
The Transnational Cartography of Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry

NIDA SAJID
RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

"Call me Ishmael." (Melville 1)
"Call me Ishmael tonight." (Ali, *Country* 40)

In his novel *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville explores the liminality of borderlands through the fluid and interstitial imagination of his narrator, Ishmael. While contemplating on the meaning of borders between land and water, Ishmael tells us about his impending decision to leave the alienating human landscape around him in order to chart the borderless world of sea. His decision to embark upon a self-imposed exile—an ironic death sentence to escape overwhelming thoughts of suicide—is no coincidence since the name of Ishmael has a long history of being symbolically associated with geographical dislocation and transcultural alienation in Christian, Judaic, and Islamic traditions. Melville's appropriation of this name in an epical and, yet, an equally frayed and fragmented representation of the modern condition acts as a premonition of a more contemporary state of postnational globalization.

As recent theorists suggest, human experience in our age of strict border policing and constant il/legal border crossings between cultures and nations has given birth to a new space and an identity that speaks with the double bind of solidarity and separation of many selves. In the words of Gloria Anzaldúa, disparate worlds and worldviews merge together to form "a border culture" inhabited by the "atrasados" (transgressors/crossovers) who break down hegemonic binary paradigms: "the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal'" (3). Seen from this perspective, Ishmael's voyage along with the other "atrasados" on the whaling ship *Pequod* enters a synecdochic relationship with a dystopian vision of liminal subject positions at a time when America had just extended its territorial claims further into the South with the Mexican war. As Charles Carnegie succinctly describes it, "Borders summon when centers oppress more relentlessly or else when centers begin to crumble" (v). Ishmael's fictional expedition to the sea in a mid-

nineteenth-century novel is a desperate call for border crossings in a time when border surveillance became an indispensable tool for performing a self-enclosed nationalism in America.

It is thus not surprising that Agha Shahid Ali, a Kashmiri American poet at the tail-end of the twentieth century chose to return to the name of Ishmael to chart his own memories of a far-away borderland in the Indian subcontinent while living in America. Ananya Jahanara Kabir describes Ali's homeland, Kashmir, as follows: "locked within inhospitable terrain, but professed by all to be a singularly beautiful place, the Valley has, in the course of the twentieth century, emerged as a bone of contention for three nationalisms, Indian, Pakistani and aspirant Kashmiri" (1). The Kashmir valley has been a disputed territory between India and Pakistan since the time of the formation of these two separate nation-states in 1947. Decades of conflicting nationalist desires of India and Pakistan led to a violent moment of self-assertion by the Kashmiris in the late 1980s. Their call for *Azadi* (freedom) in 1989 came in the shape of revolutionary violence which was swiftly answered by the nation-state apparatus of India in the form of exceedingly violent military and paramilitary action. Kashmir soon became one of the most heavily patrolled and militarized zones in the world. Persistent "class-based instrumentalization of religion" (Kabir 10) escalated tensions between the two major religious communities from the region, Hindus and Muslims, and led to an exodus of the Hindu Pandits from the valley. Caught between the territorial desires of two nation-states, the Kashmiri desire for sovereignty got transformed into a borderland of conflict and terror and, in Kabir's words, "Disappeared youth, raped women, intracommunal breakdown, interrupted childhoods, traumatized soldiers, and above all the thickness of rumor turned the region into a veritable 'space of death'" (9-10).

Agha Shahid Ali's poetry is a provocative invitation for a visit without a passport to this "country without a post office" in the hope that the "entire map of the lost will be candled" and that the "deaf worlds across continents" (*Country* 50-51) would hear once again the laments of a land torn apart by communal and state violence. While constructing the powerful imagery of social ostracism and liminality through the figure of the "atravesado," Anzaldúa creates a "mythos" of subjectivity where "I write the myths in me, the myths I am, the myths I want to become" (71). This mythical "I" is an exploration of the physical and psychological borderlands of selfhood where the "prohibited and the forbidden" need to be rehabilitated and negotiated through a "total self." Like Anzaldúa, Ali is also an "atravesado" who inhabits both an imaginary and a real borderland, Kashmir, which becomes "a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue

of an unnatural boundary” (Anzaldúa 3) in the poetic mappings of his identity. In order to acquaint us with both the “blood” and “rubies” on the “Himalayan snow,” Ali metamorphosizes into a wandering cartographer revisiting Kashmir’s historico-cultural plenitude and its slow erosion into a desert of contesting political desires. His “total self” contains mythical and historical traditions of both Kashmiri Hindu and Muslim communities which are interwoven with multiple threads of transnational cultures to counter the totalizing forces of territorial politics.

Ali’s dual commitment to aesthetics and politics—to the local and the global—is also clearly visible in his English ghazals where he takes an Indo-Persian lyric form and uses its usual tropes of love, desire, longing, separation, and loss to express both his individual and Kashmir’s difficult relationship with borders. “Practices of displacement might emerge,” as James Clifford notes, “as *constitutive* of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extension” (3). When Ali speaks of belonging in the context of Kashmir in his hybrid ghazals, his words are already circumscribed by the question of longing. This structure of longing and belonging replicates the diasporic desire for an imaginary homeland and complicates the trauma of physical displacement and exile. Ali’s poetry is a complex journey of understanding how to write or speak about a land and its people not simply separated by physical dislocation or spatial distance, but by historical and political processes that make aliens out of natives on their own soil. His verses take our attention towards the processes of “internal colonialism” and seek “to explain the subordinate status of a racial or ethnic group in its own homeland within the boundaries of a larger state dominated by a different people” (Chávez 786). Ali thus speaks of a temporal and spatial disjunction between the lived experience of Kashmiris and its representation that has constantly turned them into objects—of state policy and civil society alike—and strips them of their agency.

Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry is a quest for a language which can overcome hegemonic mechanisms within discourse and representation that hijack people’s memories to create state policies or religious ideologies and reduce the burden of reminiscences into either political agendas or propaganda. He constantly reminds us how the political turmoil and the violence of past few decades not only stripped Kashmir of its entire claim to sovereignty, but it also took from its inhabitants the possibility of being sovereign subjects in the realm of discourse. For Ali, establishing the sovereign domain of memory is more than a question of aesthetic freedom for the poet. It is primarily a political act of clearing out a conceptual space for welcoming memories of individuals and allowing them to coalesce and bind into a collective social memory. His verses are remnants of a shared past that slowly cross over communal boundaries and national

borders in the collective act of remembering. While Ali's voice merges with that of Ishmael from both Bible and *Moby Dick*, it also intersects with many other voices—both canonical and anonymous—to create a poetic subjectivity that is a conglomeration of many selves and is always heteroglossic in its articulation of desires. These hybrid utterances range from those of a Pakistani poet like Faiz Ahmed Faiz to an Indian ghazal singer like Begum Akhtar to overcome divisions of nationality and gender and to create a “poetics of bricolage and translocation, dissonance and defamiliarization” which defies “the national literary genealogies into which it is often pressed” (Ramazani 333).

The physical “Line of Control” (LOC) between India and Pakistan is “a border that is not quite a border” and is “laminated with messages contrary to the map’s usual iteration of the nation-state’s boundedness” (Kabir 8). Rather than affirming geographic certainty, it embodies nation state’s “continuing inability to confirm its borders by defeating rival claimants to its desired territory” (Kabir 9). Using Gloria Anzaldúa’s image for “la frontera,” Kabir calls the LOC in Kashmir an “open wound” which keeps haemorrhaging to let the “lifeblood of two worlds” merge into “a third country” (Anzaldúa 25). In Agha Shahid Ali’s collection *The Country without a Post Office*, each verse underlines the impossibility of writing on Kashmir without entering a LOC which not only operates at the level of political borders, but, given the conditions of an exceedingly complicated history of the region, circumscribes any act of writing through the silences that have come to permeate the transnational public sphere on the question of Kashmir as a borderland. Ali breaks the international silence on the Kashmir question and acquaints his transnational audience with this “third country” through a Hindu myth where Shiva carves the valley as a paisley in order to commemorate his reunion with his wife, Parvati. Along with being the setting of a divine romance, this “third” space is also a war zone formed between the grating borders of two disjunctive worlds of India and Pakistan. In *Rooms are Never Finished*, Ali presents Kashmir as Karbala, the sacred site of battle and martyrdom in Islamic Shiite tradition, in order to underscore the loss of uncountable innocent lives in the quest for nationalist self-determination. Such revisionist religious imagery not only overcomes the strict communal boundaries in the Indian subcontinent by cathecting Kashmir as an object of impossible desires, it also opens up Kashmir as a “third country” for hybrid, transnational “citizens of imaginative webs formed by cross-national reading and rewriting” (Ramazani 354).

In his collection of English ghazals, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, Ali’s imagery takes a different turn when he reiterates Melville and asks his reader to call him Ishmael for just one night while beckoning her to join him on an imaginary journey to

Kashmir both as an émigré and an exile. With the free-moving global financial and cultural capital, it is not uncommon nowadays to associate border crossings with spaces for hybrid identities and aesthetic exchanges that destabilize monolithic canons and homogenized nationalities. However, as Shalini Puri tells us, rather than converting “abstract hybridity into an epistemological principle” (20), it is more relevant in the postcolonial context to look for ways for connecting “poetics of hybridity to a politics of equality” by remaining “attentive to the interpenetrations, accommodations, and negotiations of the material and the symbolic as well as to the range of hybrid identities” (25). Ali pays close attention to such injunctions by remaining aesthetically and politically committed to reflecting intercultural energies and transnational mobilities in his poetry. More importantly, he connects these hybridized moments of aesthetic expression with a historicized and localized understanding of the postcolonial condition by weaving Judaeo-Christian and Islamic meanings of Ishmael’s exile, for instance, with the dystopian vision of modernity in *Moby Dick* to create a poetic haven for the troubled memories of a “burning” Kashmir.

At times, Ali’s poetic fragments are personal memories of not only Kashmir, but of a Kashmiri remembering other places and spaces as imaginary maps for border crossings. In the opening poem of *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, Ali visits Delhi, the city of his birth and the capital of India, in a “lost memory” and knocks incessantly on his parents’ door, but they remain oblivious to his knocking and existence. In later poems in the same collection, he walks up to a butcher in Old Delhi and they exchange blood and meat along with couplets and ink from the sheets of an old newspaper. He walks into a bustling marketplace and recites the following couplet that the last Mughal emperor of India, Bahadur Shah Zafar wrote during his exile: “Unfortunate Zafar / spent half his life in hope / the other half waiting / He begs for two yards of Delhi for burial” (25). These fleeting images of deaf parents, blood-soaked newspapers and a forgotten plea of an exiled king are all signposts for the nation-state’s territorial desire for Kashmir that has only translated into an unfulfilled promise for the people from the valley. With these stolen memories, however, Ali engages in a discursive manoeuvre of reterritorializing the capital city and rehabilitating invisible voices from the margins in the otherwise hermetically-sealed borders of the national imagination.

Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry is often a contract of “shared cultural memory that transpires, briefly, between the returned émigré and the rooted native” (Tageldin 253). In *A Nostalgist’s Map of America*, Ali takes us on a journey across America through imaginary conversations between an exile and a resident. In an interview with Eric Gamalinda, Ali admits that his experience is not that of an exile since he

wasn't forced to immigrate to America for any political reasons. Rather, his affinity to the idea of exile is "temperamental" because of its "emotional resonance" for his writing: "The ability to inhabit several circumstances and several historical and national backgrounds simultaneously makes up the exilic temperament a lot, especially of this past century and this continuing new century." For Ali, the creation of the diasporic imagination is "not through a definitive relation to place, but through formations of temporality, affect, and corporeality" (Axel 412). His ability to slip into disparate landscapes as a border crosser and oscillate between the ease of the resident and the distance of the outsider is most evident in his creation of an imaginary city called "Evanescence" on the map of America. As he tells us parenthetically, he had to "build" this city since "America was without one" (*Nostalgist's* 37). Within this poem, according to Amy Newman, "landscape resolves and dissolves in a series of mirages, underlining beauty and then its disappearance, as Ali makes nascent moves toward a larger appreciation of the depths of personal loss." Evanescence is a private city of pain and loss built in the memory of a friend, but it also points to the shared experience of diaspora where "India always exists off the turnpikes of America" and "the city limits of Evanescence" (*Nostalgist's* 41, 39) are everywhere. With the shifting images of freeways and speeding cars, the diasporic desire is no longer contingent on a fetishized originary homeland, but on the transient and vaporous moments of remembering "a world without footprints" (*Nostalgist's* 31).

Ali's mapping of personal and collective memories onto different geographical landscapes is a project of archiving history. This cartography of nostalgia, however, is not a simple act of historiography. As Susannah Radstone suggests, "historiography has been shaped by the linearity and the cause-and-effect structure of realist narrative," while memory's temporalities—"the non-linearity, circularity or timelessness of memory"—challenge history and its writing (138). Ali constantly returns to official recordings of events as dream states in order to interrupt their linearity and to rupture the artifice of mainstream history. He revisits places and dates to make his words witnesses of loss and trauma that goes unrecorded in bureaucratic statistics of death. His poems transform themselves into eyewitness narratives which insist on "the importance of individual experience against the crushingly impersonal forces of history" (Wallen 261). This transformation is most evident in *Rooms are Never Finished* where Ali maps the personal loss of his mother onto the devastation of his childhood home, Kashmir. While archival records reduce the violence against Kashmiris to objective information of a distant atrocity, Ali's poetic re-remembering of the journey back to Kashmir with his mother's body brings to life all the horrors and makes his first-person narrative

voice the bearer of all the psychological and physical traces of trauma and death. The elegiac syncretism of Ali's poetry along with the intense experience of losing his mother creates a unique subjective perspective on the history of Kashmir which "insists that *we* remember, and no longer be allowed to forget, what has been lived through and suffered by others" (Wallen 262).

In an interview with Suvir Kaul, Ali explains his affinity towards the opening sentence of *Moby Dick* "Call me Ishmael." For him, it is a powerful imperative which fits in well with the ending of the novel when Ishmael says he alone has survived to tell this tale. With this newfound power of navigating memory through speech, Melville's Ishmael is no longer the biblical Ishmael who became a victim of patriarchal will and was condemned to aimless wandering in the desert. Despite his long exile at sea, Ishmael is suddenly empowered as a witness of a tale known only to him. In Ali's words, this constitutes a rare moment in literature where "you find the mythic pattern—one person survives to tell a tale." Ali also fits himself in this mythical pattern of reactivating a lost archive as a solitary witness by defining his *takhallus* (pen name), Shahid, in a ghazal as "The Belovéd" in Persian and "witness" in Arabic (*Country* 74). The poet Agha Shahid Ali, however, did not survive to tell the entire tale of Kashmir. He died in 2001 in Amherst, Massachusetts, far away from his beloved childhood home. Nevertheless, by speaking to us as Ishmael, the witness, and by chronicling his life as Shahid, the exile, Ali gifts us a Kashmir accessible only to him in a voice partitioned into many selves navigating the ever-shifting borders of language and history in order to write:

And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee --
God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight. (*Country* 40)

Works Cited

- "Agha Shahid Ali, 14 Years Ago." Interview by Suvir Kaul. *The Kashmir Walla*. Web 7 Aug 2011. <http://www.thekashmirwalla.com/2011/08/gha-shahid-ali-interviewed-in-1997/>.
- Ali, Agha Shahid. *The Country without a Post Office*. New York: Norton, 1997.
- _____. *The Final Collections*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004.
- _____. *The Half-Inch Himalayas*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987.
- _____. *A Nostalgist's Map of America*. New York: Norton, 1991.
- _____. *Rooms are Never Finished*. New York: Norton, 2002.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinster/Aunt Lute, 1987.
- Axel, Brian Keith. "The Diasporic Imaginary." *Public Culture* 14.2 (2002): 411-428.

-
- Carnegie, Charles. "Reaching for the Border." *Small Axe* 10.1 (2006): v-ix.
- Chávez, John R. "Aliens in Their Native Lands: The Persistence of Internal Colonial Theory" *Journal of World History* 22.4 (2011): 785-805.
- Clifford, James. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- "An Interview With Poet Agha Shahid Ali." Interview by Eric Gamalinda. *Poets & Writers*. Web 1 Jan 2002. http://www.pw.org/content/interview_poet_gha_shahid_ali?cmnt_all=1.
- Kabir, Ananya Jahanara. *Territory of Desire: Representing the Valley of Kashmir*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.
- Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick, or, the Whale*. New York: Vintage Books/Library of America, 1991.
- Newman, Amy. "'Separation's Geography': Agha Shahid Ali's Scholarship of Evanescence." *Hollins Critic* 43.2 (2006). *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 7 Jan 2012.
- Puri, Shalini. *The Caribbean Postcolonial: Social Equality, Post-Nationalism, and Cultural Hybridity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Radstone, Susannah. "Reconceiving Binaries: the Limits of Memory." *History Workshop Journal* 59.1 (2005): 134-150.
- Ramazani, Jahan. "A Transnational Poetics." *American Literary History* 18.2 (2006): 332-339.
- Tageldin, Shaden M. "Reversing the Sentence of Impossible Nostalgia: The Poetics of Postcolonial Migration in Sakinna Boukhedenna and Agha Shahid Ali." *Comparative Literature Studies* 40.2 (2003): 232-264.
- Wallen, Jeffrey. "Narrative Tensions: The Archive and the Eyewitness." *Partial Answers* 7.2 (2009): 261-278.