal architecture by describing "Mughal ceilings signifying the presence of Mughal gardens and architecture in the valley. He further goes on with the Hindus and Muslim mysticism as well as using Biblical illusion in the below lines.

*In the heart's veined temple, all statues have been smashed.  
No priest in saffron left to toll its knell tonight.  
God, limit these punishments, there's still Judgment Day—  
I'm a mere sinner; I'm no infidel tonight.  
Executioners near the woman at the window.  
Damn you, Elijah, I'll bless Jezebel tonight.*

In the above lines, he discusses Jezebel who was considered a sinner by the society and was given a death-sentence by fundamentalist Elijah. But for Ali she was a brave woman because she was standing firmly at her window when people came to kill her. So for him, she makes an incredibly heroic picture. There are many of his verses which are filled with metaphors which he has taken from different religions exhibiting his vast knowledge.

When we read Ali's poetry in the context of his love for Kashmir, then we find that though he had left Kashmir for further studies and profession, his heart was always connected to his homeland. Throughout his life he had a longing to go back to Kashmir

but because of conflict, his parents didn't want him to come back. This he has reflected in one of his poems:

*I want to tell them I am their son  
older, much older than they are  
I knock, keep knocking*

*but for them the night is quiet  
this the night of my being  
they don't they won't*

*hear me they won't hear  
my knocking drowning out  
the tongues of stars.*

In the above lines, he seems to be upset with his parents because they were not allowing him to come back because of the unrest during the 90's which he has metaphorically represented in his poem.

Living in America, Kashmir was an illusion for Ali because he was not able to visit his homeland due to turbulence and turmoil. His experience with minute things related to Kashmir can be summed up in the following lines from his poem, *Postcard from Kashmir*:

*Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,  
My home, a neat four by six inches.*

In the above lines, Ali uses "postcard" as a metaphor for Kashmir which describes his profound longing for his homeland which is very far from him. Living in such a far-away land, he feels that Kashmir and his memory are fading away from his life. He felt that he would not be able to go back to his land and live his life as it was in his childhood or in his young days. In these lines, he is also describing his helplessness and inability to return back to his home. In the same poem, he further compares 'postcard' with Himalaya. As he says:

*I always loved neatness. Now I hold  
The half-inch Himalayas in my hand.  
This is home. And this the closest  
I'll ever be to home.*

In the Prologue of his book, *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997), which he named as "The Blessed Word: A Prologue" he has experimented with the word "Kashmir" as he used 18 different types of spellings for it and in a continuous way. This is similar to chanting of mantras in the Hindu tradition which Ali was familiar with. As he quotes:

*Let me cry out in that void, say it as I can. I write on that void:  
Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir, Cashmir, Cashmire,  
Kashmere, Cachemire, Cushmeer, Cachmiere, Cašmir.  
Or Cauchemar in a sea of stories? Or: Kacmir, Kaschem  
Kasmere, Kachmire, Kasmir. Kerseymere? (Ali, 2009)*

This is a very unique piece of writing which is experimental, metaphorical and emotional. This is the result of a sensitive mind and heart. In the above lines, we can see that he has used eighteen different ways to spell his native land, Kashmir which denotes his profound love and attachment towards Kashmir.

Ali is very much admired in the literary world by poets, writers, scholars and critics. Many research works are being done on his poetry. As scholar and critic Kazim Ali Says:

*Agha Shahid Ali's poetry traveled a trajectory throughout his life from  
from sense to sound. Though always musical, his earlier books were  
grounded in confessional experience and narrative, but moved book by  
book as if spoken by an angel with a forked tongue: pure strangeness  
and pure lucidity at once, textural music and linear narrative both.*

In the contemporary scenario, many Universities have included his poems in the under-graduate and post-graduate courses. He is widely read by scholars, critics and lovers of literature around the world.

## **Conclusion**

Reading Ali's poems, one can feel the depth of his love for his homeland, Kashmir which is now distant from him. Ali being of Kashmiri ethnicity, so most of his poems are the expression of his intense confrontation of his own personal experience residing in alien land away from his family, home and native land. The love, nostalgia and longing to go back echoes in most of his poems which are fine examples of resistance as well as diasporic sensibilities. The theme and backdrop of most of his poems is Kashmir whether it is the beauty of Kashmir, or his memories of childhood or the conflict existing in Kashmir. His relation with Kashmir is mystical which becomes the antecedent of his verses and he has used many metaphors to express his love for Kashmir. Though in his later life, he has lived away from his native place but still from the distance he is able to feel the essence of Kashmir and he never felt apart from him as Kashmir was always residing in his heart. He is considered a master of language, images, symbols, metaphors, motifs and allusions. His writing depicts the rich Kashmiri tapestry captivating cultural

resonance as well as beautiful landscape Kashmir possessed and this is what we had tried to present in our paper.

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