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Exploring the Anxiety of Eliotian Influence in Agha Shahid Ali's Literary Creations

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Abstract

Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001), the first poet to write in English from Kashmir, was introduced to T.S. Eliot's works while he was pursuing his graduation degree at Sri Pratap College, Sirinagar during 1965. Once introduced to the Eliotian world, Agha Shahid Ali could not move out of the charismatic influence of T.S.Eliot for the rest of his life even when he became disillusioned with Eliot's anti-Semitic political stance. The extent of Eliotian influence can not only be evaluated from his academic choice to write his doctoral theses at the Pennsylvania State University evaluating T.S.Eliot as an editor: *T.S.Eliot as Editor*, but can also be located in his literary creations like *Bone Sculpture: Poems* (1972), *In Memory of Begum Akhtar* (1974), *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1993), and *The Country Without A Post Office: Poems 1991-1995* (1997). This paper therefore proposes to explore not only the Eliotian influence upon Agha Shahid Ali but also the anxiety of this influence as reflected in the literary creations of Agha Shahid Ali.

Manan Kapoor, the biographer of Agha Shahid Ali, notes in his book *The Life and Works of Agha Shahid Ali* (2021) that perhaps the only contribution of Sri Pratap College to Shahid's personality and poetry was the introduction he was given here to Eliot's work. Shahid gained a lot of insights during the first decade of his poetic career by reading T.S. Eliot's poetry. Through Eliot, Shahid learnt the art of incorporating allusions into the fabric of poetry and also learnt the importance of form and sound in poetry. Shahid first read T.S. Eliot's essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" (1919) during his graduation and understood that the poetic genius in poetry emerged only when it was impersonal. In the essay, "Tradition and Individual Talent," Eliot redefines the idea of tradition and stresses its importance in poetry, before asserting the fact that poetry ought to be impersonal. Eliot believed that poetry should be impersonal and distinct from the poet: "Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality" (Enright and Chickera 299). Eliot further classifies poets into mature and immature poets, and states that for the mature poet, "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (Enright and Chickera 300). Kapoor notes that the two Eliotian catchphrase — 'tradition' and 'impersonality' — acted as a guiding principle for Agha Shahid Ali throughout his poetic career. Shahid tried his best to maintain a clear separation between his life and his poetic persona although at times the personal and the poetic self did overlap at several junctures.

Hena Ahmad, Shahid's elder sister, recollects that when Shahid was eighteen, he received a personalized rejection letter from the magazine named *Quest*; the letter stated that his poetry was 'far below the standard' and requested him to read more before sending anything again (Kapoor 80). By the time Shahid received that rejection, he had already learnt through Eliot's influence that his poetry should not

be an overflow of emotions and that his poetry should depend more on the trickery of language than on just raw emotions and organic passions. He realized that poetry was an exploration of pure form. Much later, in his essay, "A Darkly Defense of Dead White Males" Shahid acknowledges this indebtedness to Eliot: "Content is achieved sincerity. Sincerity achieved through artifice. Emotion tested by artifice" (Kapoor 80). The importance of form and formal poetry engrossed Shahid all the more after he befriended with James Merrill during 1980s and 1990s. Thus, under the influence of Eliot and Merrill, Shahid realized the possibilities of tantalizing liberty that is offered by formal poetry where he could clearly establish his voice while containing his emotion.

As a poet, Shahid was always interested in matters of political conscience and liberty but he never wanted to be categorized as a political poet or a nationalist poet. He did not believe that propaganda could be used in poetry. He was of the belief that it wasn't the subject matter but how the subject was expressed which held more importance. Shahid was of the belief that the value of art was in the work itself, not in the ethnicity, colour, sexual orientation or race of the poet. In an interview he had said that "subject matter is artistically interesting only when through form it has become content. The more rigorous the form, realized formally, openly, or brokenly, the greater the chance for content" (Kapoor 136). Kapoor notes that it is because of the success of form that *The Country without a Post Office* turned into a seminal book that offered a peek into the crisis in Kashmir and cemented Shahid's position as one of the most lyrical poets from the subcontinent.

Celebrated as the progenitor of Kashmiri resistance literature, Shahid poignantly captures the painful transition of his homeland — Kashmir — in many of his poems. Ever since he was a teenager in Kashmir, reading Eliot's verse: "He who was living is now dead / We who were living are now dying / With a little patience" (Jain 56), death became a recurring theme in Shahid's poetry. In most of the poems in his collected volumes entitled *Bone Sculpture: Poems* (1972), *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1993), and *The Country Without A Post Office: Poems 1991-1995* (1997), the dying and the dead, at times remain invisible, but the figure of death or the imagery of death is always present. With time Shahid's poetic voice adapted Eliot's skepticism, loneliness and his denial of the present. Shahid's poems represent both the happy past and the present decadence of Kashmir. They speak of both the absence and the presence — absence of freedom and presence of vigilant confinement. Kashmir presents now a map of massacre. Its streets do not count the footfall of the living, rather it counts the number of dead bodies strewn after attacks — either by the militant or by the army. It is a ghost-city, an "unreal city" (Jain 51), a city of the dead. While reading Shahid's poem, "A Wrong Turn," one cannot help but be reminded of some passages from Eliot's "The Wasteland." In the first section of "The Wasteland," 'The Burial of the Dead,' Eliot writes:

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many. (Jain 45)

Through these lines, notes Manju Jain, "Eliot refers the reader to 'The Seven Old Men' by Charles Baudelaire (1821 – 67), quoting the opening lines of the poem in French, 'swarming city, city full of dreams, / Where in broad daylight the spectre stops the passer-by'." Shahid in his poem "A Wrong Turn" 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
where only the noon sun lives.
I'm alone, walking among the atrocities,
guillotines blood-scorched,
gods stabbed at their altars,
dry wells piled up with bones,
a curfew on ghosts. (Ali, *Half-Inch Himalayas* 37)

Shahid's Kashmir thus resembles Eliot's 'Wasteland.' Kashmir is the city of ghosts where curfew is the norm and freedom an exception. Perpetual atrocities have dried up all fountains of life; thus Shahid writes of scorching 'noon sun' and 'dry wells piled up with bones.' This image of 'gods stabbed at their altars' and pile of bones, also reminds one of Calvary — the Biblical skull-shaped mountain top full of bones, where Jesus was crucified. Kashmir, it seems, have crucified its God and thus the land is devoid of water and purgation like Eliot's 'wasteland': "Here is no water but only rock / Rock and no water […]" (Jain 56).

The palpable presence of Eliot's influence can be traced in yet another poem of Shahid — "Bones" — where Shahid turns Eliot's "mixing memory and desire" to "[…] mixing blood with/ mud, memory with memory." (Ali, *Bone-Sculpture:poems* 11). Thus the entire spectrum of Shahid's literary creation is coloured by Eliotian influence. In a review of *Bone Sculpture* Sumi Sridaharan noted that " [t]he weakness of Shahid's writing is the abstractness of some of the experience and echoes from Eliot that mar even a good poem like "Bones" (Katyal). Shahid's friend Saleem Kidwai remembers that when Shahid was teaching at Delhi University, Shahid 'spoke about Eliot all the time, incessantly. I knew nothing about Eliot, and he would go on and on'" (Kapoor 39).

However, by the mid 1970s, when Shahid became aware of Eliot's anti-Semitism, he started becoming disillusioned with Eliot's politics. But such was the impact of Eliot upon Shahid that even after his disillusionment with Eliot's anti-Semitic political stance he could not come out of the influence of Eliot's aesthetics. In order to come to terms with the anxiety of this aesthetic influence and political disillusionment he soon started separating Eliot's politics from Eliot's aesthetics and announced that "We must enlarge our sympathies, historicize simplicities and complexities, and learn even from — dare I say it? — from fascist" (Kapoor 41). He therefore learnt to separate the art from the artist.

It is interesting to note that even though the formative years of Shahid's literary career was overshadowed by Eliot's influence, during the later phase of his literary career he was much more influenced by James Merrill. This shift in influence may be located in the two consecutive phases of Shahid's disenchantment with Eliot's political anti-Semitic stance during 1970s and Shahid's encounter with James Merrill during 1980's. Therefore, maybe it is James Merrill's aesthetics which did help Shahid to encounter the anxiety of Eliotian influence for the rest of his poetic career.

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