

Mapping of Diaspora Milieu: Spatial Dimensions of Agha Shahid Ali's Select Poems

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study the spatial dimensions in the poems of Indian diasporic writer late Agha Shahid Ali who emigrated from Kashmir to America. Agha Shahid Ali narrates the experience of 'transcendental homelessness' exhibiting the original exilic resonance of the experience of diaspora. Analysing his poems from a spatial perspective, this paper traces out the mapping of space and place as visible in the writings of Agha Shahid Ali's poems with reference to the diasporic experiences.

Keywords: Agha Shahid Ali, diaspora, literary spaces, cognitive mapping, cartography.

For certain components and parts of the literary space, customary mapping clearly has its limitations. At times the content conveys a few signs about the traverse of the characters while the remainder of the course stays actually in obscurity. In fact, the structure of literary space is fragmentary. This applies considerably more for dynamic components inside the described space like courses and paths. For one character's walking around a city there are many choices, particularly if the main indication the content offers is an obscure one. Clearly it can't be the plan to reproduce and trace such a path in a pseudo-exact way. Another serious issue is brought about by the classification of totally imaginary literary spaces with no reference to the geospace.

There are three characteristics intrinsic to the mapping of literary spaces. Most importantly, there must be an understanding about referentiality among geospace and printed

spaces. Fictional spaces don't need to, however can highlight references towards the geospace. In addition, it's a reality, that the authors and readers are enticed by the alternative of locating writings by one way or another in their genuine world. Then again, creators likewise enjoy making completely new universes with absolutely non-existent settings. These feeble and dominant correspondences among geospace and printed space must be considered.

Secondly, described spaces don't have definite demarcated boundaries. For the most part, cartography works with hard limits to show the edges of the space mapped. A spot or the points of confinement of one component mapped can be precisely depicted. In any case, when mapping writing, a tentative limit may be increasingly proper, whereby less precise definitions about where precisely the boundaries of a world of a specific bit of writing closes.

Finally, fiction is once in a while difficult to locate, whereby settings are found pointing to some place, with no exact correspondences to a given segment of the geospace. This creates an issue for cartographers. Cartographers should chase for pieces of information about area, pursue deduced courses and separate limits which will not accord to usual cartographic principles.

The topography of fiction must be portrayed as a fairly uncertain geography. Furthermore, it must be brought up, that there are for all intents and purposes boundless conceivable outcomes in literature. One can make any space, thus there's the need to separate these potential outcomes into a cognizant framework. The explicit objective is to unmistakably render the particular topography of writing, yet in a most reasonable way, by offering appreciation to the rationale of fictional space. Thus attempting, some parts of the geography of writing may demonstrate to be unmappable. This is an alternate geography to delineate, necessitating the investigation and advancement of alternative mapping methods.

Cognitive mapping according to Jameson deals with theorizing the relations between literary forms and social formations and it serves as a model for literary cartography and this can be perceived as a suitable alternative to map literary spaces without reference to geospaces.

Cognitive mapping sometimes refers to an individual subject's attempt to locate his or her position within a complex social organization or spatial milieu, as in the case with a single person who is walking around in an unfamiliar city, attempting to gain a concrete sense of place in relation to various other places on a mental map. This conception reveals how cognitive mapping could be a crucial method by which to overcome the real anxiety of being lost, in the most urgent everyday sense as well as the more philosophical or existential sense. (Tally 68)

This anxiety of being lost is similar to the idea expressed by Lukacs. "George Lukács introduces a spatio-temporal literary term called 'transcendental homelessness' as a way to describe 'the urge to be at home everywhere' but which the modern condition disrupts as a 'totality'" (Gladwin 175). Lukacs sees writing as a response to a condition of 'transcendental homelessness' and this tendency is evinced in the writings of the diasporic community.

Indians in bunches have engaged in this process of moving to and finding a niche in places abroad for long. In the contemporary times, the vast majority of such travails occurred during the nineteenth century when the British frontier organization sent groups of Indians to work in other British states as obligated work. This led to the formation of Indian diasporas in many places including Mauritius, Malaysia and Sri Lanka, Fiji in the Pacific Ocean area many places in the Caribbean Sea region. The improvement of the economies of the settlements made work openings abroad for gatherings of individuals having a place with either a network or then again, an area. Cohen says, "If, however, among overseas workers

there is evidence over time of (a) a strong retention of group ties sustained over an extended period (in respect of language, religion, endogamy and cultural norms); (b) a myth of and connection to a homeland; and (c) significant levels of social exclusion in the destination societies, a labour diaspora can be said to exist.”(61)

The labour emigrants were one category that comprised the Indian diaspora and the other category was the free emigrants, also known as ‘passenger Indians’. These were for the most part gifted workers or petty business men who came to investigate the conceivable outcomes tossed open by advancement of these provinces. Various Gujarati ‘dukawallas’ in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania in East Africa, a few gatherings of individuals in South Africa and then some late movements at the beginning of twentieth century to United States of America, Canada and the United Kingdom and still more as of late relocation to the Middle East went under this type of movement. It might be huge to see here that at the outset, constantly, the labourers were not permitted to either bring their families with them or send for them later.

Again, since the vast majority of the relocations under some structure were never well-considered and arranged and were required by either financial crumbling back home or were incited by bait of the lucre, the gatherings of individuals didn’t attempt to make the important changes in their socio-cultural world view. All things considered, the majority of them treated these areas abroad as simply impermanent and time-bound.

An expression of the experiences of these expatriates as narrated by their second generation is reflected through the diaspora oeuvre. They tried to voice their concerns and apprehensions over fragmented identity, cultural hybridity and homelessness. Thus the writings of the diaspora, especially the Indian diaspora constitute an important part of the burgeoning field of anglophone postcolonial literature. Some of the better-known authors in

this archive include V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, Agha Shahid Ali, Anita Desai, M.G. Vassanji, Shyam Selvadurai, and Kiran Desai. The growing international visibility of these authors is a clear marker of the acclaim that is solicited by the diaspora writings. This paper seeks to analyse the mapping of space and place as visible in diaspora writings with reference to Agha Shahid Ali's poems. The poems of Ali are viewed within a diasporic perspective that tries to shed off the sense of 'transcendental homelessness'.

The writings of Indian diaspora are marked by either a sense of longing for the homeland or a spirit of reconciliation with the host country. The migrants' dream of home and perceptions of belonging are grounded in memories of prior home and by the notions of "where 'we' have come from" (Stock 24). It is quite interesting to note that there are manifestations of different reactions toward the diaspora experience as delineated by writers. Diaspora writings are often marked by the way in which they purport the mapping of their homeland. Often this mapping of space is abetted by imagination and hence the homeland that is depicted is an idealised version of the geospace. "The space of the narrative purports to be a representation of the world and he, the rhapsode, is the one who eidea semainei, who indicates the forms, who makes things seen, who reveals; he is the one who knows" (Hartog 355). For Hartog, the narrator of these texts becomes a rhapsode, a weaver who sews spaces into a new unity. For the writers of diaspora their homeland exists in connection with their host country. It is their host country that they take as their point of reference as they often have little knowledge about their homeland and its geographical condition.

The writings of diaspora are never free from the shuttling between homeland and the host land as the writers are often defined between these endpoints. They can never find themselves settled or positioned at one place. Brah explains it very well when she wrote, "It

is quite possible to feel at home in a place and, yet, the experience of social exclusion may inhibit public proclamations of the place as home.” (Brah 193). This necessitates the creation of a space that they can possibly profess to exist.

Agha Shahid Ali was one such poet who tried to create a space of his own through the poems that he penned down. The critic Bruce King remarked that Ali’s poetry turns around insecurity and “obsessions [with]... memory, death, history, family ancestors, nostalgia for a past he never knew, dreams, Hindu ceremonies, friendships, and self-consciousness about being a poet” (2). Ali views his expatriation as an exile and during the time of detachment he becomes passionate about his homeland. “On the one hand, ‘home’ is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality” (Brah 188). He starts recreating a remembered space as imagined, a place of desire and something that is removed from reality. “I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight” is positively transmitting ideas of a utopia that Ali has in his mind. Ali is in a perpetual search to locate his self within the space that he recreates. The places that he had left behind are still triggering the conception of poetry. He is trying to place him within the spaces on the edge of the Cantonment where the Gupkar Road ends. The idea of a bodiless shadow chased is eerie though it facilitates easy unnoticed mobility. The poet might be pointing to the lingering of his soul in his homeland trying to create a space.

From Zero Bridge

a shadow chased by searchlights is running
away to find its body. On the edge
of the Cantonment, where Gupkar Road ends,
it shrinks almost into nothing, is

nothing by Interrogation gates
so it can slip, unseen, into the cells:
Drippings from a suspended burning tire
Are falling on the back of a prisoner,
the naked boy screaming, “I know nothing.” (“I see”)

The space demarcated by Ali is a place that celebrates hybridity and plurality that is the hallmark of the country of his birth. Brah says that “diaspora refers to a ‘dispersion from’.

Hence the word embodies a notion of a centre, a locus, a ‘home’ from where the dispersion occurs. It invokes images of multiple journeys” (178). Diaspora experience can be identified as a journey in search for the place where the dispersed can be rerooted. Ali depicts the new place as characterised by eclecticism and compositeness. Hutnyk opines that “hybridity appears as a convenient category at ‘the edge’ or contact point of diaspora, describing cultural mixture where the diasporized meets the host in the scene of migration” (59). Ali has travelled from Kashmir to America and though he is quite far away he is deeply affected by everything that happens to Kashmir.

The title of the poem “The Country without a Post Office” is derived from an occurrence that happened in 1990, when Kashmir defied Indian rule, bringing about many frightful and fierce passing, flames, and mass assaults. Though away within the sheltered limits of America, through dreams and visions, the broken images of his faraway homeland frequented his memory. He never wanted to be free of the memories and sense of belonging he had in relation to Kashmir. The poem is loaded up with repeating expressions and words and with frequenting pictures of longing and desire, which bring out the agony of one who battles to comprehend what’s going on in his own land and heart.

In the imaginative sojourn, the poet speaker comes back to his country, Kashmir, where a “minaret has been entombed.” A hint at the reality has been made as the writer exposes the shocking situation of Kashmir, which has been confronting communal clashes since 1990s. The viciousness in the state has been so widespread and grisly that individuals move to the plain areas, or become refugees by leaving their familial properties. The Kashmir Valley, which is otherwise called “Paradise” for its magnificence, today has become the valley of death of innocent Hindus and Muslims.

Jameson comments that narrative is the “central function or instance of the human mind” (13), and so to follow a narrative implies to develop a spatiotemporal understanding about the world it describes. This holds good for poetry as well and closely following the verse we get to know the space that is described and mapped out by the poet. *The Country without a Post Office* is in fact a mapping of the detestable space or dystopia that is represented by the state of Kashmir. The poet speaker finds instances of oppression and denial of freedom. The post office where heaps of letters remain is pointing to the unfavourable and heinous machinery of the state. A space is delineated that is hopeless and dark. There is no fruitful action and no meaningful exchange. The poet tries to trace a way out setting a contrast with the last few lines of the poem, when it becomes personal and the speaker states, “I want to live forever”.

But there’s no sun here. There is no sun here.

Then be pitiless you whom I could not save—

Send your cries to me, if only in this way:

I’ve found a prisoner’s letters to a lover—

One begins: “These words may never reach you.”

Another ends: “The skin dissolves in dew

without your touch.” And I want to answer:

I want to live forever. What else can I say?

It rains as I write this. Mad heart, be brave. (“The Country”)

In Agha Shahid Ali’s poem “The Country without a Post Office”, each stanza underlines the difficulty of composing on Kashmir without entering a LOC which not just works at the degree of political fringes, but, given the states of an exceedingly convoluted history of the locale, encircles any act of writing through the quietness that have come to permeate the transnational public circle on the subject of Kashmir as a borderland. He successfully voices the Kashmir question and succeeds in portraying Kashmir as a space that is set apart from both India and Pakistan.

In *Rooms are Never Finished*, Kashmir is depicted as Karbala, a sacred spot of fight and martyrdom for the Muslims. The religious imageries in poem also opens up Kashmir as a “third country” for hybrid, transnational “citizens of imaginative webs formed by cross-national reading and rewriting” (Ramazani 354). There is a frequent shift to and fro between present and past and between home and exile evincing the poet’s desire to locate himself within some framework. “From Amherst to Kashmir” narrates the return of his mother’s body to Kashmir for burial. The spatial demarcation from Amherst to Kashmir is consciously made as an effort to map the personal loss of his mother as something akin to the devastation of his homeland, Kashmir. In “Lenox Hill”, he depicts an incessant shifting of the scenes between Amherst and Kashmir, between his mother’s youth in Kashmir and her present situation. “At dawn, my mother/ heard, in her hospital-dream of elephants, / sirens wail through Manhattan like elephants/ forced off Pir Panjal’s rock cliffs in Kashmir.” (“Lenox Hill”) The intense sense of loss and the trauma of having to face the loss of a dear mother that is powerfully and

efficaciously depicted by Ali “insists that we remember, and no longer be allowed to forget, what has been lived through and suffered by others” (Wallen 262).

“With relation to diaspora, the most conventional accounts assert hybridity as the process of cultural mixing where the diasporic arrivals adopt aspects of the host culture and rework, reform and reconfigure this in production of a new hybrid culture or ‘hybrid identities’” (Chambers 50). In “A Nostalgist’s Map of America”, an imaginary place “Evanescence” is created and he creates it stating a reason; “America was without one”. According to Amy Newman, in this poem the “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.” Through the imaginary conversations between the resident and the exile, Ali reveals his hybrid identity that serves him to perceive landscapes and spaces both as a resident and an outsider. This becomes possible as Ali was not forced into exile. “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).

The principal segment of *The Half-Inch Himalayas* is deliberately arranged. The eight poems move from the Himalayas of tribal and racial sources and his dad’s Kashmir down to the fields of India of his mom’s side of the family, the fields of the incomparable Urdu culture that went before Partition. “The Season of the Plains” talks about his mom’s youth in Lucknow, the music and the seasons, particularly the storms (which seldom happen in Kashmir). Inside the edge of the writer’s dreams and recollections happen the recollections his mom may have had. History rehashes itself even in her recalling of similar records and

music he will celebrate. Despite the fact that Lucknow was a focal point of Islamic culture his mom recollects and acknowledges music about Krishna, “that invisible/blue god” (“The Season”). The India of his vision is the Muslim-Hindu India of Northern India before the Partition. There are likewise poems on his grandma’s life and religious conviction, as spoke to by the “Prayer Rug”, and the extraordinary specialties of the Indian past, as spoke to by “The Dacca Gauzes”, destroyed by British imperialism and never from that point forward rehearsed with a similar aptitude.

“Postcard from Kashmir” shows a different depiction of space as something shrunk into the size of a postcard. The poet maps his existence in relation with the space that he sees on the postcard and realises how remote he is from his homeland. He comes to a reconciliation with the realisation that he can never go back to find a place in Kashmir even if he wishes to. He identifies Kashmir as his home that he suffers an exile from and to where he never anticipates a return. It is a profound feel of exile that he suffers and he is sure that he cannot overcome this sense though he decides to return. The space of his contented existence is clearly defined as “a neat four by six inches” (“Postcard”). Though he attempts to mark the space using the fragments of his memory, he finds that the space fades out and he cannot clearly depict the homeland that he once knew. He realises that “when he returns, / the colors won’t be so brilliant” (“Postcard”).

Agha Shahid Ali, through his poems mapped a space that was exclusively attributive of the diasporic identity that he possessed. The attempts that he made through his poems were to free his self from the ‘transcendental homelessness’ of an exile. The mapping of space through his poems evinces that he had been in a perpetual search of a homeland which he could never realise. Kashmir and Amherst were points of reference and his longings for identifying a pattern for his locale seemed to shuttle between these two points. It is from this

end that we identify the cartography of nostalgia as a predominant trait in his writings. The space that he identifies and sets apart for himself is one that cannot be classified or labelled as belonging to Muslim, Hindu, Indian or American. Ali succeeds in portraying a space in which his poems are deep rooted. The space thus mapped corresponds to the real geospaces, replaces the imagined mental spaces and at times is situated mid-way between the real and the imagined. Thus, the space that he renders is the one that is accessible only to him and that which is segmented and which shifts across borders transcending the confines imposed upon it.

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