

Seasons of the Plains

Agha Shahid Ali

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Agha Shahid Ali is one of the most popular poets of the later years of twentieth century in Indian English literature. He was born in 1949 in the distinguished and highly educated family called Agha family of Kashmir. He received his early education from Srinagar and earned an M.A from the University of Delhi. Later he moved towards America for higher education. He got Ph.D from Pennsylvania State University.

Agha Shahid Ali has written many poetry collections, a translations a critical work and has edited a book too. Bone Sculpture (1972) is his first book written in India where he experimented with style and has been strongly influenced by his reading of Eliot. It deals with loneliness and skepticism. In 'Memory of Begum Akhtar' (1999) Ali seems to have matured as a poet and his urdu influences are quite noticeable from the title of the book. 'The Half-Inch Himalayas' (1987) is the first book he wrote while living in America; it deals with his strong longing for home; Kashmir, besides his family is also the focus of the book. A Nostalgist's Map of America (1991) deals with exile, longing and desire. 'The Country without a Postoffice' (1997) is one of his celebrated books which deals with violence and human rights violations in Kashmir. Ali's collection 'Rooms are never Finished' (2001) was a finalist for the National Book Award in 2001. The Veiled Suite (2009) which contains selected works across the poet's career was published post-humously.

Although Agha Shahid Ali lived a very short span of life but in this short age he wrote his name among memorable poets of twentieth century. He died due to brain cancer on Dec 8, 2001 at the age of 52 at his brother's home in Amherst, Massachusetts. At the time of

his death, in 2001, Ali was noted as a poet uniquely able to blend multiple ethnic influences and ideas both traditional verse and elegant free verse. His poetry reflects his hindu-muslim and Western heritage.

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1. Seasons of the Plains

"Seasons of the Plains" is one of the most renowned works written by Kashmiri-American poet, Agha Shahid Ali. Agha Shahid Ali is famous for his poems based on Kashmir, loneliness, diasporic sensibility and homesickness. His poem "Seasons of the plains" also reflects Indian culture, his love for family and Kashmir. The poem bears clear autobiographical strains. Shahid's mother belong to Lucknow of Uttar Pradesh. She was a descendent from a family that was well known in its sufi-heritage. His childhood upbringing in an open-minded religious and rich culture atmosphere and his deep attachment with the valley of Kashmir - the land of his childhood, all merge in to one to form a consciousness in him, which often find nostalgic romantic expression in beautiful poems like the one discussion. The poem starts with the beautiful description of Kashmir where four seasons can be clearly observed in a year. Further he recalls the days of his childhood, when his mother would play the records of Banaras thumri-singers and in that romantic ambience of the long yearning, melodious voices of Rasodan and Siddheshwari, she would relate to her childhood. The stories of a 'blue god' who played his flute on the shores of the Jamuna when clouds gathered in the sky. The poet actually remembers his mother who was born in Lucknow and married in Kashmir. She misses her early life of Lucknow especially the monsoon season which does not occur in Kashmir. She keeps listening to the Banaras thumri singers who sing of longing and separation. The monsoon is a season of relief and

enjoyment for children who drench themselves in the rain after the scorching summer heat. But for lovers who have to hide their love from the conservative society, the rain intensifies their feeling of separation. The pain of separation between the lovers, that can no more be borne at this time of seasonal cycle of the year, is the theme of the every lyric that is sung in the thumris. Then the religion-mythical story of Krishna-Radha transmuted itself to the stories of legendary romances of Heer and Ranjha, and similar others whose love was forbidden by society, the stories of the passion burned like the pure, beautiful, lingering incense all night in the childhood memories of the poet, whenever he sees the rain coming up and the clouds collecting in the dark horizon in the rainy season the memories of the cheerful soaking in the rain with friends in the valley, hearing of the pleasant thumris and romantic tales from his mother - all gathered up at once in the poet's mind. The poet recalls his mother singing Heer's lament, he wanders whether like his mother, Heer also actually burnt Jasmine incense sticks, which raised soft necks of nostalgic ash in her lament. Then comes the final climatic line - "She only said... Kashmir." This is the zone of conference between the real present and the nostalgic past. The poet's mother is much disturbed by the violences and upheavals in the political scenario of Kashmir, laments the loss of that romantic past in the beautiful plains where rainy season ushered in a fresh leave of life with rains of love. Kashmir, more beautiful than the 'Jamuna's shores' in physical beauty is marked by violence. There is no love in the beautiful valley, as it was in the plains of Banaras. The 'romantic blue god' thus becomes invisible here. The clouds do not cross the plains and reach the

mountainous valley, therefore, no rains of love soaks the summer-perched love lorn plains of Kashmir.

Hence is the poem reverberate in the note of autobiography and nostalgia. The theme of separation has been dealt here at two level — separation from homeland and separation from love. Separation from homeland is an intensely painful experience. The tone of the poem is nostalgic and melancholic as the poem deals with separation and longing. The tone is reinforced by the imaging of the incense stick. The poet has used allusion and visual imagery to express his feelings. The words like "the invisible blue gold" and "soft necks of ash" increases the beauty of the poem.