

**Agha Shahid Ali and Robin S Ngangom as Poets of Witness**

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**Abstract**

Poets, writers and artists capture the world through an individual and collective conscious lens, not to present the world as it is, but to present it in a new light through the narrative power of art and literature. When history is fractured by violence and distorted by silence; experience finds expression in art and literature. This paper employs a comparative analysis of Agha Shahid Ali and Robin S Ngangom's literary works. Both poets hail from distinct geographical boundaries of India: Agha Shahid Ali was born in Kashmir while Robin S Ngangom hails from Manipur; however, their literary works share thematic similarities marked by political crisis, insurgencies, violence, displacement and longing for the homeland. The paper foregrounds Stephen Greenblatt's notion of New Historicism that literature cannot be separated from history; re-reading the poems of both poets to understand the socio-political realities of the era. This paper also examines Cathy Caruth's Trauma theory to comprehend how writing in displacement is shaped by fractured memory resurfacing as trauma. The poems of Agha Shahid Ali and Robin S Ngangom embedded in trauma becomes a site where history is relived and never resolved. It also articulate personal and collective trauma through memory, history and deferred narrative. Through the lens of Caroline Forche's concept of 'poetry of witness'; the study situates Agha Shahid Ali and Robin S Ngangom as poets of witness. By reading these poets together this study underlines political trauma and experience. The comparative approach foregrounds witnessing, remembrance and resistance.

**Keywords:** Poets of witness, displacement, trauma studies, history, homeland.

## **Introduction:**

### **Robin Singh Ngangom and Agha Shahid Ali as Poet of Witness**

The term “poetry of witness”(Forche 65) was coined by Caroline Forche in the introduction of her book *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*. “She coined the term poetry of witness, to denote the method of describing history that poets under extreme conditions developed” (Forche 30). This paper situates Agha Shahid Ali and Robin S Ngangom not only as poets of witness, but employs a comparative framework to examine the thematic similarities and differences that emerge from their distinct geographical location in India. Agha Shahid Ali and Robin Singh Ngangom as poets share a series of similarities. The respective regions they hail from were erstwhile princely kingdoms. The Kingdom of Manipur acceded to the Indian Union in the year 1947, followed by the integration of Jammu and Kashmir in the year 1948. From the 1950s both regions have witnessed a series of uprisings, feuds, insurgents, violence, killings, legalization of AFSPA and uncertainties. Therefore, the poems of Agha Shahid Ali and Robin Singh Ngangom stem out of the collective experiences people have faced post-independence, which escalated in the 1990s in both Kashmir and Manipur. The ethnic clashes between the Kuki tribe and Thangkul tribe in the 1990s Manipur flesh out in the poem 'The Native land' by Robin Singh Ngangom. Similarly, the mass exodus of the Kashmiri pundits finds expression in the poem 'Farewell' penned by Agha Shahid Ali. The poets are not political fundamentalists or political extremists. They are writers concerned with the situation of their respective homelands. The poetry of Agha Shahid Ali and Robin Singh Ngangom is the medium through which they project the personal and collective experiences of the people caught in between the feuds of insurgents and the government. It is through their poetry that they emerge as representative voices of their regions. Their works offer a realistic artistic portrayal of the social and political conditions of their homelands i.e, Kashmir and Manipur respectively.

Robin S Ngangom as a poet of witness from Manipur emerges as realistic with social and human consciousness. He writes with revolutionary zeal. Robin S Ngangom as a poet, has faced criticism over the years that his poems are hemmed by extreme realism, and he further responds to it in the essay titled "Poetry in the Time of Terror" was published by Sahitya Akademi in *Indian Literature*. "If anyone should ask now why my poems do not speak of my land's breathtaking landscape; its sinuous

dances, its darkened women, I can only think of Neruda's answer: "Come and see the blood in streets"( Ngangom171).

The poems of Robin Singh Ngangom reflect the realities he understands as a witness to the condition of Manipur that reverberates in his work. There are words of angst fuelled with revolutionary zeal. The poems he writes express the experience and truth he owns as a poet who hails from a conflict zone. Robin S Ngangom feels he is indebted to his fellow citizens and he advocates that the poets have to write about experience and witness. And he calls it a "Poetry of Witness" ( Ngangom 179). Robin Singh Ngangom capitalizes on his witness and experience. Thus, writes in the article published by Muse India: "...maybe poets should try to strike that fine balance between realism and reflection..." ( Ngangom 180). Therefore, the balance between witness, realism and reflection are reflected in the select poems of Robin S Ngangom. In a similar vein, it was the conflicts and devastation in Kashmir that elevated Agha Shahid Ali as a poet of witness from the Indian Subcontinent. It was the failing situation of the 1990s that paved the way for the publication of Agha Shahid Ali's *The Country Without a Post Office*. One of its most ambitious political works of Ali was originally titled *Kashmir without a Post Office*. The recurring images and phrases in the title poem perfectly blend facts and poetry re-creating the situation of Kashmir in the 1990s. The situation in Kashmir worsened after the full uprising of self-determination, the feud between the military and the militants adversely affected the people of Kashmir. The echo, whispers and news of the valley remained silent and censored, everything was shut down, and the region was dead, no news came from the place as the post offices were piled up with messages undelivered these circumstances led Agha Shahid Ali to write his masterpiece in times of crisis. Also, the publication of *The Country Without a Post Office* cemented Agha Shahid Ali's position as a poet of witness from Kashmir.

This paper elaborately studies the theme of exile and conflict in the poem 'Farewell' in Kashmir (Ali 175) and 'A Poem for Joseph' and 'Flight' ( Ngangom) sheds light on exile and ethnic conflicts in Manipur. The poems 'Farewell' (Ali 175), 'A Poem for Joseph' (Ngangom 76) 'Flight' (Ngangom 4) share the theme of exile in the poems of Agha Shahid Ali and Robin S Ngangom. It sheds light on politics and poetry in the conflict zones of India. Therefore, this paper is studied under the ; the poems to be studied are 'Farewell' (Ali 175), 'The Country Without a Post Office'( Ali 202),

'Postcard from Kashmir'(Ali 29), 'The Blessed Word ( Ali 171), 'I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight'( Ali 178) , 'The Last Saffron'(Ali 181), 'Dear Shahid' (Ali 194), 'The Country Without a Post Office'( Ali 202) 'A Footnote to History'( Ali 221) of Agha Shahid Ali. Similarly, Robin S Ngangom to be 'When you do not Return'( Ngangom 61), 'Homeland I Left'(Ngangom 4), 'To a Valley Known as Imphal ( Ngangom 5), 'Flight'(Ngangom), 'A Poem for Joseph'(Ngangom 56), 'Everywhere I go'(Ngangom 99), 'A Poem for Joseph'( Ngangom 76), and 'The Strange Affair of Robin S Ngangom'( Ngangom 65-67).

### **The Longing for Homeland**

The longing for the homeland is an essence which binds Agha Shahid Ali and Robin S Ngangom as poets with similar perspectives. They are not political exiles like Mahmud Darwish from Palestine and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, who were exiled from their beloved Country. They both made a conscious decision to stay from their homeland. Their seminal works demonstrate that the notion of homeland transcends geographical boundaries and becomes a psychological displacement. The violence in Kashmir and Manipur is not demonstrated as merely a historical fact but memories resurfacing in fragments. The resurfacing of trauma aligns with Caruth's Trauma theory where the homeland of Agha Shahid Ali and Robin S Ngangom becomes a site where history is relived and never resolved.

In her seminal work studying trauma in lenses of post-structuralism, Cathy Caruth observes how trauma is often a deferral of narrative, memory and of history, in literature and in the psychoanalytic writings of Freud. Caruth observed how Freud wrote and published his last work, 'Moses and Monotheism' in a moment of his frantic escape from the Nazi forces. She writes "The trauma in Freud's text is first of all a trauma of leaving, the trauma of verlassen" (Caruth 20). Arguing that the trauma of Freud, is not so much about the aggressors but the inability to grasp the experience of leaving one's home, "not simply denoted by the words "German invasion," but rather borne by the words verliess ich, "I left." ( Caruth 21). Caruth emphasizes that Freud preserves the history of trauma caused by this departure and his incapacitated condition, which is "precisely within this gap in his text; and within the words of his leaving, words that do not simply refer, but... convey the impact of a history precisely as what cannot be grasped about leaving." (21)

Trauma is not only violence but is the condition of displacement and history is carried through displacement. Like Freud writing in exile, similarly Agha Shahid Ali writes in exile and Robin S Ngangom writes out of Manipur. Therefore, reminiscence, longing, and the unresolved trauma are evident in their writings. The longing for homeland surfaces several times in the select poems of Robin S Ngangom. To name a few 'The Strange Affair of Robin S Ngangom'(Ngangom 99), 'When you do not Return'(Ngangom 61), 'Native land'(Ngangom 84), 'A Poem for Joseph'(Ngangom 76), 'Everywhere I go'(Ngangom 99) and many more. In the poem 'When you do not Return' (Ngangom 61) Robin S Ngangom delivers a theme which is highly individual and universal. The individual voice in the poem longs to return to the homewhere he spent his childhood. The narrator of the poem has witnessed the changing landscape of his beloved homeland. Yet, he yearns to return home. The poet in this particular poem refers to an imaginary individual, who is referred to as 'you' throughout the poem. The 'you' in the poem mirrors the poet himself. As both the poet and the imaginary individual are both in exile. The poet wants the individual who is addressed as 'you' in the poem to return home before everything is turn to dust. Therefore, the concluding lines of the poem say "When you do not return...we enter the era of the Assassin (5-6). The poet is devastated realizing the possibility that the person in exile might not return home. The longing for a peaceful homeland finds references in the poems 'Native Land'(Ngangom 67), 'Flight'( Ngangom 51),

'Homeland I Left'( Ngangom 4). The literary output of Robin S Ngangom can be traced back to the ravages of the Second world War. The ravages and their implications beautifully reflects in the poem 'To the Valley Known as Imphal' (Ngangom), he tries to recall the history of World War II. The Poet Robin S Ngangom looks back at this with immense pride and respect for the people of his land forgotten by history. He reminisces, lost in the world of his departed grandmother's tale he discovers and relates himself to the stories of his ancestors.

Srinagar, the homeland of Agha Shahid Ali appears as a muse in his several collections of poems. But in the collection titled *The Country Without a Post Office* the word Kashmir is chanted numerous times like a spell. In the first poem of the collection titled 'The Blessed Word' the poet highlights the variations of Kashmir in twenty-six different ways:

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Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir, Cashmir, Cashmire, Kashmere, Cachemire/  
Cushmeer, Cashmiere, Casmir./Or Cauchemere in a sea of stories? Or: Kashmir,  
Kashmir, Kashmere, Kashmir, Kasmir, Kerseymore?( Ali 171)

The metamorphosis of Kashmir is embodied in the above lines taken from the collection *The Country Without Office*. As time passed and violence escalated in Kashmir followed by the illness of Agha Shahid Ali. The poet felt it impossible to return back home. With time and situation the word Kashmir changed and had a different meaning over the years "From being a metaphor for home, it turned into a metaphor for a lost homeland" (Kapoor 135). Agha Shahid Ali's obsession and longing for his homeland are reflected in many of his poems. Srinagar became his muse every lane, nook and corner of Srinagar found a way in the poems of Agha Shahid Ali. Zero bridge, Gupkar road, Cantonment, Shah Hamadan, Jhelum, Dal Lake, Shalimar gardens, Chinar leaves, Saffron and Himalayas are immortalised in his poems. The poetry of Agha Shahid Ali reverberates the story of remembrance, desire, and rootedness from miles afar. His love and longing for Kashmir are undying he coins the phrase "beloved Kashmir mother" (Jahangeer 30).

Agha Shahid Ali as a poet and individual does dread separation from Kashmir. He keeps the memories of Kashmir alive in his poems. He finds solace in the memories of Kashmir, which is evident in his poems. In the poem 'The Last Saffron' Agha Shahid Ali imagines his death similarly to Emily Dickinson does in the poem 'I Heard a Fly Buzz'. The poet writes "I will die in Autumn in Kashmir" (181). He wished to be buried in Kashmir close to his homeland. According to Agha Shahid Ali, it is a burial in Kashmir that would give him peace. If not living, he wished to return to the roots he stemmed from in his death. Another poem included in the collection *The Country without a Post Office* is titled 'I Dream I am at the Ghat of the Only World' and is considered a farewell poem to the world by Agha Shahid Ali. Agha Shahid Ali was aware that his time was running due to the prolong illness. 'I Dream I am at the Ghat of Only World' takes the readers on a journey to the other world. The world that is waiting for him, in this poem, he sees the ghost of the people he adored and loved. The people he meets are his muse Begum Akhtar, his Mentor James Merrill, Sufia his mother, Iqbal Ahmed his friend and the poetic legends of the Indian Subcontinent. In the poem, Agha Shahid Ali is in the world of spirits with his loved ones, yet the memories of Kashmir haunt him. Even in his death, it is only the memory of Kashmir

that haunts him and pulls him back to the world of the living. Therefore, most of Agha Shahid Ali represents Kashmir, unrest in Kashmir and the urge to return home. Agha Shahid Ali through his consciousness like Robin S Ngangom yearns for a peaceful. Which are evident in the poems: 'Postcard from Kashmir', 'The Blessed Word', 'In Memory of Begum Akhtar', 'I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight', 'The Last Saffron', 'Dear Shahid', 'The Country Without a Post Office', 'A Footnote to History' and many more.

### **Exodus, Ethnic and Religious conflicts**

Drawing on Stephan Greenblatt's concept of New Historicism, the literary works of Agha Shahid Ali and Robin S Ngangom is contextualized in relation to the historical realities of the period. Through a new historicist lens, political instability, fragmented history, violence and conflicts are themes that shape the literary works of both the poets. These experiences foreground the creative expression in their seminal works and situate both the writers as poets of witness studied under the lens of New Historicism. The states of Manipur and Jammu and Kashmir in the 1990s have witnessed political instability, marked by disappearances, insurgencies, internal conflicts and extrajudicial killings. The ethnic clashes between the Kuki tribes and Thangkul tribes of Manipur escalated in the 1990s and resulted in the tragedy of the 'Joupi Massacre'. This resulted in the exodus of the Kuki tribe from Manipur. The bloody incident is captured in the heart-wrenching poems 'My Native Land' and 'Poem for Joseph'. Similarly, the poem titled 'Farewell' in the collection *The Country Without a Post Office* captures the religious tension in the valley of Kashmir in the 1990s. The poem is also seen as an epistolary poem from Kashmiri Muslim to a Kashmiri pundit who has left the valley. Agha Shahid Ali in 'Farewell', Robin S Ngangom in 'The Native Land' and 'A Poem for Joseph' bear similar essence. Both the poets allude to certain incidents in Manipur and Jammu and Kashmir respectively. Grief and sorrow are reflected in the poem 'Poem for Joseph' (Ngangom 76) and 'The Native Land' (Ngangom 84). 'Poem for Joseph' (Ngangom 76) could be situated as a sequel to 'The Native Land' (Ngangom 84). The Native land depicts the internal feuds and crises amongst the different ethnic tribes of Manipur, which has crippled the state and the people. The ethnic conflicts escalated between the Kuki tribes and Thangkul tribes of Manipur which led to the black day known as the 'Joupi Massacre' in the 1990s. According to the poet, there is no room for optimism and he is surrounded by hopelessness makes him conclude the poem with the lines "... I continue to live as if nothing happened" (Ngangom 22-27). Without intellectualizing or taking sides in the



situations, the poet laments the loss of humanity, intolerance, and sensibilities in the people of Manipur. The state of helplessness to stop the feuds transformed him into a flint-hearted person like the rest. The feud which crippled the state of Manipur has crippled the conscious mind of the poet. Furthermore, the poem 'Poem for Joseph'(Ngangom 76), the sequel to the poem 'The Native Land' mourns the migration of the Kukis in the 1990s. In the poem 'Poem for Joseph' Robin S Ngangom laments the situation of Manipur. He writes about the migration of the Kuki tribes from their ancestral land to other parts of India for survival. According to the poet, there is no end to a journey like this. The people will become refugees in a distant land, unable to return. In the poem, the narrator's urge to return home is extreme but held back when he realizes that nothing remains. Everything is washed away in the rain. Now, he shelters himself in a rented place in the plains of Imphal. The title of the poem and the character of Joseph allude to the biblical character in the Book of Genesis exiled to Egypt. Therefore, Robin S Ngangom's portrayal of Joseph in the poem voices the stories of several 'Josephs' who left their homeland for survival.

Similarly, the poems of Agha Shahid reverberate the essence of the exodus. There is a striking parallel between Agha Shahid Ali and Robin S Ngangom in how they mourn the exodus of people from their respective regions. The 1990s in Kashmir was a time of uncertainty, violence, religious conflicts, the rise of insurgents, the exodus of Kashmiri pundits and judicial killings. The political turmoil and targeted killings of Kashmiri pundits added fuel to the existing fire. Kashmir witnessed gruesome violence in the 1990s. Kashmir was not peaceful anymore and the religious tensions escalated. Therefore, Kashmir witnessed a mass migration/ exodus from the valley of Kashmir to other parts of India. It displaced thousands of people, forcing them to abandon their ancestral home. A situation Agha Shahid Ali writes and laments about in his poem 'Farewell'. A secular poet and citizens are bewildered by the exodus of the Kashmiri pundits. The poet living in America is haunted by the exodus of the Kashmiri pundits. He writes to the Kashmiri pundits the piece of Kashmir has left the valley, and he calls them back. He witnesses the Kashmiri Pandits leaving their ancestral home with the idols in their hands. This image haunts the poet, without the guardians and the support of the neighbours, the ones who are left behind find themselves defenseless. The exodus of the Kashmiri pundits has left a deep void in the valley. The poet laments the exodus of the people. He asks the people who have left the valley to come back. According to the poet, the people who



are left in the valleys are defenseless and helpless as the violence never seems to end. Despite all the chaos, conflicts, power struggle, political, religious, social and economic turmoil. Agha Shahid Ali is hopeful. Therefore, the collection *The Half-inch Himalayas* ends with a positive hopeful note "The world is full of paper .Write to me" (Ali 71)

The striking parallel between Agha Shahid Ali and Robin S Ngangom is how they treat their subjects. Through their poetry, they express the essence of human and social awareness. When the political voice is dismissed such writings become an act of witness. In doing so, they create a counter narrative to history rooted in memory. The concept of poetry of witness acts as a critical lens through which Agha Shahid Ali and Robin S Ngangom can be understood as relevant writers whose works resonates in the present times . Manan Kapoor in his book on Agha Shahid Ali writes: "Today, readers of poetry throughout the world turn to The Country Without a Post Office to understand Kashmir, perhaps because poetry can teach us what history misses out." (Kapoor 178)

Correspondingly, in an interview conducted on 21st July 2022 in North Eastern Hill University Campus on Robin S Ngangom he speaks of the similarities he shares with Agha Shahid Ali. He says:

They both speak of agonizing political history in their respective regions. Also, a large corpus of their poetry falls under the concept of poetry of witness (Forche 65). The social and political upheavals in the poetry of both the poets are common themes they share. Both the poets write about disappearances of youth, custodial killing, human rights violence in Kashmir and Manipur are the issues that both the poets write in their poems, which appears in Robin S Ngangom's 'The Strange Affair of Robin S Ngangom'(Ngangom 65-67), 'Everywhere I go'( Ngangom 99) and Agha Shahid Ali's 'The Country Without a Post Office'(Ali 202). Therefore, their poems have a sense of nostalgia and longing for the homeland in their poems. His explicit love for ghazals is a similarity he shares with Agha Shahid Ali, he has often quote Mir Taqi Mir and Agha Shahid Ali's love for Faiz Ahmed Faiz has always been evident. Thus, he ends the interview by placing himself and Agha Shahid Ali as romantics. (Ngangom, 21 July 2022)

## **Conclusion**

Besides, Agha Shahid Ali and Robin S Ngangom when they write about a particular situation share a similar setting. Their writings note the complexities of the accession of their respective states followed by the stories of bloodshed the regions Kashmir and Manipur have witnessed since the 1950s. The poems of both the poets are invaded by the degradation of their homeland, and the decadence of their respective regions is moral, social, economical, religious and ethnic clashes. Through the lens of New Historicism, their works can be understood as an extension of socio-political realities; emphasizing that literature cannot be separated from history. In the same vein, Cathy Caruth's trauma theory illustrates how history is continuously relived through fragmented memory. And a comparative reading of Agha Shahid Ali and Robin S Ngangom 's literary works elucidates them as poets of witness. The poems of both the poets represent grief and lament in a war-ravaged society. Their literary works demonstrates uncertainty and hopelessness that haunt both the past and present. Robin S Ngangom writes with angst and revolutionary zeal whereas Agha Shahid Ali voices out his agitation with a subtle tone. Thus, both the poets unabashedly speak of disappearances, custodial killing, human rights violence, insurgents, ethnic conflicts, religious conflicts, exiles, exodus and longing for a peaceful homeland as poets of witness.

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