



## THE THEME OF TRAVEL IN AGHA SHAHID ALI'S *A NOSTALGIST'S MAP OF AMERICA*

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### ABSTRACT

The poetry of Agha Shahid Ali abounds with the complex relations of various regions, the scenes and visuals, of the place, the language of locals and other such experiences. In this paper, Ali's love for travel and its poetic fusion is explored. The paper is an attempt to study his volume *A Nostalgist's Map of America* and it tries to analyse Ali as a travel poet. It examines the poet's love to explore and poeticize about different geographies and connecting them on common grounds. This provides a platform for the reading and understanding of trans-local theme in his poems. Reading his poetic volume, *A Nostalgist's Map of America*, the paper focuses on Ali's love to recreate and blend different locations under one poetic subject. It analyses the importance of travel and displacement in Ali's poetic art. Keywords: Travel, displacement, migration, trans-local spaces.

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Travel and migration has played an important role in the poems of Agha Shahid Ali. His poems bring to reader different geographical backgrounds and cultural differences. His love for travel has allowed him to make the transition of different geographical spaces in his poems. His book *A Nostalgist's Map of America* is charged with the theme of travel and importance of migration.

In this paper an attempt is made to understand Ali's technique of creating local sites in global spaces. The poet is seen revisiting India in the foreign surroundings. Moving through the themes of migration, love and longing, the paper graphs the instances where the poet tries to constantly connect with Indian places and other geographical settings. The poet's method of transition from one place to another is analysed to infer the idea of trans-local spaces in his poems.

The term 'trans-local' is an umbrella term. It could be related to the idea of addressing two different worlds in similar settings. It is interesting

to assess how Agha Shahid Ali, crosses national boundaries and yet brings interconnectedness amongst different cultural settings. The paper also focuses on the travel experiences of the poet that later turns into poetry. Ali's love for travel offers a journey of poems that originate beyond national boundaries and collectively develops common themes and expressions. Through this journey, Ali discusses, the idea of compassion for different cultures.

The poetic journey of Agha Shahid Ali has always been subjected to a gradual shift and transformation. Travel and migration from one place to another, from India to United States, accounts for Shahid Ali's welcoming of many cultures and helps to relate his embracement of multiple ethnicities. Reading his poetry, it could be observed that there are many shifts and moments of different experiences with respect to culture, place and to the form of writing poetry.

His poetry bears different tone and effect. He is poetic about every experience- a dream or an interview. There is dark humour, the abstract assimilation of thought, mingling of the real and the superficial world, rich as well as grotesque. His poetry is the resultant rendition of many issues that includes his tri-cultural origin, the problems of leaving home, exilic feelings, and his fondness for new cultural forms. The paper attempts to bring together the details of various places in America and the poet's experience about those places. Ali talks about various scenes, landscapes, ethnic tribes and gives reader a sound idea of the America. Memories and experience set order for his poem that ranges from the verses based on people, places, advertisements, radio stations which are together intermingled with imaginations and allusions. It is therefore interesting to read the blend of Kashmiri-American-Islamic and Indian form of verses that are tightly weaved together. He plays dexterously with the images of deserts, oceans, turnpikes, trains, colours, literary references and regional affiliations.

The repeating images harmonizes with the theme of love for cultural plurality and associations with many cultures. He talks about past and present, near and far, now and then, mapping visuals and introducing readers with many terrains.

Ali's poetry in *A Nostalgist's Map of America* reflects the reasons of human displacement. It presents a concrete picture of North American zone. He draws links between differences of culture, the subject of regionalism and shows his love for natural geography of different zones of the world. In discussing about the region, the poet draws focus on the socio-cultural and historical details. As remarks Maimuna Dali Islam, focusing on the travel experiences of the poet:

In the poem "Beyond the Ash Rains", Ali talks about the vanished tribes of Native Americans, two and three thousand years ago. Furthermore, Ali's presence in that past, in the past of the vanished Hohokam tribe, is so visceral that in the poem "Leaving Sonora", during a flight take off while leaving Tuscon, Ali imagines the blue lights of the runway fade into diamond like sparkle of lights from a faded past, from a faded outline of vanished

Native American village from centuries ago. (264-265).

The idea explored in Shahid Ali's attempt to amalgamate many civilizations in a partially imaginative and partially realistic landscape is that exile and migration does not restrict the growth of human relationship. His poetic imagination further supports the line of thought which explains that movement and migration helps the migrants to develop ethnic affiliations and nurture transnational attachments.

In the first poem "Eurydice" of the volume *A Nostalgist's Map of America* Ali frames the myth of Orpheus in the background of Nazism. The poet shares deep concern about the treacherous human victimization. Another political commentary is shaped in "I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror" when Ali elaborates about military camp in Peru and voices his empathy for deforestation in Brazil.

Ali offers a glimpse of personal, mystical and cultural ideologies. Ali could capture his loss from the very beginning of "Beyond the Ash Rains" but in the same line of thought he could construct regional affiliations and celebrate his inheritance. Thus, he begins "When the desert refused my history". (Ali, 110). In "A Rehearsal of Loss" examines his current phase as someone sharing dual identities and cultures of India and America.

Ali draws the allusion from other celebrated poetic figure known for isolation and alienation in their poetic voice. The theme of Evanescence blooms from Emily Dickinson. "In Search of Evanescence" consist of eleven poems, written for a friend named, Phil, who was living in California, at that point of time and later died of AIDS. Ali progressively quotes from Thomas De Quincey in the second poem of the series. Ali establishes the nexus between Ohio and Calcutta in the third poem of the series.

Ali is powerful in his imagination to consider himself as the member of a tribe from South West region of America and at other times construct a city from his imagination, and calls it 'Evanescence'. "In Search of Evanescence" also articulates trans-local sentiments in terms of language, art and travel. It moves from personal to political in expressing different realities of many nations and cultures. The

second poem of the series focuses on the historical and political events and facts in the form of a travelogue. Though the tone of the poem is gloomy, as it shares the demise of Phil, the poet seems on a journey towards the western world. The poem contains a juncture where the West imagines and reflects the image of the east. Therefore, in Ohio, Ali discovers Calcutta and emphasizes the idea that he is sketching the world in America and he writes 'I've begun America'.

The topography of America always seems to be explored by Shahid Ali in all the poems of the series "In Search of Evanescence". The allusions simultaneously play vivid role in drawing the images of 'home' and 'away', 'the local' and 'the global'. The fifth poem brings reference to Georgia O'Keefe's abstract. It describes various scenes from a train in desert, to a museum and presents an ambiguous use of poetic language. The language used by the poet underscores the poet's intense and vibrant relationship with the Southwest America. In parallel way, Agha Shahid Ali's description in his poems also establishes his identity as Southeast Asian. Such detailed poetic description evokes a new dimension of relationship between different geographic zones, across time and space, in historical and cultural visions. The construction of all the poems brings tightly weaved events, monuments, city and literature from the experienced archives of Agha Shahid Ali. The myriad stories and legion narratives exhibit the transnational aspect of Agha Shahid Ali's art of writing poetry.

The imagery of dessert and its haunting resemblance to the Persian tales is composed by the poet in the series of thirteen poems- "From Another desert". The celebrated legend of Laila and Majnoon and the stories of Persian literature is tightly compacted in the deserts of Western parts of the world. The poet's imagination allows him to flow between United States and India, present and past, New York to Delhi and he cherishes his heritage in the foreign land.

Bruce King, in his article, analyses this volume on a wider plane and writes, "In *A Nostalgist's Map of America* his own exile stops being an exile as it is assimilated into the topoi of the travelling American,

the American always on the road between the places. The book of poems is his own version of the "being on the road" movie, novel or autobiography as he travels by car, airplane, train and imagination to friends, places, memories and the past. As in the American versions there are mentions of specific roads, exists, radio stations, places and peoples. Ali is often literally behind the wheel and on the road between one place and another. Whereas the American artist invests the here and now with everything making the experience the only value, Ali treats being on the road as a journey of the imagination, fancy and memory". (17)

It is a different sense of belonging to American zone which Ali expresses in sharing his imagination, memory and fancy. The metaphorical language used by Shahid Ali augments his tri-cultural identity and becomes suggestive of different aspects of the poet's life such as cartographer, cosmopolitan and a person who acknowledges deeply his ethnic affiliation.

In his presentation of places throughout the volume, the same place undergoes through metaphorical transformations and bears both actual and imaginative resemblance. The reader constantly keeps witnessing historical places such as Pubelo of Acoma in New Mexico, the myths and tales attached to the superstition Mountains in Arizona or the cities of Southwest America like Phoenix, Las Cruces, Tuscon and others. The associative images are full of geographical markers in the poem "I See Chile from My Rearview Mirror" which brings the features of travel and cosmopolitanism in his poetic effects. And he writes: 'Once I went through a mirror/From there too the world, so intact, resembled/Only itself'. (Ali, 161)

The motif used here is that of a traveller. Judith Rauscher describes Shahid's visuals in the poem and compares him to a painter. In her own words, she remarks on the poet's sense of colour in context and its context used in the poem and writes "By describing the night in Uruguay as "black salt", Columbia as "vermillion", Brazil as "blue tar", and Peru as "titanium white", while the colours of Argentina and Paraguay are "breaking, like oil" and other countries are "wiped clean of colour"(Ali, 96). Ali produces a rich tableau of Middle and South

America in several senses of the word: his description not only sketches a portrait that hints at economic exploitation and even genocide, it also conjures up a brightly coloured map, which relates these histories to the colonial project and its aftermath".(Rauscher,14)

Ali's poetry reflects the cross-cultural ideas in locating Calcutta in Ohio. The image that his imagination forms is set to, passively and unconsciously blur the difference between home and the foreign land. In another country, the poet reaffirms and relocates the native sentiments and the two distinct places, which are far away from each other.

In doing so, on a general level, Ali as a traveller is very close to this common act of relocating and attributing the image of one place to another. Therefore, progressively, in the next poem, Agha Shahid Ali as a traveller, is again searching, relocating and celebrating the image of India in America. "On Route 80 in Ohio", he strikingly mentions:

India always exists  
Off the turnpikes  
Of America  
So I could say  
I did take the exit  
And crossed Howrah  
And even mention the Ganges  
As it continued its sobbing  
Under the bridge. (Ali,123)

Xiwen Mai brings a very interesting point in this context and mentions that Calcutta is a name of small town in Ohio. He further opens a line of thought that Ali in bringing the name of a place from native land to a foreign terrain is seeking to bridge the gap between the two nations and thereby searching the common grounds or familiar sentiments. In Mai's words, "The juxtaposition of "Ohio" and "Calcutta" interestingly, is both surprising and natural. "Calcutta", the name of a major city in India, Ali's home country is also the name of a small town in Ohio. The Indian city Calcutta was the capital of British. Cultural geography scholars have noted that the colonizers act of "naming places" is their way of "claiming spaces". (8)

Ali constantly uses metaphorical language to suggest trans-local affiliations in his poems. Ali voices the tragedy of endangered civilizations that have perished. There seems a journey from Midwest to New Mexico and Arizona and the poet focuses on the Native American aborigines tribes and their culture. The narrative is charged with pun and sarcasm as the poet writes 'the last speaker of a language' and 'a language will die with me'.

Ali could relocate the American Indian tribe in the West. He can identify and relate with the culture and the tribe in the West. In his act of identification and relation with the west, the poet could bring the idea of migrated Indians in America.

In the poem "Snow on Desert" Shahid Ali also attempts to objectify these agendas. Geographically, this region is marked by cultural and ethnic diversifications. It also captures the history of migrated population and displacement. As the poem begins Shahid is seen as a speaker who is making the journey to Tuscon International airport to receive his sister Sameetah and he is driving through the Sonoran desert.

The significance of travel is apparent in Ali's poetry. Writing about his travel experiences, Ali has discussed histories of different regions and the social and the cultural worlds. Drawing relationship between two or more than two places, Ali tries to reinvent one place in a different zone. Thus, he dexterously blends the boundaries and recreates a trans-local subject in his poems.

Ali in recreating new space for his local identity reconstructs the subject of the self and identity. In Ali's poetry, a new place is explored as site of coordination with the experienced place. The common bindings of social practices and traditions are analysed through the concept of displacement. Ali's *A Nostalgist's Map of America* brings different locales both actual and imaginary. Primarily, he focuses on the American Southwest region and the desert landscape. The displacement and movement captures the agendas of identity and belonging.

It shares the images of local native people of the regions and the poet's insights. Place, is redefined, in its meaning and approach, as it links people of different origins together. His emphasis lies on the migrants' relationship with a new place

and not on the loss of the origin and home. Writing about the desert and tribes, showcasing the natural environment, Ali's travel poetry underscores the relationship between human and the nature.

The real and the imagined sewed together offer a rich metaphorical language. Associating the new place with the old one display regional affiliation. The poet's attitude as a traveller allow him to acknowledge, the meaningful relationship between places. Thus, the local and the regional is set to meet the global and the universal. The value of migration and displacement is brought into context by Ali's artistic productions.

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