

“A Land that is not my own”: Pull of home in the poetry of Ahmed Ali

Farah Afrin

Research scholar,

Department of English and Modern European Languages

Lucknow University, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh

Abstract: Ties with one’s native land are so strong that it cannot be broken. The place where one’s identity and culture is formed, a place where one’s roots are fixed, keeps recurring in the mind of the person, no matter how much distance lies in between. Distance is a physical obstruction and it can be removed to some extent with the onward rush of nostalgic memories. Feelings of separation, loss of identity, one’s failure to connect with the people belonging to different cultures are some of the problems faced by the person who has migrated or forced towards new destination. A destination which is new and alien, but it has to be adopted. Remembrance is the only medium to overcome this “pull of home”. Ahmed Ali (1910 New Delhi- 1994 Karachi) was an Indian and later Pakistani poet, critic, diplomat, scholar and translator. He was born and educated in India. He also taught at various universities in India. During the partition, he moved to Pakistan. He was forced to be separated from his native land and this found expression in his collection, *Purple Gold Mountain: Poems from China (1960)*. The collection is divided into three sections Prelude, The Flowery Middle Kingdom and Exile. The last two sections deal with the theme of exile. My paper is an attempt to read his poetry dealing with this theme and to understand his deep love for his native country India as he himself says:

Close by the desert

Under the brown hills

Where the Ya Na River flows

Lies my home.

Keywords: Native land, Identity, Nostalgia, Remembrance, Exile, Culture, Distance.

For no fault of my own but feuds
Of little men warring over crumbs
I was thrown into exile
That has lasted these long years, two score and ten.
Where should I honour my parents,
And their parents before them
In a land that is not my own?¹ (qtd. in Coppola
125)

Ties with one’s native homeland are so strong, that it cannot be broken. A place

where one’s culture and identity is formed, a place where one’s roots are fixed, keep recurring in the mind of the person, no matter how much distance lies in between. Distance is a physical obstruction. It can be removed with the onward rush of nostalgic memories. Feelings of separation, loss of identity, one’s failure to connect with the people belonging to different cultures are some of the problems faced by a person who has migrated or forced towards a new destination. A destination which is new and alien, but it has to be adopted and adjusted and to some extent absorbed also.

Remembrance is the only medium to overcome this “pull of home”.

Ahmed Ali (1910 New Delhi-1994 Karachi) was an Indian and later Pakistani poet, critic, diplomat, scholar and translator. He was born and educated in India. He also taught at various universities in India. During the partition of India, he was the British Council Visiting Professor to the University of China in Nanking as appointed by the British Government of India. When he tried to return to India in 1948, KPS Menon (then India’s Ambassador to China) did not let him and he was forced to move to Pakistan. Thus he had to leave his native land India where his roots were fixed. He was uprooted and planted on a new soil named Pakistan. His longing, urge and craving for India continued as he was denied entry to it. He was forced to be separated from his native land and this found expression in his collection *Purple Gold Mountain: Poems from China (1960)*. The collection is divided into three sections, Preludes, The flowery Middle Kingdom and Exile. The second and the third section deal with the theme of

exile and the longing for homeland India. In 1978, Ali expanded *Purple Gold Mountain: Poems from China* to over sixty poems. This version is yet unpublished and my discussion is based on this version. My paper is an attempt to read his poetry dealing with this theme and to understand his deep love for his native country India. He was living a life of borrowed identity. Ahmed Ali being the product of India felt a sense of nostalgia on seeing the country being divided into two major countries India and Pakistan. Two nations originated from a single nation. Not only this, he was asked to be a part and parcel of that portion, which was new and alien to him. He was asked to adopt a borrowed identity. After a few years' time, this burden of borrowed identity was difficult for him to endure. But nothing could be done now because he had become the part of the divided land. This division had a profound effect on him. It gave him the sense of what it was like to live amongst the aliens and unknown people. It was not his real home. The theme of exile deals with “sense of homelessness and uncertainty he experienced when stranded in China for several months after partition” (Coppola 125). In one of the poem titled as “Entrapped by war in a Foreign Country I Think of My Native Land” he writes about his poignant feeling about his homeland India. He writes that the land of India was divided not by its people but by the Generals because of which he had to leave it. Because of this traumatic experience, he used to feel dejected in the season of spring, the same spring which is symbolized as season of hope, positive attitude and optimism. He had to endure the experience of exile, and be in a constant fear of being killed and die in a land which was foreign to him. The dust in which his body would be mingled would be unknown to him. It was a period of uncertainty and confusion for him. His heart was not at peace. There was fear of the unknown and the alien atmosphere. He had come to Pakistan unwillingly. He writes:

In Summer it was the war began;
In Autumn the Generals divided up the land;
In Winter I left my native home;
And now in Spring my heart is sad
For return I shall no more to that
From this warrior-oppressed land
Caught between the gain and loss
I must suffer and be crushed
Under foreign feet to unknown dust.² (qtd. in Coppola 125)

In another poem titled as “In Exile I Remember my People and I Feel Sad at my Plight” he writes that for no fault of his own, he was exiled to a land that did not belong to him. He did not feel a sense of belonging here in this country Pakistan. He felt alienated, separated and segregated. It was because of disagreement between Nehru and Jinnah, that the land was divided and he was thrown into a place for which his mind and soul was not ready. He wanted to pay tribute to his parents and ancestors but how could

he? Because the land was alien and its soil did not have remains of his ancestors. He was afraid of the men having indifferent attitude, who were more inclined towards show, property and money. He did not feel any kind of mental connection between himself and these people. Living on this land, amongst these alien and arrogant faces, he was reminiscent of the simplicity of the people of India. The simplicity, the devotion of the people of India was a stark contrast to the hatred, arrogance of the people of Pakistan. He was yearning to see the garden i.e. India again. He writes:

I watch the cavalcade
Of arrogant men who stamp ground
With pride and pomp of property,
And remember the simple folk at home offering
Paper money to the gods
At the altar of heaven.

.....
When shall I see the day's dawn
Through foreign dust across my garden, the earth
Smelling sweet and the birds singing
In the trees by the jade of the Sapphire Springs?
In exile my sun has set.³ (qtd. in Coppola 125-126)

In another poem titled as “Of Hatred and Peace” he writes about the torments he was receiving at the hands of the soldiers. In a way, he was receiving mental as well as physical trauma. He was beaten by soldiers. He was in search of peace. He felt as if he belonged to neither of the place. It was in between state. He says:

I sat under the Purple Gold Mountain,
Contemplating the Lotus Lake and the peaceful
scene,
I belong neither to this warring land nor that,
Only a poet in search of peace,
Yet the soldiers beat me all the same,
For having no hatred and being serene.⁴ (qtd. in Coppola 127)

All these poems reflect the sense of not belonging to anywhere. He wanted an identity for himself. Partition of India had a traumatic influence on his life. He was in search of peace. There was turmoil in his heart because of the cruel activities going on in front of him. Outwardly, he looked calm, but behind the calm appearance, there was the feeling of uncertainty and rootlessness. He was born in Delhi, so it held a prominent place in his nostalgic memories. He was all the time reminiscent of its beauty. After all, he was born here. It was his birthplace. Because of few political catastrophes, his right to be associated with it was snatched. “On My Native Place” shows clearly that he identified himself with India and Delhi. He says that this city was witness to the glories of Emperors. It had been destroyed and looted many times by the foreigners. Here in this piece, he describes the plight of the city during the mutiny of 1857. It was completely ravaged and lost its glory which could be taken as the loss of spring from the native land. Coppola writes:

The British, in wreaking revenge on Indians after the 1857 rebellion, pulled down many of the walls which surrounded Delhi. However, the ‘foreigners’ alluded to in the third stanzas might well be Indians themselves, perhaps Hindus, perhaps Indian Muslims who do not look upon Delhi and India with the same sense of belonging as the speaker, and Ali, do. (124)

Home is a place, where one feels secure and surrounded by warmth and emotions. This sense of security and warmth was what Ahmed Ali

missed. His physical self was there in Pakistan, but mentally he was there in India. The sense of being connected was not there. Memories kept coming back to him. After all, it was his birthplace. He got education and identity here and here only. There was attraction and pull of home all the time and he was not able to resist this pull of home. This made him restless. Outwardly he was calm and serene. He himself says about his real home:

Close by the desert

Under the brown hills

Where the Ya Na River flows

Lies my home.⁵(qtd. in Coppola 123)

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Notes

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