

Landscapes Mythicized: Placing Selected Poems of Agha Shahid Ali

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Abstract

The lay of a people is often tethered to the lay of the land that they live in or leave behind; for the land holds all the associations of ancestry, heritage, and environment that constitute what Emile Durkheim would call “the collective conscious.” Landscapes may assume near mythical dimensions in forming and framing the creative impulse of writers who draw their images and symbols, themes and motifs, and aspirations and apprehensions from their terrestrial roots and routes. In the present paper, I seek to re-read a few poems of the famous Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali with a view to highlighting his poetics of place that remains true to the kindred points of haven (America, the adopted land) and home (Kashmir, the homeland). Attempts will be made to shed light on the re-creative dynamics of his poetry that helps him to mythicize these two landscapes with the aid of “memory” and “imagination.” My objective here is to foreground the process through which the poet’s re-creation of place combines with the reader’s focus on spatiality to situate Ali’s poems such as “Postcard from Kashmir,” “Snowmen,” “A Wrong Turn,” “Snow on the Desert,” “Farewell,” etc. In the poem, “Postcard from Kashmir” for example, the speaker holds the postcard that represents to him the land of his birth – “Kashmir shrinks to my mailbox,/ my home a neat four by six inches.” The persistent pains of “exile” lead him to proximate the half-inch Himalayas to this “home,” because he realizes “This is home. And this the closest I’ll ever be to home.” Similarly, in the poem “Snow on the Desert,” the poet brings to bear all his imaginative elasticity to re-create the Papago’s way of living in the Sonoran desert in the South Western part of the United States. His poetic narrative brings to the surface the native history of the Papagos people whose long lost lives are imaginatively re-created by a diasporic poet, keenly aware of the ancient glory of his own homeland as contrasted with its recent abjection.

Keywords: Agha Shahid Ali, Diaspora, Ecocriticism, Geocriticism, Place, Migration, Exile

“Place is the locale of the truth of Being”

– Martin Heidegger (*On the Way to Language*)

Since time immemorial, literature has shared a very close bond with the land, both in its telluric generality and in its spatial selectivity. The flora and the fauna, men and manners, and topography and history give a specific character to a place, and evoke particular associations in alert and articulate human subjects. As Bertrand Westphal points out, geocritical consciousness, motivated by specific environmental and cultural concerns, is a late 20th century phenomenon though its roots can be traced in the post-Renaissance phases of “exploration,” “colonization,” and “migration” (qtd. in Tally *et al.*, ix-xv). In the present paper I intend to “place” selected poems of Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali from a geocritical perspective focusing on his treatment of physical environment encompassing both the landscape of Kashmir, his place of origin, and of the United States, his place of immigration. I shall seek to show how, against the backdrop of the politically volatile situation of his native land, the once pristine beauty of the “paradise on earth” and the sheer brutality of its gory present are set side by side. Attempts will also be made to explain how Agha Shahid Ali’s poetic narrative revolves around the place even in the adopted soil of the American southwest. Be it Kashmir or Arizona, landscapes in his poetry have been

mythicized from an earth-centered perspective. His commitment is to Earth as reflected through his commitment to places and landscapes which, as will be shown, is at once translocal and transcultural.

Purporting to situate man's intellectual and artistic endeavors in the *compositio loci* of the physical environment and a specific locale respectively, ecocriticism and geocriticism, as Robert T. Tally, Jr. and Christine M. Battista have observed, share the same discursive domain (Tally *et al.*, 1-18). Ecocriticism as a critical approach has been adequately defined by Cheryl Glotfelty in the following words:

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. (xix)

To put Glotfelty's words into the geocritical perspective we may refer to Bertrand Westphal's definition of geocriticism: "Geocriticism probes the human spaces that the mimetic arts [e.g. literature, painting, culture etc.] arrange through, and in, texts, the image, and cultural interactions related to them" (Westphal 6). Since ecocriticism connects literature with environment, and since geocriticism "probes the human spaces" as constituting the environment, these two fields of study inhabit the common discursive domain of "situatedness."

"Situatedness" is one of the main traits of Agha Shahid Ali's poetry. Ali's poetic consciousness is at once formed and informed by the land he had lived in and left behind. The soul of his poetry consists of his diasporic imagination, nostalgic vision of the beauty of the native land accompanied with the sense of loss and sometimes the awareness of victimhood. Besides, the sense of wonder with which he takes in the reality of a changed landscape in his adopted country, finds expression in a number of his poems. According to Shaden M. Tageldin, "Twice convicted by Colonization and displacement the postcolonial migrant [like Agha Shahid Ali] finds in being longing, rather than in belonging, her or his only reprieve" (Tageldin 32). The reason why the dynamicity of "being longing" seems preferable to the stasis of "belonging" is that mobility gives to the poet both the incentive and the ingredient of poetry by offering a variety of locations.

Ali's diasporic memory is always entwined with landscape but the landscape is "reported" to be ravished in the name of politics and/ or changed beyond all recognition in the name of progress. Ali's diasporic consciousness endorses "cultural pluralism" and upholds the cause of nature, transcending the geographical and topographical specificities of both Kashmir and Arizona. Ali's emphasis on place as thematic as well as the schematic pivot of his poetic endeavor renders his work amenable to geocriticism. Kashmir has always been present in Ali's poems in the twin capacity of what Nirmal Selvamony terms as "diastopos" and "syntopos":

When space is spoken of in terms of objects, space is thought of as "place," as space occupied by objects. Such space or place could be denoted by means of the terms, "diastopos" (after Saussure's "diachrony"). But when the object does not occupy any place other than consciousness, consciousness as place can be spoken of as "syntopos" (after Saussure's "synchrony"). (Selvamony 191)

Ever since 1947, Kashmir has been the apple of discord between two nations India and Pakistan. It has witnessed several disturbances including insurgency, militarization, and civil unrest accompanied by environmental devastation and inhumanity. The poems I have chosen provide an ecoconscious as well as geoconscious dossier of the plight of Kashmir and her people. They expose and reconstruct the awful environmental and cultural degradation of Kashmir. Poems such as “Postcard from Kashmir,” “Snowmen,” “A Wrong Turn,” “Farewell,” “I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight,” “I Dream I Am the Only Passenger of Flight 423 to Srinagar,” “A Pastoral,” “Return to Harmony 3,” “A History of Paisley,” “Leaving Sonora,” “Beyond the Ash Rains,” “Snow on the Desert,” “The Keeper of the Dead Hotel,” “An Interview with Red Riding Hood, Now No Longer Little,” and “Hansel’s Games” reveal the “green” moral and political agenda of the poet. Agha Shahid Ali’s poems are engaged with the natural environment, and the poet is perceived to “investigate,” à la Greg Garrard, “climate change, environmental justice, sustainability, the nature of ‘humanity’ and more” (Garrard, *Dust Jacket*). Yet on another level, the above poems testify to the poet’s enduring awareness of place.

“Postcard from Kashmir,” the very first poem of the collection *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987) reconstructs “home” through what Lawrence Buell calls “environmental imagination”; for Ali’s poetic strategy in treating his remembered homeland closely parallels what Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin stipulate, namely, the exploration of “nature and natural elements (landscape, flora and fauna, etc.) as self-standing agents, rather than support structures for human actions, in the world” (13). To the absent poet, any news of and from Kashmir, as contained in a postcard, stands for Kashmir itself. The picture that is evoked before his mind’s eye is that of a colorful and vibrant Kashmir full of “neatness.” That this remembered picture does not reflect the actual situation of Kashmir lends to it an added poignancy on account of the sense of loss and longing contained therein that inspires Rajeev S. Patke to designate Ali as a “poet laureate of loss” (232):

...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. (“Postcard from Kashmir,” *The Veiled Suite* [henceforth, *V.S.*], 29)

That his “love” is or may be “overexposed” suggests that this overexposure has both physical and psychological dimensions. On another level, that he suffers his love to be “overexposed” may hint at, as a means of engaging himself in the imaginative recuperation of the loss of natural beauty and resources, what Kashmir faces in reality. The vibrant color of the flora and fauna of Kashmir, when remembered, remains “a little out of focus,” because the spatio-temporal distance renders the memory distorted in being “giant” (lengthened or heightened to an unnatural extent), “black and white” (devoid of colors), and “still undeveloped” (yet to be processed or defined). By deploying the vocabulary of photography, such as “overexposed,” “out of focus,” “black and

white,” and “undeveloped,” Ali secures for his spatial reconstruction an atemporal and aspatial suspension of pictorial stasis that goes a long way in indicating the aforementioned strands of his memory namely “loss” and “longing.” In this context, Bruce King opines, “Loss, whether of the protection of family, of friends, homelands or alternative futures, is normal, part of growing up and experiencing, rather than particularly the tragedy of exile or the result of cultural conflict” (2). However, Ali’s sense of loss cannot be rationalized merely as a “part of growing up and experiencing,” because, as Kamala Das, one of his peers, has observed “The tragedy of life/ is not death but growth...” (“Composition,” *D*, 29) In fact, the self-exiled poet’s process of proximation – “This is home. And this the closest/ I’ll ever be to home” may profitably be read in the light of his sense of loss; for it adds the quality of evanescence to his spatial imagination on account of the essential fictiveness and transience of this make-believe.

In “Snowmen,” another poem from *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, Agha Shahid Ali narrativizes the antique migration of his ancestor, “a man of Himalayan snow.” As the mythical forefather steps across the spatial border between Samarkand and Kashmir, the landscape changes. Nevertheless, the basic egalitarian approach to Nature, and men’s harmonious relationship with her is established and/ or explored throughout the poem. The poet-speaker shows at once great imagination and an equally great perception in grounding the march within the traversed spaces from Samarkhand to Kashmir:

My ancestor, ...
 Came to Kashmir from Samarkhand,
 Carrying a bag
 Of whale bones:
 Heirlooms from sea funerals,
 His skeleton
 Carved from glaciers, his breath
 Arctic, ... (“Snowmen,” *V.S.*, 34)

The poet considers the aching nostalgia for the whole journey of human history from the prehistoric to the modern period as his “heirloom” which has “passed from son to grandson,/ generations of snowmen” Human and non-human particles of ecology are found engaged in a symbiotic relationship with each other, as space is at once telescoped and teleologized with the “heirlooms” of time. The poetic persona seeks to re-create the close bond between his ancestor and nature by representing him as an inter-specific survivor of sea funerals of whales.

Place attachment and place-sensitivity are vitally important ingredients of ecocritical, and by extension, of geocritical writings. As Val Plumwood points out, “place sensitivity requires both emotional and critical approaches to place, and this must include an understanding of place that is rooted in memory (including community memory)” (233). In the poem “A Wrong Turn” taken from *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, the limned landscape of Ali’s “memory’s homeland” (Kashmir) mirrors the violent desecration of nature and it betrays his tender concern for Kashmir. Here we perceive a strong “place attachment” as well as a keen “place-sensitivity.” Though in dream, the persona sees not an inflated vision at all if we remember the blood-smeared Kashmir during and after insurgency and militarization in the 1980s:

In a massacred town,
 ... walking among the atrocities,
 Guillotines blood-scorched,
 Gods stabbed at their altars,
 Dry wells piled up with bones,
 A curfew on ghosts. (“A Wrong Turn,” *V.S.*, 60)

Of course, the unnatural cruelty of the situation in Kashmir is at once symbolized by the proposition of Gods being “stabbed at their altars” and the ghosts being subjected to a curfew. The gruesome reality of the massacred town with its tell-tale hypallage is further aggravated by the imagined vision of “Guillotines blood-scorched” and the perceived presence of a bone-filled well. What is more, the place-sensitive poet fails to find escape from this scene of “atrocities” neither in reality that assails him with the harrowing details of a massacre, nor even in memory that evokes in him the sanguinary associations of the French Revolution.

A sustained lamentation over the loss of an earthly paradise recurs throughout Agha Shahid Ali’s poetic oeuvre. “Farewell” from *The Country Without a Post Office*, for instance, raises a voice of protest at the mindless massacre of innocence: “They make a desolation and call it peace/ who is the guardian tonight of the Gates of Paradise?” The poet inveighs against the loss of the paradise on earth when he experiences hell in his beloved Kashmir – “I am being rowed through Paradise on a river of Hell.” The narrative flashback evokes the poet’s psychological restoration of Kashmir’s golden past of cultural syncreticism, where Kashmiri Hindu “pundits” and Muslims could once coexist in joy and safety. In the process, he is enabled to relive the paradisaical coexistence of diverse peoples and multiply a nostalgic yearning equivalent of his wish to “protect” or “safeguard” the loved memory of Kashmir. In fact, it is only the poet’s memory “getting in the way of your history,” that can reconstruct the former glory of communal harmony that the land has lost – “In the lake the arms of temples and mosques are locked/ in each other’s reflections” (“Farewell,” *V.S.*, 176).

At this point of the poem, the poet’s lament for the place graduates into an elegy on a severed human relationship. If the “I” of the poem is a Kashmiri Muslim, then the “you” may stand for a Kashmiri pundit. That they had been together for centuries, and that they have been now torn apart from each other, give to the intradigetic speaker much chagrine and megrims: “If only somehow you could have been mine,/ what would not have been possible in the world?” (“Farewell,” *V.S.*, 177). On another level, what ails the poet is a perceived and persistent dilemma as to whether he should “hide” or “reveal” his pains from himself: “I hid my pain even from myself; I revealed my pain only to/ myself...” (“Farewell,” *V.S.*, 177).

The possibility of forgiveness, the speaker feels, may transform recrimination into a “farewell.” It is in this context that Amitav Ghosh, the renowned novelist and a close friend of Agha Shahid Ali, writes: “If the twin terrors of insurgency and repression could be said to have engendered any single literary leitmotif, it is surely the narrative of the loss of Paradise...” (Ghosh 89).

This desecration of the “paradise” and plundering of its environment (both natural and cultural) constitutes the theme of yet another poem “I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight.” The

reader sees the tragedy of Kashmir unfold in this brilliant poem: “the homes set ablaze by midnight soldiers/ Kashmir is burning.” Kashmiri Hindu pundits are forced to leave their native place and the poet helplessly recalls this wrong of history:

By that dazzling light
we see men removing statues from temples.
We beg them, “Who will protect us if you leave”
They don’t answer, they just disappear
on the road to the plains, clutching the gods.

(“I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight,” *V.S.*, 180)

This exodus is indicative of a grave loss to Kashmir’s rich diversity that was once famed for its variegated cultural fabric. Agha Shahid Ali’s commitment to cultural pluralism comes to the surface when the poem’s speaker laments the loss of the Hindu divine protection for the entire (predominantly Muslim) population. Besides, the flight of the pundits towards the plains (from the hills) signals a regional bifurcation of Kashmir that hacks at the ecumene’s pluralist heritage and saps its life-blood.

The poem, “I Dream I Am the Only Passenger of Flight 423 to Srinagar,” evokes a similar sense of loss. The personal sorrow and nostalgia for Begum Akhtar is juxtaposed with the general anguish for Kashmir. The *Statesman* headlines show both “BEGHUM AKHTAR IS DEAD” and “IT’S WAR: It’s 1994: ARMY LAYS SIEGE TO SHRINE.” The poem is an elegy in effect, and commemorates the loss of what Ali prized very highly, namely the queen of ghazals and the paradise on earth. He mourns the loss of Lal Ded’s heirloom which is also the Kashmiri cultural heirloom. The devastating fire in “Chrar-e-Sharif,” the shrine of the revered Sufi saint Sheikh Noor-ud-Din, is factual but Agha Shahid Ali uses this in a metaphoric sense also. The poet feels a sharp pang at the communal violence between “Muslim and Brahmin” which has claimed many innocent lives and wasted a uniquely syncretic spirituality. The “threads” of hope wane as “autumn’s last crimsoned spillage rushing with wings down the mountainside” is paired with the “flames clinging to a torched village.” In fact, the hapless poet-speaker looks on as the confluential culture of Kashmir frays thin under the collective burden of transnational terrorism, state-sponsored repression, and local militancy.

The trope of the pastoral is deeply entrenched both in environmentalism and in geoconsciousness. Besides, “pastoral has always been characterized by nostalgia, so that wherever we look into its history, we will see an ‘escalator’ taking us back further into a better past” (Garrard 37). In the poem “A Pastoral,” Agha Shahid Ali’s poetic practice closely parallels the above precept. Nevertheless, what distinguishes the poem as a lay of the land is that it envisions a better future for the land just as it looks back to an idyllic past:

We shall meet again, in Srinagar;
by the gates of the Villa of peace,
our hands blossoming into fists
till the soldiers return the keys
and disappear. Again we’ll enter
our last world, the first that vanished
in our absence from the broken city. (“A Pastoral,” *V.S.*, 196)

The nostalgia is therefore always for the past but not without hope and prospect of getting back the “lost glory” in future: “...We’ll hear/ our gardener’s voice, the way we did/ as children, clear under trees he’d planted.” What renders uniqueness to Ali’s transreal spatial imagination is his power of evocation that encompasses both the landscape and the lifescape of a liminal Kashmir that is free to retain its pristine glory either in the remembered past or in a prefigured future.

“Return to Harmony 3” from the same collection *The Country Without a Post Office* blends environmentalism with social ecology in the service of Ali’s poetics of place. Here, the theme of injustice, both social and environmental, has been dwelt upon in detail: “...Troops will burn down the garden and let the haven remain./ This is home – the haven a cage surrounded by ash – the fate of Paradise.” A note of melancholy is clearly discernible in the above lines that produce an almost apocalyptic vision of Kashmir. Here, Agha Shahid Ali’s composition closely corresponds to Lawrence Buell’s observation: “Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (285). In fact, Ali’s apocalyptic vision of Kashmir is a product of both a close bond with the land and an utter anxiety about its ignominious present. Absence of “two summers,” return to a land under military occupation, and entry into a much loved home – all these fashion the poet-speaker’s response to his immediate surroundings.

Home has now been transformed into a “cage” surrounded by “ash” (remains of the “Paradise” on earth). As such, the inhabitant of such an abode (the speaker’s mother) can only be “poor.” The speaker’s dear home (“Harmony 3”) looks alien to him by the sudden appearance of “paramilitaries” “bunker,” “shadowed eyes” of the military personnel. He feels “like a trespasser” anxiously wondering if the gardener has “fled” to escape the precarious present. Significantly, the pastoral beauty of the “Harmonies” is brought into sharp contrast with the oppressive backdrop of the military presence to highlight the awkward feeling of the speaker who returns to a home left behind only to find it “all changed, changed utterly.” The house of the grandmother, the annex building of the Harmonies, is now closed and there is “nothing else to reflect” except the irretrievable fond memories of her sons’ absolute devotion (“offering themselves”) to her like “bouquets of mirrors.” The “bouquets of mirrors” here symbolize the means of an all-round reflection (revelation) of the physical as well as spiritual state of “her sons.” The speaker apprehends the whereabouts of the gardener and the postman who were necessary parts of the Harmonies but have inexplicably gone missing. The speaker guesses that the former might have been killed, and realizes that the absence of the postman must have been caused by the absence of the residents. As a result, “the roses have choked in their beds” and in the drawer of the cedar stand, there is “a pile of damp letters.” Damp letters here refer to the non-communication between the home and the world in this perilous situation.

While positing “the idea of home” as a “kind of space,” Mary Douglas points out, “There has to be something regular about the appearance and reappearance of its [the home] furnishings” (289). As if in keeping with Douglas’ views, the speaker promptly discovers the house with all its familiar arrangements on entering “Harmony 3.” The Koran is “lying strangely wrapped in a *jamawar* shawl” and like before it “still protects the house.” In view of the perils of the situation, the scripture’s protective efficacy may however be called into question. Similarly, the reference to the framed calligraphy – “*If god is with you, Victory is near!*” – seems “ruthless behind cobwebs”; for

the haze of the cobweb seems to defer the victory of the faithful and deny any possibility of the divine proximity in the veritable hell of Kashmir. The lack of normalcy is logically accompanied by a breakdown in communication as symbolized by “the dead phone.” Like the speaker who finds himself exiled from the once safe haven, “its number [too is] exiled from its instrument.” The speaker is now “a refugee from belief” seeking safe haven of bygone “harmonies” which echo the lines from another of Ali’s poems, a ghazal namely “Tonight”- “I beg for haven: Prisons, let open your gates—/A refugee from Belief seeks a cell tonight”(“Tonight,” *V.S.*, 374).

Each object of the home the speaker looks at turns into a mirror reflecting the earlier version of the home when home was safe haven “untouched by blood.” Even mountains seem to the speaker like a mirror reflecting his stare. The bookshelf holding the books of Ritsos, Rilke, Cavafy, Lorca, Iqbal, Amichai, and Paz along with the wedding pictures of the speaker’s parents and a black and white photograph of the speaker’s mother in her teens make the home “so unforgivingly poor and so unforgivingly beautiful” that the speaker cannot hold it anymore – “the house begins to shake in my arms.” But “...when the unarmed world is still again, with pity, it is the house that is holding [the speaker] in its arms and the cry coming faded from its empty rooms is [his] cry.” Nothing is left now except a gnawing sense of loss and a profound feeling of hurt, because the speaker cannot shut his eyes to man’s responsibility for the decrepitude of the house (“Harmony 3”), and by extension, of the place (Kashmir).

In the poem “A History of Paisley,” the poet mythicizes the valley of Kashmir by claiming the “alibi of chronology,” and calling it in the same breath, a “vain collaborator of time.” Ali associates the myth of Parvati and Shiva with the topographical pattern in which the Jhelum flows through the landscape of Kashmir. The epigraph relates the mythical story that is associated with the formation of the pattern of paisley in the image of the landscape:

Their footsteps formed the paisley when Parvati, angry after a quarrel, ran away from Shiva. He eventually caught up with her. To commemorate their reunion, he carved the Jhelum river, as it moves through the Vale of Kashmir, in the shape of paisley. (“A History of Paisley,” *V.S.*, 218)

In much of his poetry, Ali has used the leitmotifs of “paisley,” “saffron,” and the “Jhelum” to foreground the mythological associations of his homeland. The poet ruefully envisions a future when this beloved place will be decoupled from such myth. Addressing the reader as “you” he writes,

You who will find the dark fossils of paisleys
one afternoon on the peaks of Zabarvan --
Trader from an ancient market of the future,
alibi of chronology, that vain
collaborator of time -- won’t know that these
are her footprints from the day the world began
when land rushed, from the ocean, toward Kashmir. (“A History of Paisley,” *V.S.*, 218)

The association of the addressee “you” with some “trader from an ancient market of the future” operates on the basis of a common outsider’s status for both of them. Here, the trader’s “ignorance” has been apposed with the “awareness” of the ancient market (land) with a view to highlighting the ephemerality of the former and the permanence of the latter. As for the poet, by engaging with the mythical history of Kashmir and by expressing his sense of loss at the apprehension of a gradual disappearance of this originary antecedent, Ali establishes a kind of anthropological bond with the land of Kashmir. The poet can hear the echoing sound of the Goddess’ (Parvati) anklets in the mountain stream of the Jhelum. Nevertheless, he also apprehends that the future generations will be “deaf” to such music of nature. They will be deaf to “history” embedded in the landscape on account of their mercenary motif for keeping ledgers. Further, they will be “deaf” to the “bullets drowning out the bells of her ankles,” just as their bond with the land and her people will be severed over time:

For you, blind to all defeat
 up there in pure sunlight, your gauze of cloud thrown
 off your shoulders over the Vale, do not hear
 bullets drowning out the bells of her ankles...
 O, alibi of chronology, in what script
 in your ledger will this narrative be lost? (“A History of Paisley,” *V.S.*, 218-219)

On another level, however, the “you” becomes the heedless march of history that remains equally impervious to the gargling music of the mountain stream as well as to the steady patter of bullets. Wiping out all the strands of history and memory, the future trader will treat the place merely as a commercial hub. Ali mourns: “The city burns; the dusk has darkened to rust/ by the roses. They don’t see it.” However, the geoconscious poet’s lament of apprehension may also caution the future generation against a possible ecocide that will at least leave some hope and scope for its regeneration.

That Agha Shahid Ali’s fidelity to place is translocal and transcultural finds echoes in many of the poems of *A Nostalgist’s Map of America*. The diasporic poet is seen to give adequate attention to the landscape of his adopted country. In this connection Lawrence Needham observes, “His [Ali’s] subjects – lost tribes and vanished villages, vast deserts, geological epochs, and cataclysmic changes – are able to support a resonant vocabulary of loss and desolation, as well as the mythic subtexts informing many of his poems” (123). By way of explication we may focus on Ali’s preoccupation with time while describing place, because time is seen to enrich spatial associations that may connect the diasporic poet with his hostland.

The poem “Leaving Sonora” describes the fidelity of the “Hohokam” people to the Sonoran desert, their place of residence “for 1500 years.” In fact, drawing upon the insights of Richard Sheldon, the local poet whose words provide Ali with the poem’s epigraph, he grows introspective. For the diasporic poet, this ancient tribe’s bonding with their desert, their living place, is evocative of the poet’s own bonding with Kashmir, the place of his origin. It is in a similar context that Abin Chakraborty has commented, “This is precisely why in Ali’s imagination the space of the host country, USA, often opens into that of his native land, which need not [but may also] refer to Kashmir alone” (206). To come back to the poem under discussion, the poet insists on the

bonding with the non-human elements of the environment (here the desert landscape): “Certain landscapes insist on fidelity.” According to the desert ethos, one has to be faithful not only to the place of one’s residence, but also to those of one’s ancestors that have now vanished from the face of this earth. That the poet is not unfaithful to those who no longer exist becomes clear when he feels the aching voice of his ancestors from Samarkhand in his bones and considers the memory as his “heirloom” in the poem “Snowmen” that has been discussed earlier. Away from the blinding light of reality and inside the cosy confines of memory, the poet-speaker is brought face to face with a Hohokam woman whose “summer thunder” voice invokes both the oddity and the fertility of the desert rain:

In his shade, the poet sees one of their women,
beautiful, her voice low as summer thunder.
Each night she saw, among the culinary ashes,
what the earth does only through a terrible pressure-
the fire, in minutes, transforming the coal into diamonds. (“Leaving Sonora,” *V.S.*, 116)

Significantly, the terrestrial fire may metamorphose ordinary coal into extraordinary and precious diamond, just as Ali’s spatialism may transform the sight of the “blue lights” into the vision of “a vanished village.”

“Beyond the Ash Rains” taken from *A Nostalgist’s Map of America* is a poem of loss. The loss here refers as much to the loss of man’s connection with a place as to that with a loving companion. The first person speaker opens the account on a note of frustration as the land he had lived in and left behind refuses to acknowledge his connection with it:

When the desert refused my history,
Refused to acknowledge that I had lived
there, with you, among a vanished tribe,

two, three thousand years ago, you parted

the dawn rain, its thickest monsoon curtains,

and beckoned me to the northern canyons. (“Beyond the Ash Rains,” *V.S.*, 110)

The denial of the speaker’s history has serious ontological ramifications for him, because this refusal by the land may blot out both the speaker’s present (any claim on it) and his past (his ancient association with it). The introduction of “You” and the allusion to “a vanished tribe” in the narrative matrix add a gregarious dimension to the speaker’s “spatialism” connecting the coeval companion (“You”) and the antecedent community (the vanished tribe of the Hohokam people). The frustrated speaker is given an alternative choice of destination by his recrudescing addressee who, like a deft guide, parts the dawn rain to reveal another possibility, and calls the speaker to leave for the northern canyons (the Antelope canyons).

If the companion’s hospitality soothes the speaker’s weariness and anxiety, then her alacrity to come with him reassures the speaker in ways more than one. In fact, hand-in-hand with her, he can

afford to traverse the “emptied world” of the desert in which time has emptied the land of all its accumulated personal significations:

You took my hand, and we walked through the streets
 of an emptied world, vulnerable
 to our suddenly bare history in which I was,
 but you said won't again be, singled
 out for loss in your arms, won't ever again
 be exiled, never again, from your arms. (“Beyond the Ash Rains,” *V.S.*, 110-111)

On another level, his act of revisiting history in her company gives the promise of a permanent abode in a long-loved land with a long-loved companion. What grants the poem its multivalence is the feasibility of interpreting the “you” figure not only as a human companion, but also as a place of residence. It is the “you” that remains the more active agent of the two, offering alternatives, giving assurance and showing fondness for the speaker. Following this terrestrial interpretation, we may say that place exercises a decisive influence, rejecting or replenishing the speaker at will. In fact, though thoroughly dependant on place, man remains only partially aware of the real extent of its influence. As a result, place retreats to the backdrop and becomes what M. Merleau-Ponty dubs “the matrix of habitual action” (90). Needless to say, it is this matrix of habitual action that the speaker at once forgets and retains, and that the “you” figure recalls to and replenishes for him.

“Snow on the Desert” from *A Nostalgist's Map of America* hints at the radical relationship among elements of ecology dismantling the speciest hierarchy, denying human supremacy, and displacing anthropocentrism with a kind of post-speciest outlook:

in each ray a secret of the planet's
 Origin, the rays hurting each cactus
 into memory, a human memory –
 for they are human, the Papagos say:
 not only because they have arms and veins
 and secrets. But they too are a tribe,
 vulnerable to massacre. (“Snow on the Desert,” *V.S.*, 165)

Fidelity of the poet towards the indigenous people (the Papago Indians) and their life is reflected in his description when he reiterates the Papago belief that saguaros (a cactus species) are also a community and they too have their “memory.” The empathetic attitude towards the plants (saguaros) of the desert testifies to the poet's eco-sensitivity which is very much concerned about the indigenous culture of the land and her people (here the Sonoran desert and the Papago Indians). Accepting from Arthur Rimbaud the poet's responsibility towards human beings and/or animals (202-205) Agha Shahid Ali, the Kashmiri poet, can easily empathize with any other oppressed people like the Papagos or the Palestinians. Like the Australian Aboriginal philosopher

Bill Neidjie, Agha Shahid Ali also “weaves his [the Papagos] people beautifully in the ecological fabric of the world as connected beings, held by the land and its places of special sacrality” (Neidjie in Plumwood, 225).

The last lines of the poem can be read as a kind of rumination on the loss the earth has faced during its journey from the beginning:

... a time
to recollect
every shadow, everything the earth was losing,

a time to think of everything the earth
and I had lost ... (“Snow on the Desert,” *V.S.*, 167-168)

Needless to say, the earth’s losses are to be borne by men in general and a sensitive poet like Ali in particular, for he too is a member of the human community.

In another poem from the same volume, namely “The Keeper of the Dead Hotel,” the poet sheds light on a historical and historic event of Arizona that took place in 1917 and has had an enduring cultural importance ever since. Hubert Zapf propounds the concept of “cultural ecology”:

... it has staged and explored, in ever new scenarios, the complex feedback relationship of prevailing cultural systems with the needs and manifestations of human and nonhuman “nature,” and from this paradoxical act of creative regression has drawn its specific power of innovation and cultural self-renewal. (852)

This pattern of “cultural ecology” is perceptible in “The Keeper of the Dead Hotel” where the poet re-visits the Bisbee Deportation of July 1917. The voices from the past keep whispering to the collective consciousness and a kind of “*Son et Lumiere*” is enacted in the place of the illegal deportation and killing of nearly 1,300 mine workers:

he hears her whisper: “Something
has happened. What is it?”
No one answers,
but each night a voice cries out: “Fire!”
The copper mountains echo with rifle shots:
Men on strike are being killed
In the mines, the survivors forced
into boxcars and left the desert
without water. Their women are leaving the city. (“The Keeper of the Dead Hotel,” *V.S.*, 137)

A kind of dialogic relationship is established between past and present, and history and culture. As a result, a process of cultural ecology is set in motion and a creative regression operates just as a kind of “cultural self-renewal.” What is more, this opens a new vista for a later day poet who is free to negotiate the past armed with the heirloom of the history of the land.

“An Interview with Red Riding Hood, Now No Longer Little” taken from the volume *A Walk Through The Yellow Pages* (1987) imagines the poet’s encounter with a character from a famous fairy tale almost 700 years after its creation. In this, Ali’s spatialism finds newer dimensions as he moves beyond the constrictive frameworks of “temporality” and “reality.” An obvious geocentric concern is perceived in the following lines: “My father.../...slowly bought the whole forest,/ Had it cut down./ But the wolves escaped, ...” The poem actually allegorizes the urbanization of the rural and the sylvan landscapes. Since Little Riding Hood is no longer little, she does not fail to comprehend the mercenary motif of her father for the denuding of nature and endangering the life of wild animals. The other characters of the fairy tale also change in keeping with the changed times. The father of the little girl comes out as a commercial enterpriser who shows no compunction in ruthlessly cutting the forest and making money out of it. A direct conflict thus arises between human and non-human elements of ecology that fill out space into place by means of association. The symbiotic relationship is broken here. A traumatic, environmentally critical situation arises in the following lines: “Now I drive through the city,/ Hearing wolves at every turn./ How warm it was inside the wolf!”

The “wolves” are obviously symbolic here, indicating some harmful elements of the social environment of a city girl threatening her safety and security. Not only do the human-nonhuman bondings get severed, the interhuman bonding too crumbles down as the social environment becomes vitiated. What gives the poetic picture an element of pathos is the predicament of the girl’s grandmother. Unable to cope with the pangs of dislocation from their forest home to an old age home, the venerable lady got nightmares and lupophobia that ultimately took her to her grave: “The last time I saw her, she cried,/ “Save me, he’s coming to eat me up!”/ We gave her a quiet burial.”

The transformation of the locale from a sylvan landscape to the concrete jungle that gives to the poem the distinction of a revisionist reworking of a fairy tale, also reveals the geo-consciousness of Agha Shahid Ali who seems to follow Arthur Rimbaud’s ecoconscious dictate: “He [the poet] ... is responsible for humanity, even for the animals” (204).

“Hansel’s Game” is another subversive take on a German fairy tale that was first recorded by the famous Grimm brothers and published in 1812. It captures similar concerns over the change of environment, at once biological and social. There is a contrast between “in those years” and “now.” This is the narrative of revisiting the “form of the world” from “the grave to the womb” and from “the womb to the grave.” The twist comes at the tag end of the poem when the innocent little boy, now grown up, does the kind of work “what witches do” or did in the original tale:

We have a big ice-box
in our basement
where we keep the witch.

Now and then we take portions of her
to serve on special occasions.
And our old father washes
her blood from the dishes. (“Hansel’s Game,” *V.S.*, 103)

Apparently, the evil of consumerism has outreached even the witches. What is worse, the doers are not at all guilt-conscious; they have left behind any sense of guilt or shame like discarded belongings. If on the macro level, the spatialism exhibited remains telluric, then on the micro level it becomes domestic.

Agha Shahid Ali's sustained negotiations with landscape(s) add a remarkable dimension to his poetry, thanks to his unflinching as well as unwearied attitude to place. In this context, Amy Newman opines, "Though his [Ali's] poetry is dense with the landscapes of pre- and postpartition India and of his travels through and transitions to America, his [Ali's] nostalgia is extraterritorial" (71). According to Newman, "It [Ali's place attachment] is not limited to the borders and waters between countries but extends to the boundaries of human longing, dissolving postcolonial categorizations and etching poetry of an immaterial rather than a geographic exile" (71). The poems discussed in this paper may show us how Ali's passion for landscape(s) acquires for them near mythical qualities of evanescence, poignancy and a genuine sense of loss and longing. Significantly Ali's geoconsciousness is at once translocal, transtemporal and transreal allowing him to describe with equal aplomb Kashmir and Arizona, utopos and distopos, and ever-ever land and never-never land. By going across place, the poet is able to gain and give a global perspective that is ever mindful of specificities and generalities of location(s) described. By going across time, the poet limns the changes that affect his locations and lends to them a dreamy grandeur. By stepping across the liminality of the real, the poet gets the freedom to conflate "the inspective," "the introspective" and "the inventive" in the service of poetry.

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