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The Body of the Condemned in Agha Shahid Ali's Poem Country without Post Office

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze Agha Shahid Ali's poem *A Country without Post office* (1997) through the praxis of Foucault, use of the phrase 'The Body of the Condemned' in his famous book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of a Prison* (1977) as Foucault put it, is a condition where 'the people are missing' and are subjected to various tortures and constant misappropriation. Agha Shahid Ali's Poem *A Country without Post office* (1997) is both witness to, and a critique of war-torn Kashmir and conditions of life and of 'condemned bodies' (1977), wherein 'Country' in the poem stands for space half hanged, 'dead-alive,' in the name of death, 'truly dead, or pained,' death, the uncertain, certainty' and so on (2010:8) A "celebrated automata" (1997: 147) that is at once cultural, non-local and politicized. The poem portrays a politics in which the proclaimed democracy is at war with its minority community whose necropolitical trauma has become a permanent condition used by military groups to target youth populations under various guises. Ali's writing gravitates toward the idea of a planetary democracy where law, sovereignty, and justice are not subservient to necropolitical traumas. Through experimentations with form, and voice in his narrative Ali offers us glimpses of pessimistic realist worlds tempered by brotherhood, spirituality, and violence. His poem demonstrates that he is a writer committed to bridging worlds and will speak truth to power in the service of social justice.

Keywords: Body of condemned, doomed addresses, post office, country, Kashmir, letters, violence, politics

METHODOLOGY

The body as an object to be acted upon, but also as the subject of "political technology" (1976) is present throughout the work. Beginning with public execution, where the body is horrifically displayed, Foucault charts the transition to a situation where the body is no longer immediately affected. The body will always be affected by punishment—because we cannot imagine a noncorporeal punishment—but in the modern system, Foucault says, the body is arranged, regulated, and supervised rather than tortured. At the same time, the overall aim of the penal process becomes the reform of the soul, rather than the punishment of the body. Eventually, the concepts of the individual and the delinquent replace the reality of the body as the focus of attention, but the body of the criminal still plays a role. If anything can be seen as constant in this work, it is the idea that the body and punishment are closely linked.

The title of this poem *Country without post office* (1997) presumably in the content of essentialist strategy creates a poetic aura that not only subscribes to minor literature but also attests to what in Foucauldian genealogy is called counter-memory (Foucault 1991) Therefore, going beyond the hermeneutics of "hybridity", (Homi K Bhabha 1994:16) Ali unleashes at traumatic dislocations both of himself as well as of his 'country' and its aftermaths, since, the trope of 'Post office' that has been deliberately denied to 'country' invokes anxiety and functions as a signifier, attempted construction of 'body of condemned' and a rapture "essentially defined by processes where an exogenous collective replaces an indigenous one through a ritual of execution" (L.Veracini, 18)

Therefore, 'the body of condemned' not only registers degrees of deprivation, constriction, and obstruction but always and simultaneously a concern for how such limits operate to stimulate and incite movements

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of becoming and the predicament becomes symbolic of how the Indian government's insignia is constructed on the Kashmir that has been trumpeted as the body of condemned what Jurgen Habermas's through the idea of "representative publicity," (1976: 44)

INTRODUCTION

The poem *Country without post office* (1997) appeals to our political emotions of uneasiness, compassion, and shame. Even though Ali was subjected, from his early childhood to the violence of colonial oppression, through this poem Ali presents a poetic voice that resonates with oxymoronic appellations authenticating various atmospheres and enclosures of the poem, besides this, the philatelic reference to the title *country without post office* deliberates that, *Country* as a Place and landscape are not just 'settings'; through the ongoing process of invalidation of both 'Country' and 'Post office', the world is constantly shaped and formed. Yet, 'Country' and 'Post office' can be thought of in different manners, not just as an active and unhindered process but also in terms of impediment, obstruction, or 'condemned'. The post office is an office of a stamp collection that validates address, communication, and ensures stamp of metaphysics of presence, but sadly Ali's country is without address, communication thereby subject to spatial and temporal displacement, and been made vulnerable to contemporary society's most privileged values. Therefore, to speak of condemned places is to read the poem *Country Without Post office* both as a praxis of minor literature and a rallying cry against the empire that normalizes "universality of inhumanity" by surreptitious torture carried out unapologetically (1976).

Regarding the semantic totality of the poem Derrida asserts that It is not only a haunting repository for producing knowledge about the disappeared but it also fills a discursive and spatial lack of the disappeared individual; it is an "effective archive." *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1998:8) and at isomorphic level, the title of poems stands obdurately mismatched. Painstakingly, the cramped space can be seen in the semantic hermeneutics of the poem that allows us to speak to the nexus of the area and subversive political engagement which is quite incommensurable and recalcitrant. Morphologically 'Country' is a noun that brings together 'without' Post office (to stamp, validate). The prepositional determinant, without, acting as an adverb, unmoors *Country* from settled meanings of stability and peace, therefore ferries it

along the axis of space and time that holds no purchase for self, love, brotherhood, and lineage. As adverb/preposition, 'without' incites play between registers of absence and movement, between loss and return, drawing attention to the impossibility of engagement and attention.

Our introduction cusps itself around Kashmir, that merely gasps between the litany of names, Kashmir can never be marshaled fully as the site, as the thing that must speak its truth, even one that unravels its fulsome and torsioned history, as well as de-territorialized. Even as one cannot know it, Kashmir provisions the possibilities for epistemology without rendering itself as knowable, as the place constantly constituted as an object for geopolitical fracas, as the denouement in the games of geopolitics.

Today, the lines of communication around Ali's Kashmir are more tangled than ever, with the voices Kashmiri authors often excised from public discourse due to anxieties around the charge of anti-nationalism – anxiety that has sometimes led to the closing down of debate.

There is no doubt that Ali is appalled by the unchecked violence that was unleashed by the Indian army and its associate forces. Several human rights organizations, newspaper reports, and scholarly studies have successively blamed the Indian forces for perpetrating several atrocities, including torture of detainees, rapes against women, "disappearance" of detained boys, fake encounters, unlawful arrests, and multiple massacres. A panel report of the Press Council of India states, to quotes Suranjan Das in his book. *Kashmir and Sindh: Nation- Building, Ethnicity and Regional Politics in South Asia* (2001) states:

A panel report of the Press Council of India states, Human rights cannot be safe in (the rest of) India if they are trampled upon . . . in Kashmir. Such violations are brutalizing and threaten the democratic edifice of the country. More precisely, far from subduing aggrieved communities, Kashmiris in this case, can only alienate them further, especially if their women are dishonored and their collective psyche hurt. (66)

Therefore, to make it more precise the poem *A Country without Post Office* (1997) is a critical embracing of 'body of condemned' against the false or apolitical

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solution of proffered identity. As in the interrogation cell, so in the social realm more broadly, for the enforced individualization of interrogation has a structural correspondence with the development of Kashmiri politics after the recently constitutional abrogation by the fringed incumbent government, the constitutional 'appropriation' can be described as the seduction and enforcement of minority autonomy or identity, whereby a Muslim minority is abstracted from its cramped conditions and bound to the deterritorialized or a social structures of the state, boiled to 'client pseudo-state' under conditions of extreme deprivation and violence governed in furtherance of colonial agendas sermonizing Mbembe's juxtaposition of necropolises with "micro power" that turns populations into zombies that create "death- worlds either by the state of exception" or by "the state of siege." (2003:11)

Returning to the conditions of 'body of condemned', in this most isolated and individualized of conditions, Agha Shahid Ali through his poetic oeuvre produces collectivity, but less as a collective subject than a collective opening of perception to the pain and antagonism of oppressive social relations. The complex nature of this collectivity is apparent in the words: It's Us! It's Us! whose letters are cries that break like bodies in prisons? (1997:82) and notwithstanding the fact the colonial enslaving has let loose the destruction to that extent the tantrums come aghast, "The lost are like this" / They bribe the air for dawn, this their dark purpose. (1997:84), presumably, an ethical-political convention 'reached among us out of the conviction that history had positioned us in a particular place that we have to respond to by embracing its burdens'.

A 'national' narrative that normalizes "violence as an inevitable and indispensable part of producing a nation" (Krishna, 2001: 56) cannot be the foundation for a diverse and plural society like India. It can only culminate in what Krishna aptly terms as "the national cul-de-sac" (1992, 859) whose collective discontents have been documented in depressing detail by human rights groups in India (Desai 1986, 1991). The inscription of the 'national' idea through military means in Kashmir paralleled the attempt to secure Kashmir's territory without - to the extent that nuclear weapons were not just instruments of diplomacy and deterrence but came to be declared as items of actual use (Cohen 2001, 60).

Even as the erosion of state legitimacy and state reliance on organized violence against citizens precipitated a domestic crisis of militarization, the latter was legitimized by instrumental manipulation of constructions of 'the nation that can be seen in the statement of Indira Gandhi' minister of India as quoted by Henry C, "Democracy is not more important than the nation. There is no choice between democracy and the nation" (1976:12) serve territorial nationalism" (Junaid 2013: 166).

Kashmir exemplifies the gravity of the crisis that flows from the use of the military for domestic repression. As Arthur Bonner notes, "Kashmir is like a nation ruled by a wartime army of occupation." Quoting an editorial in the 'Economic and Political Weekly of India', Bonner highlights precisely why militarization in Kashmir thoroughly undermines the Indian state's claim to democracy and legitimacy:

Town after town, not to mention Srinagar, has been put under curfew, and the security forces given orders to shoot at sight...In the name of fighting out secessionist militants, those responsible for the governance of this great country are themselves hitting at the very foundations of our democratic republic...A republic does not last by enforced submission of its people at gunpoint. It has just the opposite effect (1994, 249).

Ali grotesquely depicts the gruesome genocide and how the lurking pal looms large at the cost of native life, inlaid with gold, then ash/ They haunt a country when it is ash. Phantom heart, (1997:17,32) Quite apart from portraying a settler-colonial society as democratic, marketing to the world that gunning down unarmed Kashmiri protesters sealed off behind a fence is an act of self-defense. Deleuze commented on the power of representation: "The injustices are the acts of violence, but also illogicalities, false reasoning's, false guarantees that claim to compensate or vindicate them' (Deleuze 2007: 241).

In a text that would not shame the propaganda machine of Indian academia the poem exhibits the existential preoccupation with death and decay, and display grieving melancholy, mournful reflection, and a rather large helping of sentimentality. The Post Office chronicles the death of innocent young boys who awaits the arrival of a letter in a setting of dramatic irony in which the other characters in the refrain and the audience

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members know that the boy is waiting for his premature death and to be a victim of colonial structural adjustment as annotated in the poem itself "Without a lamp I look for him in houses buried, empty— He may be alive, opening doors of smoke, breathing in the dark his ash-refrain"(1997: 35, 36) No wonder when praised by Amitav Ghosh as the only national poet of Kashmir, Ali pithily remarked, "A national poet, maybe. But not a nationalist poet; please not that" (Ghosh 14).

How can one escape the resolute manipulation of signs? With a no less definite determination not to be affected by signs as if they were mere representations of our attachments and anchors in the world, the image is best carved by Ali, "I have returned in rain to find him, to learn why he never wrote" / "I've brought cash, a currency of paisleys to buy the new stamps, rare already, blank, no nation named on them".(1997: 33,34) 'Discursive power enables the oppressor to monopolize moral value and authority (Hughes 2004: 154)

Something significant weds these two dimensions together: namely, the tracking down of the negatives – the 'enemies that prevent the genesis of thought: convention, opinion, clichés, stupidity' (Smith 2012: 91). Mostly, our encounters are consonant with norms, discourses, and expectations constructed through processes of socialization, and, consciously or not, we often tend to avoid new encounters and mixtures.

In a text that would not shame the propaganda machine of Indian academia the poem exhibits the existential preoccupation with death and decay, and display grieving melancholy, mournful reflection, and a rather large helping of sentimentality. The Country without Post Office (1997) chronicles the death of innocent young boys who awaits the arrival of a letter in a setting of dramatic irony in which the other characters in the refrain and the audience members know that the boy is waiting for his premature death. "Without a lamp, I look for him in houses buried, empty— He may be alive, opening doors of smoke, breathing in the dark his ash-refrain" (1997: 35,36). Since a country s without a post office, it is tragic presumably because it routes all the certainties' and epistemological privileges on which ethical decisions and responsible interpersonal relations depend.

The poem The Country without Post Office (1997) frames its text with an epigraph from W.B.Yeats

(Easter, 1916): —Now and in time to be, / whenever green is worn/ A terrible beauty is born./ Like a Mad silhouette crying to echo the pain of lost people and due effort is being made to invoke the gods of all sorts to have that peaceful era that was a symbol of communal brotherhood, but vacuum and void is being anticipated as ' there is no sun here' (1997:81,88) Ali has no prayer to invoke god. He is like common Kashmiri shouting out in despair and their outrage against the atrocities done to them. It is all of them crying out their pain in the form of letters and carrying the shrieks, cries of pain when the bones break in the interrogation centers of Kashmir. Each night the poet soaks the wicks of clay lamps in mustard oil in whose gentle and soft light he climbs the steps of the entombed minaret to read messages scattered on planets. Each night the poet guides himself up to the minaret in the hope to get an answer but nothing comes from the void.

In the poem Country without post office (1997) we find the poet contemplating the place with "each house buried or empty" (Ali, Collected Poems 6). The light bulbs in this modern landscape become relics at an archeological site, each lamp flickering "archive for letters with doomed addresses," (1997: 7). The poet then begins a reverie, in which he remembers people who used to frequent this square of his native place. They soon appear to him as ghosts who "Empty? / The soldiers light it" (1997:10). Their absence "paper-mâché," and the town is also similarly decrepit, its "hone the flames, The poet wonders whether he should linger, and realizes that other people passing by are also stamping for home, ", burn our world" (1997:12) similarly, "When the muezzin/died, the city was robbed of every call"(Ali, The Veiled 202). Ali wants the temples and mosques to be full of people so that they will usher in an era of peace and harmony again. A time prevailed in the state when selective killing was carried especially Moulana's/preachers were killed rampantly either to silence the people or to politicize the struggle. Now the "minarets have been entombed" (AH, The Veiled 202)

By using the metaphor of 'letters' and 'post cards' and 'Post Office', Ali is trying to find messages and information from the place from where no information comes out, and everybody is desperate to share the sorrow. The epigraph of the poem "...letters sent/ To dearest him that lives alas! Away." is from G M Hopkins' sonnet, "I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day" (Hopkins 1885).

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Thus the metaphor of letter for Shahid is an act of witness, protest, and longing for peace. These letters and reference to the letters and messages is Ali's performative act, where Ali as a conscious pariah is disseminating information, even if, letters are barred and restricted.

But the reports are true, and without song: mass rapes in villages,
Towns left in cinders, neighborhoods' torched.
"Power is hideous/
Tike a barber's hands." The rubble of downtown Srinagar
Stares at me from the Times. (Ali, 173)

In After August Wedding in Lahore, Pakistan, Ali Talks about a Brigadier who narrates the procedures of torture that are done to the Kashmiri boys. The degree of feelinglessness can be seen in that how shamelessly, the event is discussed in a wedding, which shows the insensitive and inhuman nature of the army officer who is so stone-like that he makes it just a commonplace incident and talks about it without any sense of shame or guilt. Shahid writes, "A brigadier says, the boys of Kashmir/ break so quickly, we make their bodies sing/ on the rack, till no song is left to sing," (Ali, 2009)

This was not a unidirectional assault, as the federal government of India retaliated with large-scale military interventions, complemented by special laws and constitutional provisions that gave armed forces extraordinary powers over civic life. In the process, the valley of Kashmir, a place whose legendary beauty caused it to be called 'Paradise on Earth,' was turned into a disconsolate inferno marked by the corpses of innocence whose Execution is a ritual designed to reestablish order that is being played out like a tournament or sports contest.

A Country without a Post Office, like a fragmentary phantom poignantly depicts the trauma and agony of violence, dismembered bodies float down the Jhelum; fires encompass houses; the population diminishes before his eyes and more than a what Deleuze called "cramped space" or country "was robbed of every Call"(1997:18). the place which is being zeroed and denuded and vulnerable to mass murder, genocide, kidnapping, communal disharmony, thereby nihilism its existence to the level wherein author in epistolary tone seems dismayed and desperate to share an impasse of miseries "Phantom heart, pray he's alive(1997:32). Where

"Everything is finished, nothing remains."(1997:40), thereby subjecting the country and its inmates to 'universality of inhumanity. Thus the country in Country in the Post office in Ali's poetry may stand for all places where devastation evokes the felt sense of the flawed human, where paradise exists as a possibility, ever-present in mind, though the landscape reflects only its absence and in a philatelic context the post office is both source of lost authentication and the stamp of metaphysics of presence is absent.

CONCLUSION

From "the politics of verticality" (2007:12) to "infrastructure warfare" (2007: 14), The poem Country without a post office becomes a metaphor for the world at large, unmoored from its paradise, where the fates are parentless and the gods asleep. Kashmir was his poetic lodestar. The Country without a Post Office, his most overtly political work, is a meditation on the tragic history of his land, and for much of his writing life in America, though, Ali seemed destined to be remembered primarily for something else: he was the poet, perhaps the only poet, who brought into American English the modern history of Kashmir. Ali situates the Kashmir that he knew not just on a map but within a literary and artistic culture that extends beyond South Asia, beyond and outside any national tradition. His allusions, his proper nouns, and his choice of forms all help him present the territory, and the city, where he grew up just as a tragedy.

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