

**Reminiscing Kashmir in the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali****Umair Hyder**

Research Scholar,  
Department of English Language and Literature,  
Islamic University of Science and Technology.  
Email: [umairhyder1921@gmail.com](mailto:umairhyder1921@gmail.com)  
Contact: 7780835765

**Abstract**

Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001) is appraised as one of the most charismatic poets from Kashmir. He considered himself part of several cultures, including Kashmiri, Indian, and Western, but he preferred to be called a Kashmiri-American poet. His poetry effectively captures his attachment to his native land, and his poems are replete with memories of Kashmir. The paper attempts to investigate how Agha Shahid Ali's memory of Kashmir influenced the themes and literary techniques of his poetry. He relies on his memories of Kashmir while away from home because they seem to be the only consolation in exile to compensate for the loss. His poetry offers an insight into his transition from one culture and home to another. Through poetry, he attempts to recover the loss of his culture and home while writing about it. The paper explores Ali's interaction with Kashmir while living in exile, such as how it affects his sense of homelessness and how he uses memory to locate it. The paper reads Ali's select poems in the context of Memory Studies. Memory studies emerged as an academic field to study the role of memory and its manifestation in literary texts. Literature plays an integral part in displaying memory as a narrative tool for expressing diverse social, political, and cultural themes.

**Keywords:** memory, Kashmir, diaspora, homelessness, culture, loss, exile, identity

**Introduction**

By encoding it into aesthetic forms such as narrative structures, symbols, and metaphors, literature can depict individual and collective memory, its contents, its workings, its fragility and its distortions. Fictional versions of memory are distinguished by their dynamic relationship to the memory concepts of other symbol systems, such as psychology, religion, history, and sociology: they are shaped by them and in turn, shape them; they may perpetuate old or anticipate new images of remembering and forgetting. This close relationship between literature and social discourses of memory has been apparent at least since the modernist writings of Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf. In "memory novels" such as Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), ideas about the individual memory that were popular at the turn of the

twentieth century (e.g., Sigmund Freud's concept of the unconscious and Henri Bergson's *memoire involontaire*) are staged with specifically literary forms, such as free indirect discourse and a complex time structure.

Concerning the memories of violent histories, such as war, terror, and genocide, the potential and limitations of literary depiction are assessed. Recent comparative studies have examined the literary memory of international wars, colonialism and decolonisation, authoritarian regimes, genocide, and global terrorism. 9/11 can be conceptualised as a global traumatic event. It has produced a vast volume of Anglophone writing that attempts to give literary form to its influence on cultural memory (e.g., the novels by Don De Lillo, Jonathan Safran Foer, Moshin Hamid, and Ian McEwan). The Holocaust, however, takes centre stage in expressing horrific pasts through literature and other artistic mediums.

Postcolonial studies, with its emphasis on the persistence or working through the colonial past, can provide significant insights to individuals interested in transcultural memory. Important themes, such as "writing back," and "colonial nostalgia," manifest a vivid memory dimension. A defining element of New English Literature, for instance, is that it frequently represents and constructs transcultural memory. The "transcultural" is thus not only a category for studying memory in our current globalising era but also a perspective on memory that can be chosen in principle for all historical periods and concerning both the synchronic circulation of representations and the diachronic dimension of memory.

### **Reconfiguring Home: The Poetics of Home and Displacement in Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry**

Agha Shahid Ali, like Osip Mandelstam and Mahmoud Darwish, is regarded as a poet of exile because his poetry highlights the impact of exile and the transformations the poet's home endures in his absence. He is regarded as one of Kashmir's most dynamic poets; however, unlike the others, he was never exiled. Shahid immigrated to the United States by choice. He was just a migrant, unlike Darwish, Mandelstam, and Joseph Brodsky, who were exiled by a nation-state or an ethnoreligious community. Ali's poetry shows a whirlwind of feelings and memories around his fractured "home" as he recalls, recovers, and rewrites his hometown of Kashmir from his diasporic place in the United States. Ali's painful lyrical memorialisation of Kashmir, his heartrending lyric, and his cultural loss provide insights into understandings and negotiations of home and relocation, as well as their intersections. The metaphor of memory, both as a theme and as an integral part of the form and structure of Ali's poetry, is essential to understanding his conceptions of home. Kashmir, to which he

traced his ancestry and irrevocably influenced his identity and poetry, is one of the various overlapping constructions and recollections of “home” in Ali’s poetry. They also include Delhi, “the city where he was born, educated, taught, and published his first collection of poems,” which appears in more than two dozen of his poems and for which he “expresses tremendous nostalgia and affection” (Qadeer, p. 1–2).

In postcolonial discourse, the concept of “home” as a familiar environment of security, comfort, and belonging has been deconstructed for some time. For the Kashmiri migrant like Ali, born shortly after India’s independence and bearing the imprint of Kashmir’s unique post-1947 history of entangled and contested nationalistic claims and affiliations, expressed through decades of violent conflict, “home” becomes an even more contested territory, a site of fragmentation and rupture. In Kashmir, the factors intrinsic to the concept of “home,” such as cultural identity, language, religion, and geopolitical borders, manifest as contested and tense places.

Ali’s poetry simultaneously repositions and reconfigures the concept of “home” while emphasising the loss and impossibility of recovery embedded in the concept. It reinvents his home through many journeys across spaces, languages, and forms. His poetry traverses numerous experiential, cultural, and intellectual levels and is renowned for its skilful allusions to European, Urdu, Arabic, and Persian literary traditions. Thus, Ali’s lyrical imagination exposes itself during a journey en route, where it is at home. Transcultural encounters and influences have shaped his cultural identity. Ali has described his cultural ties as “tripartite” (Kaul, 2011), formed by “variations of Hindu, Muslim, and Western traditions” (Benvenuto, p. 267). Regarding his poetic identity, he stated, “You are a cosmos; you are the result of tremendous historical forces” (Ansari and Pal 1998). According to Abin Chakraborty, this type of plurality “is not only of his sensibility or his familiar background, but also of the larger cultural plurality that is associated with the ethnolinguistic entity of ‘Kashmiriyat’” (Chakraborty, p. 60), the distinctive, syncretic cultural heritage of Kashmir, which combines, among others, Muslim, Hindu, Sufi, and Buddhist traditions.

### **Framing Kashmir: Desire and Loss**

Haris Qadeer remarked that “Shahid’s reputation as an exiled poet is so well-established” that “the poet’s name has practically become synonymous with Kashmir” (Qadeer, p. 2). Akhil Katyal observes that his name “almost indexes the terms ‘Kashmir’ and ‘America’ (Katyal 2011). The lost Kashmiri home looms large and persists in Ali’s creative imagination. This is

demonstrated, for instance, by the brief lyric “Postcard from Kashmir” from his early book *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (Ali 1987). Kashmir in Ali’s poetic recuperation, as revealed in this poem, highlights the linkages between home, memory, and displacement (both spatial and temporal), alluding to the intricate web of relationships between space, time, and memory that characterises most of Ali’s poetry.

“Postcard from Kashmir”

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,  
My home a neat four by six inches.  
I always loved neatness. Now I hold  
The half-inch Himalayas in my hand.  
This is home. And this the closest  
I’ll ever be to home. When I return,  
The colours won’t be so brilliant,  
The Jhelum’s waters so clean,  
So ultramarine. My love  
So overexposed.  
And my memory will be a little  
Out of focus, in it  
A giant negative, black  
And white, still undeveloped (pp. 1–14).

Ali uses the vivid metaphor of a postcard arriving in his presumably American mailbox from Kashmir to convey his physical and emotional isolation from Kashmir in this poem. The appearance of the postcard “increases his feeling of separation from home, leaving him holding ‘the half-inch Himalayas in his hand’” (Nelson, p. 2). The miniature representation of his Himalayan house in his palm, both tokenised and sanitised by the idyllic image on the postcard, highlights the disparity between the postcard’s superficial, one-dimensional portrayal and the home’s rich complexities. Ali’s argument that “the colours won’t be so brilliant/the Jhelum’s waters won’t be so clean/so ultramarine” when he returns further emphasises the inaccessibility of the lost home and the hopelessness of recovery. In contrast to the vibrant colours of the postcard, his memory of Kashmir is “black and white,” “undeveloped,” and “negative,” blurring and obscuring his home by being “a little out of focus.” His black-and-white memory contrasts with the beautiful clarity of the Jhelum’s waters in Kashmir and on the postcard. Ali’s realisation that “home” is inaccessible echoes

another diasporic author, Salman Rushdie, and his metaphor of “broken mirrors,” which displaced authors use to reflect on their roots. (Rushdie, p. 11)

### **The Poetics of Transnationalism**

While Kashmir remains the centre of Ali’s lyrical universe, it also traverses several geographical and cultural locations. According to Nishat Zaidi, Ali’s influences were James Merrill, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Mirza Ghalib, and Begum Akhtar, and “his poems are filled with the images of Radha, Krishna, Laila, Majnoo, Buddhism and Hinduism, Sufism, and Bhakti” (ibid.). She emphasises how Ali’s poetry “moves over time and geography, with Syria, Andalusia, Damascus, Boston, Frankfurt, Delhi, and Srinagar all blending into one” (Zaidi, p. 160). Ali’s vision, according to Bruce King, connects “past and present, America and India, Islamic and American deserts, American cities and former American Indian tribes, modern deserts and primordial oceans” (King, p. 17). These leaps over space and time, which connect varied landscapes, contexts, and histories, bring the home and the globe closer together.

Ali’s poetics is thus exposed through the dual vectors of yearning and melancholy for a lost and inaccessible homeland and travel across various, diverse borders. Therefore, the “foreign” is “re-homed” in Ali’s poetry, just as the “home” is “de-homed” by diasporic distance. Consequently, travel appears not just as a well-known trope or thematic concern but also as an organising element in Ali’s work, as indicated by his poetic “journey” across cultural, formal, linguistic, and generic areas. Thus, Ali’s poetics can be effectively understood through the concept of “transnational poetics” proposed by Jahan Ramazani, in which “transnational affiliations and identities of... poets” encourage a reconsideration of entrenched “single-nation genealogies” or “mono national narratives” of understanding modern poetry (Ramazani, p. 332). As the “world . . . becomes deterritorialised and transnational” (Appadurai, p. 188), marked by “migration, relocation, displacement” (Gilroy, p. 111), the “nationalities and ethnicities of poets and poems . . . become hybrid, interstitial, and fluid” (Ramazani, p. 333).

Ali’s poetic return to Kashmir — the irretrievable, estranged, and yet inalienable “home” — is thus made possible and perpetuated by a parallel “journey” across borders. The following excerpt from his poem “When on Route 80 in Ohio,” from the collection *A Nostalgist’s Map of America* (Ali, 2002a), exemplifies the constant shifts and transitions, as well as the blurring of boundaries, that are so characteristic of his poetry:

“When on Route 80 in Ohio”

I came across an exit  
to Calcutta  
the temptation to write a poem  
led me past the exit  
so I could say  
India always exists  
off the turnpikes  
of America (pp. 1–9)

The idea of travel in the poem is both physical and figurative when the poet states that he saw a sign for Calcutta while driving in Ohio. The reference to the “map” in the title of the collection *A Nostalgist’s Map of America* evokes nostalgia and loss, as well as journey and direction, alluding to the dual nostalgia and travel impulses that define Ali’s poetry. The illogical juxtaposition of Ohio and Calcutta has a rational explanation, however. In addition to the Indian metropolis, Calcutta is also the name of a location in Ohio. This juxtaposition of the two Calcuttas in the poem implies that histories and contexts are intertwined. The colonial history of Indian Calcutta is interwoven with the current American practice of claiming and adopting foreign place names by mapping them onto its territory.

Like the collapse of spatial boundaries in this poem, “The Last Saffron” from *The Half-Inch Himalayas* collapses temporal boundaries, confounding past, present, and future: “Yes, I recall it/The day I’ll die” (p. 23–24). Such temporal blurring, as apparent in poems such as “The Lost Memory of Delhi,” serves as a “distorting yet amplifying lens” (Kabir, p. 188) to demonstrate how deeply death, Kashmir, and memory are woven into Ali’s poetic imagination. As with spatial and temporal boundaries, linguistic demarcations are obscured in Ali’s poetry, and languages overflow into each other.

Ali’s ability to traverse a variety of poetic genres from around the world is one of the most notable aspects of his poetry. He was recognised for his formal brilliance and “his resolute dedication to literary aesthetics” (Chambers 2011). Meta Jones and Keith Leonard noted the “variety of formal options, innovations, and traditions that animate the cross-pollination of.” . . . multi-ethnic poets” like Ali (Jones and Leonard, p. 10). They highlight how the cultural repertory of such poets is shaped by their “flexible use of poetic form” . . . adaption . . . and the intricate. . . ethnic self-construction strategies . . . in verse” (ibid., p. 9).

This type of formal multiplicity and movement across several global poetic forms is a means of “homing” and “rehomeing” the world. Ali’s poetic homing of the world might be described as formal cosmopolitanism. Nonetheless, notably, such cosmopolitanism concurrently serves as an idiom for him to tell a disrupted and fragmented home.

As Ali’s sorrow for his mother dissipates into despair for Kashmir, the subsequent lines of the poem emphasise the intertwining of the mother and Kashmir. Kashmir, the repeated end-word of the verse (other than mother), aims to highlight Kashmir's prominence in Ali’s lament for his mother.

. . . Mother,  
 they asked me, So how’s the writing? I answered My mother  
 is my poem. What did they expect? For no verse  
 sufficed except the promise, fading, of Kashmir  
 and the cries that reached you from the cliffs of Kashmir  
 (across fifteen centuries) in the hospital. Kashmir,  
 she’s dying! How her breathing drowns out the universe  
 as she sleeps in Amherst. Windows open on Kashmir (pp. 32–38)

Thus, “Lenox Hill” highlights parallels between the loss of the mother and that of Kashmir. Ali alluded to these continuities of loss in the preface to *Rooms are Never Finished*, stating, “To a home at war, my father, brother, and I buried my mother. It was the only option, as she had longed for home throughout her illness” (Ali, 2002b, p. 15). Ali composed several elegies besides this elegiac canzone. The most well-known is “From Amherst to Kashmir,” also from the same collection, which combines personal and political tragedy with myth and history.

### **Conclusion**

Memory studies and literature have a particularly pertinent interaction. This raises the issue of the cultural authority of literature as a chronicler of the past. This discipline of memory studies can be utilised to investigate further the role of literature in creating and distributing memories. As we explore the significance of literature in transitional cultures, memory may serve as an essential backdrop. Shahid Ali’s verses are a repository of longing, a place where memory is a homeland. He spent the majority of his adult life yearning for the valley of Kashmir and visualising the United States through the eyes of nostalgia. Kashmir was always

in Shahid's thoughts, regardless of his distance from home. It was a massive negative and a measuring tool for him. Ali eulogises Kashmir's natural beauty in his poems through recollection. The trio of "memory, nostalgia, and longing" played a central role in his poetry, and the many metaphors through which he expressed his memories were the result of his exposure to multiple cultures and geographies, as well as the three languages he spoke at home: Urdu, Kashmiri, and English. Shahid, however, embraced his eclectic identity with open arms, fusing the mannerisms and sensitivities of the diverse cultures into poetry.

### **Bibliography**

- Ali, Agha Shahid. (1987). *The Half-Inch Himalayas*. Wesleyan University Press.
- Ali, Agha Shahid. (1997). *The Country Without a Post Office: Poems 1991–1995*. W. W Norton.
- Ali, Agha Shahid. (2002a). *A Nostalgist's Map of America*. W. W Norton.
- Ali, Agha Shahid. (2002b). *Rooms Are Never Finished*. W. W Norton.
- Ansari, R. (1998, March 1). *Agha Shahid Ali: Calligraphy of Coils*. Himal South Asia, <https://www.himalmag.com/gha-shahid-ali-calligraphy-of-coils/>
- Appadurai, Arjun. (1996). *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Benvenuto, Christine. (2002). Agha Shahid Ali. *The Massachusetts Review* 43(2), 261–73.
- Chakraborty, Abin. (2017). Beyond Borders, Nations, and Exclusivist Identities: Agha Shahid Ali's Poetics of Plurality. In K Ali (Ed.), *Mad Heart Be Brave: Essays on the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali* (pp. 55–70). University of Michigan Press.
- Erll, A. (2011). *Memory in Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Garde Hansen, J. (2011). *Media and memory*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Gilroy, Paul. (1993). *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Verso.
- Hoelscher, S. & Alderman, D. (2004) Memory and Place: Geographies of a Critical Relationship. *Social & Cultural Geography* 5(3), 347-355.

- Katyal, Akhil. (2011, January 30). *I swear... I have my hopes: Agha Shahid Ali's Delhi Years*. Kafila, <https://kafila.online/2011/01/30/%E2%80%98i-swear-i-have-my-hopes%E2%80%99-gha-shahid-ali%E2%80%99s-delhi-years/>
- King, Bruce. (1994). Agha Shahid Ali's Tricultural Nostalgia. *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 29(2), 1–20.
- Nelson, Matthew. (2020). Agha Shahid Ali and the Phenomenology of Postcolonial Nostalgia. *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 22(7), 1–18.
- Qadeer, Haris. (2019). The City and the Beloved Witness: Mapping Cityscapes of Delhi in the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 1–17.
- Ramazani, Jahan. (2001). *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English*. University of Chicago Press.
- Ramazani, Jahan. (2006). A Transnational Poetics. *American Literary History*, 18(2), 332–59.
- Roediger, H. L., & Wertsch, J. V. (2008). Creating a New Discipline of Memory Studies. *Memory Studies* 1(1), 9-22.
- Rushdie, Salman. (1991). *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991*. Granta Books.
- Van House, N., & Churchill, E. F. (2008). Technologies of memory: Key issues and critical perspectives. *Memory Studies* 1(3), 295-310.
- Zaidi, Nishat. (2007). Karbala as Metaphor in the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali. *Indian Literature* 51(1/237), 154–67.