
Poet's Mother and Poetry: Re-reading Agha Shahid Ali's Select Poems

Krishnapada Mandal

Assistant Professor of English,Nistarini College, Purulia, West Bengal

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Abstract

As an interdisciplinary field of studies, Motherhood Studies is indebted to sociology, politics, and cultural studies. The core concept of Motherhood Studies evolves through negating the mother's identity as biological. The study observes that motherhood is socially and culturally constructed. After recognizing the cultural construction of a mother, Motherhood Studies go further and seek to know the way a mother is seen in a society. Challenging the patriarchal construction of motherhood, the Motherhood Studies emphasize reclaiming the position of a mother in a society. What I have received from Motherhood Studies becomes crucial in understanding Agha Shahid Ali's poetry. Any biographical and literary study of the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali would come across the recurrent presence of Ali's mother. The paper first goes on to understand what Motherhood Studies do and how the motherhood critics frame their ideology. It then goes on to read some of the important poems of Ali, where the mother's presence does a lot to the poetic creation of Agha Shahid Ali.

Keywords: Agha Shahid Ali, Mother, Motherhood Studies, Memory, Poetry

Introduction:

Motherhood Studies has occupied a distinct position in academia. Feminist critics in the second wave began to address motherhood as a burden to a woman. As Simone de Beauvoir discusses in her book *The Second Sex* (1949), motherhood is a constructed idea. And behind the construction of the idea of motherhood, there remain issues that are connected to society and psychology. The idea of motherhood, or in other words, idealized motherhood, confines a woman within its biological boundaries. A woman's biological obligations prevent her from transcending her biological condition. Later feminist critics are critical of Beauvoir. They assert that the biological advantage of childbearing can be a good sign in any woman, as this advantage can help a woman to challenge the man who biologically lacks the ability to childbear. Marking a limitation in the concept of motherhood, contemporary critics feel optimistic in converting Motherhood Studies into mother studies,

as the idea of ‘mother’ opens up more flexible grounds for an individual experience of the mother.

Keeping all these things in mind, I started reading Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry again and marked ample references to the mother in his poetry. Initially, I faced fundamental questions like why Ali has taken his mother’s name in several poems, and how his often-referred-to mother foregrounds a major theme in his poetry. These questions led me to reread Ali. And I found what I have pointed out in the next part of this essay.

Critical literature of Agha Shahid Ali includes a number of issues, such as diaspora, dislocation, memory, and the like. But any first-hand reading draws its reader’s attention to the issue of the mother. What struck me very much is why Ali so emphatically says, “My mother is my poem” (Ali, “Lennox Hill” 33). Agha Shahid Ali, his mother, and his poetry are three poles that are interconnected, and the current would stop flowing if one of these three poles is kept aside. The emphasis of mine can be substantiated by what Ali’s sister, Hena Ahmed, says about her brother’s poetry. She says, “His verse drew on an eclecticism that derived from our mother. Instrumental in opening up a world that exposed Shahid to Hindu mythology and Indian classical dance and music, particularly the Bharat Natyam and the sitar, our mother was a repository of these elements, sparking them in Shahid’s mind” (Ahmed 35-36). The quoted lines inform us how influential their mother was to the making-up of her son’s mind. Though she belongs to a Muslim family, she had a tremendous domain over Hindu and Greek mythology. She instilled secularism in the psyche of her child. Belonging to an upper-class educated Muslim family, she had the chance to play records of ‘Banaras thumri-singers, Siddheswari and Rasoolan’ and so to enrich herself. India, with its art, mythology, and history, is channelized through the ancestry. Irfan Hassan, one of Shahid’s friends, says:

Everyone loves his mother. So did Shahid. But love for his mother was so deep that it won’t be possible for him to describe. He nursed her and was always there by her side as if she was ‘his own daughter’. Sofia aunt’s death was something Shahid could not expect and it greatly disturbed him. He could not come to Kashmir because of it. (Hassan 10)

The mother herself was a dynamic person, having access to all the emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, and cultural properties of the country to which she belonged. She was not just a mother rearing a ‘good’ child. The first important thing here is that she produced, reared, and induced a kind of thought into the brain of her child that made the child famous in the world of poetry. The child—the grown-up poet—carries on the same mind that he biologically achieved once during his birth. Moreover, the grown-up poet at present must acknowledge the cultural legacy that he received from his mother. In more simplistic terms, we can say that Ali could not be able to conceive Indian heritage so dynamically if he could not receive all those things from his mother.

Ali has referred to his mother in several poems, highlighting his mother's profound and versatile impact on him. The poetic identity of Ali is an extended version of a mother's psychology. Sometimes the mother speaks in the voice of her son and vice versa. Ali received all kinds of education from his mother, Sufia Noami, who had the grandeur of a Sufi. He inherited a passion for music from her. In his poem, "A Lost Memory of Delhi" (1987), Ali, looking at photographs, visits a time before his birth, when his mother was a happy bride wearing a sari beautified with brocade. The happy things and moments of life are photographed. In the family album, the parents look happy. But the irony of life is that they won't hear the knocking of their son. They are now the lost memory of Delhi. This loss becomes prominent in Ali's poetry. His mother used to live a decorated life and follow the Muslim rituals and culture. In "A Dream of Glass Bangles" (1987), Ali portrays his mother:

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 (Ali, "A Dream of Glass Bangles" 4-10)

In this poem, Ali creates a surreal phenomenon with the help of the images. Because of these images the real mother appears to be someone unfamiliar. Here, Ali imagines a time when Ali was not present. As we can guess from the title of the poem, the lines try to capture a dream reality. The surreal phenomenon it creates with the help of images cannot be found in real life. The nostalgic poet's imagination makes things vivid, but those vivid things are no longer permanent. They are fragile like the glass bangles. Now the question comes—who is this mother? On this mother's arms, there were bangles generally made of glass. The bangles are visible to the readers at the moment they read the lines where the particular word 'bangles' is mentioned. The bangles also create sound in the minds of the readers. The sound and the picture of the bangles are deeply connected with an Indian Muslim mother. The bangles are part of its culture. The image of the mother described in the poem is a cultural production. Ali, as a poet, cannot go beyond this culture that formulates a mother's identity. Another remarkable point that the motherhood study of the poem "A Dream of Glass Bangle" (1987) provokes to mark is that of the parents' dividedness. The lines "the air a quicksand of snow / as my father stepped out / and my mother / inside the burning house" (19-22) strike two words—"stepped out" and 'inside'. The fathers typically go outside for work, and the mothers do the household duties. Obviously, the poet's concern in this particular poem is not to highlight this man-woman binary. But a reader, informed of mother studies, is led to raise such issues while reading the poem.

Home and emotional security are always represented by the mother of the poet. By the expression of 'home', Agha Shahid Ali means Kashmir. While speaking about the

mother, Ali becomes nostalgic. To him, his mother is warmth, an emotional shelter. The mother's memory sometimes gives him solace, at least for some moments. In the poem, "The Season of the Plains" (1987), Ali emphasizes his mother's contribution to his artistic upbringing. The lines of this poem mentioned below inform us how influential Ali's mother was to her son:

She played old record
of the Banaras thumri-singers
Siddheswari and Rasoolan, their
voices longing, when the clouds
gather, for that invisible
blue god (Ali, "The Season of the Plains" 8-13)

The mother spoke of her childhood in the plains of Lucknow to her son. She recollects her own childhood and by doing so, shares both story and history. Having an orientation of art and music, she developed her own respectful personality. Her personality, artistic orientation, and intellectualism had much impact on her children. It is she who reared the artistic and creative mind of her child Ali. The lyricism Ali practiced throughout his poetic career has had its base on how he was brought up by his mother. While reading this poem, we are also informed of how his mother "hummed Heer's lament" (Ali, "The Season of the Plains" 24). She speaks of the monsoon of Lucknow. This is a beautiful season, when 'Krishna's flute is heard on the shores of Jamuna.' A sense of romanticism and feeling of love she puts into the self of her child. The grown-up poet's memory is surrounded by the phenomenon in which the mother is humming. Both the art/music and the receiver of it (the mother) are mixed together and get crystallized in the mind of the son, who recreates a new art out of that memory. In this regard, we can say that the mother is the co-creator of the poem "The Season of the Plains" (1987). The mother is present every moment while Ali is writing the poem. She, like the "invisible blue god" (13), is the guiding force that enables the poet to express. The poetic emotion and the emotional son are blended and driven by the spirit of the mother. This is how the mother establishes a grand position in the poetic language, and in the lyricism Ali championed. Ali could internalize the religion to which he did not belong. He was a free heart which his mother, Sufia Agha, brought up through singing "bhajans to him and dressed him as Krishna for Janmashtami" (Kapoor xxi). The child, being introduced to different cultures other than Muslim, has been able to become an international poet, and own other cultures and languages.

Manan Kapoor writes about Ali's mother in his book *Life and Works of Agha Shahid Ali* (2023). Kapoor emphasized Sufia's magnetic personality which attracted everyone around her. As Kapoor writes "Sufia was a compassionate person who was attentive and cared about the minutest of details, making sure that everyone felt loved. Agha Iqbal Ali, Shahid's younger brother, stresses that his mother's love wasn't a 'zero-sum game but an infinite pie'. Sufia attended to everybody in a ceremonial manner" (Kapoor 3).

Throughout his life and works, Ali felt free to express and practice secularism. His mother, Sufia, seeded this secular mode of thinking into him. As Kapoor informs us regarding this: "Sufia dressed Shahid as Krishna" (Kapoor 4), and took him to the refugee centre, which she looked after. Ali was so fascinated by Krishna that he "ran around the house with an idol, asking his parents to help him build a temple" (Kapoor 4). Ali learned to give respect to other religions and cultures from his mother, and later on, as a poet, he spread those feelings into the reader's world. Ali remained influential to all who, in one way or another, think about giving respect to others, or anything that belongs to others.

We can remember the socio-political and religious turmoil Kashmir was going through at the time when Ali was writing his most remarkable poems. Kashmir's socio-political environment was already under observation of the people living outside India. Ali's secular take did something meaningful to his time. We may call his poetic duties as poetic activism, as his poetry projects an India where there is no such religious division as is stressed by the commercial media houses. The whole process of practicing secularism began with the mother's activities, which shaped the poet's mind, and then it went to his readers and again to other readers of later generations. And, thus, the mother's presence in Ali's literary oeuvre is to be addressed again.

Manan Kapoor writes, "The value systems he (Ali) had inherited were his father's socio-political beliefs and his mother's compassion and finesse" (Kapoor 20). Kapoor further adds a remark of Ali's friend Vidur Wazir in his book. Kapoor quotes, "He (Ali) was fortunate to have a mother like that—she was fantastic! Psychologically, she knew how to work with children" (qtd. in Kapoor 20). All these comments about Ali's mother make my argument in this article stronger. Ali's mother is not just a mother rearing her children. She is something more. She is the maker of a poetic mind that can smell the sweetness in a language. The finesse in Ali's poetry is the very result of finesse in his mind, and the finesse in his mind is the result of the finesse in his mother's way of bringing up of her child. This may be the reason why Ali time and again puts his mother's name. In Ali's own words, as quoted in Kapoor's book, his parents gave him a "wonderful atmosphere of possibilities of self-expression" (Kapoor 21). The liberty he got and the ability he was given to express himself have to be discussed in connection with the interpretations of Ali's poetry.

In Ali's poetry, the mother represents memory in which Ali's mind lives. While living in America, he missed both his mother and Kashmir. Ali could get back to the time past and the place Kashmir through his thoughts about his mother. The geography of Ali's mind is constituted of the warmth and care Ali received from his mother. Thought about the mother brings the past into the present, and the past seems to be the present. Memory bridges between two different places, and lowers the distance between Kashmir and America. It is the memory of the mother that gives Ali company in the lonesome moments in his life. The more Ali misses his mother, the more his thoughts surround his mother. Thus, the memory

of the mother effaces the gap between times and places. The mother becomes a psychological and emotional company for the child. In the poem “Survivor”, the poet envisions a scene in which a mother and a son, who seems to be a different man, not the poet himself, meet. The surreal phenomenon appears to be aching as the imagined man “calls to my mother in my voice / she turns” (Ali, “Survivor” 18-19). The poem ends with a melancholic tone: “He is breathless to tell her tales / in which I was never found” (Ali, “Survivor” 20-21). The two persons ‘he’ and ‘I’ are different. Time and place have ravaged the poetic self of Ali, but not the self of the mother, who still has the same caring self within her as she had earlier. Time has not been able to ravage the self of the mother. Thus, the mother transforms from biological to spiritual.

Ali brought his mother from India to America for better treatment. He looked after his mother as a daughter. Day and night he was beside her head, always praying for her recovery. He was emotionally overburdened after her death. Amitava Ghosh in his essay “‘The Ghat of the only world’: Agha Shahid ali in Brooklyn” (2002) writes: “During the last phase of his mother’s illness and for several months afterwards, Shahid was unable to write. The dry spell was broken in 1998, with ‘Lenox Hill’, possibly his greatest poem.” (Ghosh 321) The passage of time, after his mother’s death, could not give him any relief. Always haunted by the loss, Shahid could not concentrate on any work. He re-lived it over and over again until the end. Sometimes in mid-conversation with people, he used to say that he cannot believe that she has gone. Amitava Ghosh shares another experience: “The week before his death, on waking one morning, he asked his family where his mother was and whether it was true that she was dead. On being told she was, he wept as though he were living afresh through the event” (Ghosh 321). The mother and the son met the same fate— attacked by brain cancer. Ali loved to think that he would meet his mother in the ‘after-life’, ‘if there is an after-life’ (Ghosh 322). This was his supreme consolation. In Ghosh’s words, “Shahid’s identification with his mother was so powerful as to spill beyond the spirit and into the body” (Ghosh 322). In “Lenox Hill,” Shahid mourns the death of his mother, records the ruined mother and Kashmir, and perpetuates the cries that reached the mother from the cliffs of Kashmir (across fifteen centuries):

Thus I swear, here and now, not to forgive the universe
that would let me get used to a universe
without you. She, she alone, was the universe
as she earned, like a galaxy, her right not to die,
defying the Merciful of the Universe,
O Destroyer, let her return there, if just to die.
Save the rights she gave its earth to cover her, Kashmir
has no rights. When the windows close on Kashmir,
I see the blizzard-fall of ghost-elephants.
I hold back—she couldn’t bear it—one elephant’s
story: his return (in a country far from Kashmir)

to the jungle where each year, on the day of his mother
died, he touches with his trunk the bones of his mother (Ali “Lennox Hill 247-249)

The poem “Lennox Hill” (2001) perpetuates the mother’s memory in the reader’s mind. Ali’s poetic aesthetic has reached its peak in the collection *Rooms are Never Finished* (2001). The personal grief becomes universal for the language used in the mother poems. In “Lennox Hill” (2001), Ali employs the Italian canzone form to express his pain of loss. The lines place the mother and the motherland side by side, and blur the line between personal and universal. The dying mother repeatedly reminds us of the dying Kashmir. Everywhere in the lines, there is a sense of loss—a loss that would never be repaired. The mother’s traumatic experiences in the hospital in Manhattan and the trauma experienced by the people of Kashmir cannot be separated from each other.

Thus, the three poles—mother, poetry and poet can never be separated. The same can be said about the connection among the mother, Kashmir, and the universe. In Ali’s own words: “For compared to my grief for you, what are those of Kashmir, / and what I (I close the ledger) are the grief of the universe / when I remember you—beyond all accounting—O my mother? (Ali, “Lennox Hill 63-65). In many of the poems where Ali does not use the word ‘mother’, the mother’s presence and influence can be found if the reader is oriented with Mother Studies. The mother’s aesthetic presence makes Ali’s language so harmonious and beautiful. Any further studies may discover how the mother is omnipresent in the language of Agha Shahid Ali.

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