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Reconfiguring Home Through Travel: The Poetics of Home, Displacement and Travel in Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry

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Abstract: This article seeks to examine how the Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali explores and rethinks ideas of "home" and travel in his poetry. Ali's poetry is a layered affective terrain in which his complex, entangled emotions surrounding home, exile, nostalgia, displacement, and travel play out. I argue that Ali's verse, through multiple journeys ranging over locations, languages, cultures, and literary terrain, interrogates and collapses the boundaries between the "home" and the world. I read his poetry as voicing the "disturbed" and displaced home of Kashmir, while simultaneously distilling a "re-homing" desire. Such an impulse reconfigures and reimagines the home through the inhabiting and repeated "homing" of multiple, "foreign" locations. Poetic travel across geographic and literary terrain, in Ali's oeuvre, thus speaks to the fraught and complex nature of the "home" in postcolonial and diasporic contexts, while remapping the home through the "re-homing" of the "foreign". Arguing that "travel" is a means of negotiating and rethinking the "home" in Ali's poetry, the article examines the intermeshed and dialogic relationship between home and travel that imbues his verse. Focusing particularly on poetic experimentation as a mode of travel, it aims to show how such literary travel makes new homes, while remembering and articulating Ali's lost homes.

Keywords: Agha Shahid Ali; Kashmir; home; loss; travel

> "Ali so thoroughly inhabits his exile, [. . .] that he makes of it—both for his own spirit and for his readers—a dwelling place." (Doty 2009)

1. Introduction

This article seeks to examine how the Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali explores and rethinks ideas of home and travel in his poetry.[1] A self-professed "multiple-exile", a "bilingual, bicultural (but never rootless) being" (Ali 1995, p. 77), Ali was born in New Delhi, raised in Srinagar in Indian Kashmir, and educated in Kashmir, Delhi, and the United States, where he lived a major part of his adult life. Ali's poetry is a layered affective terrain in which his complex and multiple emotions surrounding home, exile, nostalgia, and travel play out. Ali's poetry in the 1990s brought to the global Anglophone readership for the first time literature in English from an embattled and conflict-torn Kashmir. The Kashmir valley has been one of the most troubled and contested regions in postcolonial India, since the time of its violent history following the insurgency and armed conflict, which exploded

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[1] Ali had himself given a long list of the "various designations possible" to describe himself. They include appellations like Kashmiri-American, Indian-American, South-Asian American and Muslim-American (Benvenuto 2002, p. 267). He elucidated, "All of those designations would be true, in one way or the other, and if they are used in larger ways I don't have an objection to them. But if they are used simply to restrict me, I'm not interested in them" (ibid.).

in the valley in 1989.[2] Writing from and back to this troubled, embattled Kashmir, Ali's poetry delves into the intimate recesses and intersections of home, conflict, violence, place, and memory. The physical and cultural landscape of Kashmir, the primal home that he is displaced from, through distance and conflict, the home that is irrecoverably lost, occupies a central position in Ali's poetic and imaginative landscape. The hauntingly powerful, simultaneous presence and absence of Kashmir is the pivotal centre of Ali's lyrical world.

Remembering, recuperating and (re)writing his "disturbed", traumatised homeland of Kashmir from his diasporic location of the United States, Ali's poetry reveals a swirl of emotions and memories surrounding his ruptured "home". It brings to the fore the contiguous and deeply entangled ideas of home, displacement, loss, (be)longing, and travel. In this article, I argue that Ali's anguished poetic memorialising of Kashmir, his poignant lyric logic intertwining political conflict, cultural loss, and personal and collective trauma, offers insights into understandings and negotiations of home and displacement and their intersections. I also posit that the trope of travel, both as a thematic and woven into the form and structure of his poetry, is a crucial register to apprehend Ali's negotiations of home. Poetic travel across geographic and literary terrains becomes, for Ali, an expression not only of uprootedness and home*less*ness, but also of what might be termed "home*ful*ness", not just of loss of home, but of finding home(s) in verse. The lost "home" is thus remapped and resituated through the "re-homing" of the world. Enacting multiple journeys across different registers and polarities—spatial, cultural, temporal, linguistic, and formal—Ali's poetry confounds and obscures their boundaries, revealing their interconnectedness.

Ali's poetry reveals the impossibility of reclaiming home, underlining the distance that intrudes between the home and the imagination and memory of it, as the realisation dawns that "[one] cannot go home again as [. . .] [one] and [. . .] [the home] have both changed" (King 1994, p. 263). As Shaden Tageldin notes: "[T]he immigrant may long for a 'home' only contiguously related to the origin" (Tageldin 2003, p. 255). Home is thus not simply, straightforwardly the lost and irretrievable Kashmir. Ali's poetry brings to us multiple configurations and connotations of "home". While home in his imagination is always already marked by loss, distance and "impossible nostalgia" (ibid., p. 234), it is also reimagined, rethought and recontextualised through travel and border crossing, both literal and metaphorical. "Home" in Ali's poetry is thus multiply experienced, lost and (re)formulated.

The multiple, intersecting constructions and memories of home, in Ali's poetry, include Kashmir, the place to which he traced his roots, which shaped his identity and poetry indelibly. They also include Delhi, "the city where he was born, studied, taught, and published his first collection of poems", which figures in more than two dozen of his poems, for which city he "expresses a profound nostalgia and love" (Qadeer 2019, pp. 1–2). Home also traverses for Ali (both self-avowedly and poetically) physical and cultural locations of the United States. It is an emotional, cultural terrain where multiple identities and affiliations collide and (re)form, entangling narratives and memories about identity, (be)longing, and the self.

Ali's metaphorical and poetic "home" also encompasses multiple locations all over the world, both geographical and literary, that his poetry moves across and brings to his readers. As Stephen Burt observes, in his poetry Ali "aligns Kashmir with other war-torn places" (Burt 2017, p. 107); "yet even more insistently", it "places Kashmir within a global *literary* network, extending east, west, north, and south in space, beyond the Hindu and Muslim parts of the globe, as well as backwards in time",

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2 Kashmir has been the site of unrelenting territorial and national contestations between Indian, Pakistani and aspirant Kashmiri nationalisms, since the moment of South Asian decolonisation in 1947. "The most heavily militarized region in the world" (Kazi 2010, p. 85), Kashmir is vivisected into territories identified as Indian and Pakistan occupied Kashmir, demarcated by the Line of Control. These extremely fraught and vexed territorial relationships have been revealed through years of violence perpetrated by both militancy, and Indian and Pakistani armed forces. Marked by decades-long insurgency, conflict, militancy and military violence as everyday realities, the Kashmir valley and its daily negotiations with conflict and violence, tellingly, reveal a "disturbed" home/land. Kashmir foregrounds the fault lines of the nation and the nation's difficult, contested relationship with its troubled and troubling margins.

through its "global and polyglot literary allusion" (ibid., p. 108, italics in original). I contend that Ali's layered and multifaceted construction of "home" inscribes both loss and possibilities. It encompasses, along with his lost and remembered homes, his travels across multiple locations, physical, imaginative, and literary. It is this multiplicity inscribed within Ali's idea of the home, whereby literary travel becomes a means of embracing new homes in literature and life, that I wish to examine in this article. As much as Ali's home is shaped by loss, displacement and violence, it is also shaped by his imaginative ruminations over multiple cultural and geographic locations, whereby he imaginatively inhabits multiple "homes", ultimately disrupting and collapsing the binary between the "home" and the "foreign".

2. "Re-Homing": Reframing Home and Displacement

Svetlana Boym has argued that "[n]ostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective", thereby rendering "la nostalgie future" a universal exilic condition (Boym 2001, p. xvi). What distinguishes Ali's nostalgia for home from this kind of universal existential exile is that for the postcolonial migrant, "home" is "already a site of dispossession", "under the imprint of colonial history" (Tageldin 2003, p. 233). The idea of the "home" as a familiar space of security, comfort and belonging, has been discursively disassembled for some time within postcolonial and feminist theoretical deliberations. Tageldin notes that the postcolonial migrant's longing for home is a "two-way hyperextension towards 'home', mandated by colonization's presence in the past and past-tense in the present" (ibid.). For the Kashmiri migrant like Ali, born just after India/Pakistan's independence, bearing the imprint of Kashmir's particular post-1947 history of tangled and contested nationalistic claims and affiliations, expressed through decades of violent conflict, "home" becomes an even more vexed territory, a site of fragmentation and rupture. The inherent elements naturalised within the idea of home, like cultural identity, language, religion, and geopolitical borders, emerge as vexed and fraught territories in Kashmir. The Kashmiri migrant's experience of "home" is thus marked by a "dislocation of 'home' at its very origin"; as "home" itself is a disrupted site, for Ali, "displacement [...] is not necessarily exile [...] it is potentially, uneasily 'home'" (ibid., pp. 251, 234).

If home signifies dislocation and disruption, and displacement paradoxically becomes home, then these two experiential and conceptual categories cease to be counterpoints, and become simultaneous, contiguous, and mutually constitutive. This simultaneity of and blurring between home and displacement is elucidated by James Clifford, in his reading of "traveling" and "dwelling" as simultaneous and co-extensive (Clifford 1992, p. 108). Decentring the very idea of a centred, rooted human existence, he argues that "human location [is] [...] constituted by displacement as much as by stasis" (Clifford 1997, p. 2).

Conceptualising the dialogic and constitutive relationship between concepts of diaspora and home, Avtar Brah asserts that diaspora always "embodies a subtext of 'home'" (Brah 1996, p. 187), "*inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins*" (p. 189, italics in original). For the diasporic consciousness, "home" is a "mythic place of desire" and "a place of no return" (ibid., p. 188). Brah's concept of "homing desire" does not inscribe a possible return to the "original" home. It signals rather towards an engagement with ideas and emotions constitutive of home, and the complex contours and layers of home. In a similar vein, Susheila Nasta affirms that the displacement of diaspora "not only create[s] an unrequited desire for a lost homeland but also a 'homing desire', a desire to reinvent and rewrite home as much as a desire to come to terms with an exile from it" (Nasta 2002, p. 8).

While in my reading of Ali's poetry I endorse Brah's and Nasta's notion of "homing desire", I develop it further to evince an idea of and response towards home which I call "re-homing", which I characterise as both a thematic and a formal impulse. Such "re-homing" does not imply an emotional, cultural return to, and a recuperation of a lost culture and identity, or just a reconfiguration of the home from the in-between "third space" of diaspora (Bhabha 2004, p. 55). Such an understanding of the in-between space of diaspora is largely predicated upon a dialectical relationship between the cultures

of origin and destination. The diaspora aesthetic is envisaged as being located between, though also beyond, the binary of the "home" and the "host", as represented in theorisations of the "hyphen" of diasporic identities. In my reading of Ali's poetry, however, poetic and formal "travel" becomes not just a means of articulating the lost home, or of homing the culture(s) adopted later as home, but of repeatedly homing multiple locations and cultures all over the world. Through such a formal strategy, multiple spaces, cultures, and literary heritages across the world are *imaginatively* connected to Ali's *lived*, *experienced*, and *remembered* homes, through a web of interconnections. Those diverse spaces, histories, and contexts, which Ali may have never experienced as homes, but which he imaginatively travels to, imbue his multivalent, layered conceptualisation of home.

While underlining the loss and impossibility of reclamation inscribed within the idea of "home", Ali's poetry simultaneously resituates and reconfigures "home". Through multiple journeys across spaces, languages, and forms, it reinvents his home(s). Particularly noted for its dexterous allusions to European, Urdu, Arabic, and Persian literary traditions, his poetry straddles multiple experiential, cultural, and imaginative planes. Ali's poetic imagination thus reveals itself in journey, en route, finding itself *at home in motion*. His cultural moorings derive from formative *trans*-cultural interactions and influences. Ali had described his multiple cultural moorings as "tripartite" (Kaul 2011), shaped by "permutations of Hindu, Muslim and Western cultures" (Benvenuto 2002, p. 267). He had said of his poetic identity: "[Y]ou are a universe, you are the product of immense historical forces" (Ansari and Pal 1998). As Abin Chakraborty writes, this kind of plurality "is not just of his personal sensibility or his familiar background but also of the larger cultural plurality that is associated with the ethnolinguistic entity of 'Kashmiriyat'" (Chakraborty 2017, p. 60), the distinctive, syncretic cultural heritage of Kashmir, which mingles, among others, Muslim, Hindu, Sufi, and Buddhist traditions.

3. Framing Kashmir: Desire, Loss and Violence

Haris Qadeer has noted that "Shahid's reputation as a poet of exile is so firmly established that", "[t]he poet's name has almost become synonymous with Kashmir" (Qadeer 2019, p. 2). Akhil Katyal too notes that his name "virtually indexes the keywords 'Kashmir' and 'America'" (Katyal 2011). Indeed, the lost Kashmiri home is a looming and abiding presence in Ali's poetic imagination. This is revealed, for example, in the following short lyric, "Postcard from Kashmir", from his early collection *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (Ali 1987). Kashmir in Ali's poetic recuperation, as revealed in this poem, brings to the fore the interconnections between home, memory and displacement (both spatial and temporal), pointing towards the complex mesh of relationships connecting space, time and memory that characterises much of Ali's poetry.

> 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 is the closest
> I'll ever be to home.　When I return,
> the colors 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)

In this poem, Ali evokes his physical and emotional distance from Kashmir, by using the evocative metaphor of the "postcard" that arrives in his presumably American mailbox from Kashmir. The arrival of the postcard "piques his sense of distance from home, leaving him holding 'the half-inch Himalayas in [. . .] [his] hand'" (Nelson 2020, p. 2). This touristy token to the diasporic Kashmiri from his far-away home across continents, drives home to him definitively that "[t]his is home. And this is the closest/[. . .] [he'll] ever be to home." Such tokens now replace "intimate exchanges with the land", and "[t]he receipt of such a postcard alienates further, even as it evokes [. . .] [the] alienation [that] already preceded it" (ibid., p. 6). The miniscule abstraction of his Himalayan home in his hand, both tokenised and sanitised through the idyllic image on the postcard, underscores the gap between the superficial, one-dimensional reclamation on the postcard, and the complex nuances of the home left behind. The inaccessibility of the lost home and the impossibility of recuperation, is further highlighted through Ali's assertion that "the colors won't be so brilliant/the Jhelum's waters so clean/so ultramarine" when he returns. His memory of Kashmir, in contrast to the brilliant colours of the postcard, is like a "black/and white", "undeveloped", "negative", blurring and obscuring the home by being "a little out of focus". His monochrome memory underscores the distance that intrudes between it and the brilliant clarity of the Jhelum's waters, both in Kashmir and on the postcard. Ali's realisation of the inaccessibility of "home", recalls another diasporic author Salman Rushdie's metaphor of the "broken mirrors", with which displaced authors look back at their origins (Rushdie 1991, p. 11).

The central photographic metaphor, on which the poem's iterations about memory and home hinge, can also be read within contexts which speak not just to Ali's personal experiences of loss and displacement, but to broader histories of Kashmir in colonial and postcolonial India. The "commodity" of the picture postcard, for the tourist's and *outsider*'s consumption, points towards the global marketplace commodification of indigenous landscape and culture. It foregrounds both Ali's relationship with Kashmir as a diasporic "outsider", as well as the commoditized global and Indian consumption of the famed beauty of the pristine Himalayas of Kashmir. This tourist's token with its crucial metaphor of the photograph, signals towards framing narratives of beauty and desire, established representational paradigms that the valley of Kashmir, famed for its paradisiacal natural beauty, has been locked in, in popular Indian and global imaginings of the region.

Ananya Kabir, in her book *Territory of Desire*, identifies the discourse of desire and desirability within which Kashmir has been imagined since the nineteenth century. Kashmir was perceived, in both colonial times and the postcolonial Indian imagination, as the quintessential pastoral "other" of modern India, a site of fantasy and desire for the plains inhabitants. Such an imagining of Kashmir, imbued with beauty and desire, was intensified further in postcolonial India, when Kashmir became the touchstone of a pre-colonial, pre-industrial Indian pastoral vision, tied intimately with Indian nationalistic interests in claiming this "territory of desire". Analysing the relationship between colonial modernity and fantasy in late nineteenth century Kashmir, Kabir identifies the entry of the camera into Kashmir as a key moment within this narrative of desire (Kabir 2009). Through the use of the photographic metaphor, Ali's poem, as I have shown above, signals towards his fraught relationship with his home of Kashmir. It simultaneously evokes and interrogates the photographic gaze on Kashmir, and the thoughtless, superficial consumption, and objectification that it has been subjected to for centuries. Through the objectified, tokenised representation of Kashmir in the photograph of the postcard, where Kashmir collapses into "a neat four by six inches", abstracted to the "half-inch Himalayas", Ali evokes the problematics of such abstraction. Along with the deep sense of personal loss that the poem evokes, it also suggests the lost and alienated landscape and identity of Kashmir, ravaged through desire and consumption of its natural beauty. As Ali realises that "memory and artifice transform the very past he pursues" (Ramazani 2001, p. 12), he also realises that not just his but Kashmir's past is also irretrievably transformed, through the artifice and violence of fantasy and desire.

The Half-Inch Himalayas, from 1987, predating explicit conflict in Kashmir, which erupted in 1989, evokes loss, distance, "departure, erasure and loneliness" (Nelson 2020, p. 2). Ali's later collections of poems on Kashmir, however, like *The Country Without a Post Office* (Ali 1997), agonisingly evoke the

physical and psychic violence of war in Kashmir. The collection as a whole, as the title suggests, builds on the idea of the travelling letter/mail that was earlier introduced in "Postcard from Kashmir". It now foregrounds the thematic of the lost letter that never reaches its destination, as a way of suggesting rupture and dislocation in the social fabric of Kashmir, as well as its inaccessibility and isolation, engendered through violence. Unlike the postcard which had travelled from Kashmir in the earlier poem, letters from Kashmir now do not travel outside, as it is now a "country without a post office", cutting off and rendering impossible all connections with the world outside. Just as the metaphor of the picture postcard arriving from Kashmir implies the distance between Ali and his lost home, the metaphor of the lost letter suggests the destabilisation and disruption of the home through conflict and violence. The poem "I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight" from the collection, for instance, evokes both Ali's emotional proximity to, and the political isolation and distance of violence-torn Kashmir. Srinagar is now a place both proximate and distant: a "city from where no news can come" (p. 3), yet also a place that Ali sees from New Delhi "so visible in its curfewed nights/that the worst is precise" (pp. 4–5). Unlike his "out of focus" memory blurring the home in "Postcard from Kashmir", Kashmir is now "precise" in its clarity. "[A]cross five hundred miles", the poet is "sheened in moonlight, in emptied Srinagar" (p. 18).

In the poem, we encounter Rizwan, dead in custody in occupied Kashmir, like many other young Kashmiris, now seen by the poet from New Delhi as "a shadow chased by searchlights […] running/away to find its body" (pp. 7–8). Rizwan exhorts the poet "Don't tell my father I have died", and the poet agonisingly follows him

> … through blood on the road
> and hundreds of pairs of shoes the mourners
> left behind, as they ran from the funeral,
> victims of the firing. From windows we hear
> grieving mothers, and snow begins to fall
> on us, like ash. (pp. 31–36)

Rizwan brings to us the horrors of war-torn Kashmir: "Kashmir is burning" (p. 39). The vividness of the poet's imagination as he sees Rizwan's "bullet-torn" body, his "blood sheer rubies on Himalayan snow" (pp. 49–50), starkly contrasts with the poet's "out of focus" memory of Kashmir in "Postcard from Kashmir", as well as with the idyllic representation of Kashmir's pristine beauty on the postcard. The bloodied Himalayan snow, on the other hand, now exhorts the poet to be with Kashmir in its trauma—"Each night put Kashmir in your dreams" (p. 27)—and not let distance intrude, though Kashmir may now be, in its violent isolation, a place from where "no news/escapes the curfew" (pp. 54–55).

Claire Chambers has read Ali's Kashmir poems as an attempt to give "an international dimension to the Kashmir situation", observing that "[a]s a Kashmiri-American, Shahid wants to look at Kashmir from a broader perspective than the local geopolitics of South Asia" (Chambers 2011). *The Country Without a Post Office*, in its haunting evocation of violence, connects Kashmir to other war-torn spaces across the world, making connections to "Israel and Palestine, Russia in the 1920s and early 1930s, to the Ireland of Yeats' civil war poems, and to the Spanish Civil war" (Burt 2017, p. 110). Such interconnections in time and space, through sweeping movements across histories and contexts, locates Ali's Kashmir in a web of globally perpetrated, itinerant violence and conflict.

4. A Poetics of Travel and Transnationalism

While Kashmir remains the pivot of Ali's poetic world, it also travels across a multitude of geographic and cultural sites. As Nishat Zaidi notes, "Shahid's inspirations were as varied as James Merrill, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Mirza Ghalib and Begum Akhtar" (Zaidi 2007, p. 156), observing that "his poems are replete with the images of Radha, Krishna, Laila, Majnoo, Buddhism and Hinduism and Sufism and Bhakti" (ibid.). She draws our attention to how Ali's poetry "moves across time

and space [. . .] Syria, Andalusia, Damascus, Boston, Frankfurt, Delhi, Srinagar all melting into one" (p. 160). Bruce King has described Ali's imagination as linking "past and present, America and India, Islamic and American deserts, American cities and former American Indian tribes, modern deserts and prehistoric oceans" (King 1994, p. 17). These leaps across space and time, connecting diverse landscapes, contexts, and histories, enact a convergence of the home and the world.

Ali's poetry contains numerous scattered references to the world-renowned Kashmiri shawl with its globally known "paisley" design, and the Kashmiri spice saffron, in poems like "The Last Saffron", "Farewell", and "The Country Without a Post Office". The Kashmiri shawl and saffron, material luxury goods which have been transported for centuries from Kashmir all over the globe, represent Ali's geographical and cultural roots of Kashmir, with its narratives and histories of the "local". They also simultaneously evoke these objects' global trade, travel and recontextualisation, where the local encounters the global. The imagery of the itinerant Kashmiri shawl and the globally exported saffron thus has, encrypted within it, narratives of global travel and adaptation. However, they simultaneously suggest cultural appropriation, loss and the violence on Kashmir of colonial and neo-colonial capitalism, a violence signalled in the very name and history of the world-famous Kashmiri shawl design, the "paisley".[3] The shawl and the paisley, with their connotations of colonial violence, also anticipate the violence-torn Kashmir of the 1990s, where "men/fleeing from soldiers into the dead-end lanes", leave "footprints on the street" whose shapes resemble a beautiful carpet ("A History of Paisley", Ali 2009, p. 18).

An arc of continuity can thus be identified across Ali's numerous poetic references to these objects, and the violence of appropriation and consumption that their pre-capitalist global travel evoke, and the later trajectories of violence, perpetuated through structures of capital and consumerism on Kashmir in a globalised world (for instance through tourism), that his poetry often foregrounds. These Kashmiri material objects, whose global travels and histories suggest violence and appropriation, speak to the fraught and contested nature of the "home" in Kashmir, also marked by loss and violence. They also denote the complex trajectories of global travel from Kashmir, of goods, people, and cultural heritages. Yet, while the global trajectories of these Kashmiri material items underline loss and dislocation, they simultaneously suggest the possibilities of adaptation and recontextualisation embedded within travel. Ali and Ali's poetry too, like these Kashmiri objects, have travelled globally, a travel that has been characterised by loss and distance, but also by new possibilities, gateways, re-location and recontextualisation.

Ali's poetics is thus revealed through the dual vectors of a longing and nostalgia for the lost and inaccessible home, and of travel across different, diverse boundaries. The "foreign" is thus "re-homed" in Ali's poetry, as the home itself is "de-homed" through diasporic distance and violent conflict. Therefore, travel emerges not only as a significant trope or thematic concern, but as an organising principle of Ali's work, revealed through his poetic "travel" across cultural, formal, linguistic, and generic territories. Ali's poetics might thus be effectively understood through the concept of the "transnational poetics" that Jahan Ramazani posits, whereby "transnational affiliations and identities of [...] poets" encourage a reconsideration of entrenched "single-nation genealogies" or "mononational narratives" of understanding modern poetry (Ramazani 2006, p. 332). As the "world [...] become[s] deterritorialized and transnational" (Appadurai 1996, p. 188), characterised by "movement, relocation, displacement" (Gilroy 1993, p. 111), "nationalities and ethnicities of poets and poems [...] [become] hybrid, interstitial and fluid" (Ramazani 2006, p. 333).

3　The "paisley" is an ornamental textile design, the tear-shaped motif with a curved upper end, from the Persian *boteh* or *buta*, used commonly on the Kashmir shawl. When the intricately designed hand-woven Kashmiri shawl began to be exported to metropolitan Britain during the nineteenth century, the popularity of the Kashmiri artefact created a large scale demand for the shawl in Britain and Europe, which led to mass, machine made, cheaper versions of the shawl, produced in various textile manufacturing centres in Britain. The west Scottish town of Paisley, which was such a centre for the mass-produced machine made imitation Kashmiri shawl, eventually gave the design its name, which came to be known as the "paisley" design. For more on the history of the paisley, see Michelle Maskiell (2000), Valerie Reilly (1987).

Ali's poetry can be located on such a vector of transnational and transcultural poetics, along with the frames of loss and exile that he has so often been read within. Ali's Kashmiri identity, with its specific cultural heritage and geopolitical history of the post-1947 era, bequeaths on him its complex legacies of conflict and turmoil surrounding ideas of home and belonging. His poetry also repeatedly underscores the inaccessibility of and impossibility of reclaiming the lost home. Yet his poetic vision encompasses much more, connecting Kashmir to other lost histories, disrupted geographies, reclaiming the lost home through homing disparate spaces and literary traditions. It is hybrid, multiply constructed and articulated, traversing cultures, places, and narratives beyond Kashmir, yet imaginatively linked to Kashmir in multiple ways. The following couplet from Ali's poem "Land" expresses these complex imbrications of home, displacement, and multiplicity: "If home is found on both sides of the globe/home is of course here—and always a missed land" (pp. 5–6). Expressing the uncertainties and ambiguities surrounding the home, Ali here underscores home as a space that is "on both sides of the globe", "here", and also "missed"; the "ambiguity is complicated by the use of a singular 'home' that can be available to plural parts of the world" (Khalid 2013, p. 2). Home is thus singular, yet multiply formed, experienced, and remembered, always a site of displacement and nostalgia, but also of (re)formulation and (re)invention.

5. Crossing over: The Blurred Boundaries of Ali's Poetry

Ali's poetic return to Kashmir—the irretrievable, alienated and yet inalienable "home"—is thus enabled and sustained through a simultaneous "travel" across boundaries. The following extract from his poem "When on Route 80 in Ohio", from the collection *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (Ali 2002a), reveals the perennial shifts and transitions, and blurring of boundaries so representative 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 trope of travel in the poem is both literal and metaphorical, when the poet claims that while driving in Ohio, he came across a signpost for Calcutta. A point to note here is the simultaneous evocation of both nostalgia and loss, *and* travel and direction, through the reference to the "map", in the very title of the collection *A Nostalgist's Map of America*, connoting the dual impulses of nostalgia and travel that characterises Ali's poetry. The surprising and surreal juxtaposition of Ohio and Calcutta has a logical explanation, though. Calcutta, apart from the Indian city, is also the name of a place in Ohio. This juxtaposition of the two Calcuttas in the poem, suggests the interconnectedness of histories and contexts. The colonial narrative of the Indian Calcutta intertwines with recent American history of claiming and appropriating foreign place names by mapping them onto its own territory. Xiwen Mai identifies in this moment of the poem a confusion between the "home" and the "foreign", in which "[t]he two places, geographically far apart suddenly merge into one" (Mai 2007, p. 9).

The poem also examines the relationships between peoples and nations, between the first and third worlds, between Ali's alienated and displaced home of India, and his adopted home of America, within the framework of a globalised world ordered through capital, power, access and lack. The poet's realisation that "India always exists off the turnpikes of America", evokes the simultaneity of "India" and "America" as dual loci of identity and allegiance in Ali's poetic world. But it also focuses our attention on the relationship between India and America in the current globalised world, structured

through networks centring on capital and power. These look back upon and recall similar relationships in the colonial era, such as those evoked through Ali's references to the Kashmiri shawl. Ali's poetic play on Calcutta's name recalls the city's colonial terminological history when the Bengali "Kolkata" became Calcutta, signalling towards the larger histories of colonial violence. It also suggests similar narratives of violence and appropriation in a new global order, when the name of the colonial city is *re*appropriated as an American place name in Ohio. This underlines the repositioning of structures of power and profit from the colonial to contemporary neocolonial times. Ali ponders on this relationship between India and America in a global world of capital and human flows, through the tantalising counterpoint between the Ohio whose "road is a river/polished silver by cars", and the river in India, "the Ganges [. . .] sobbing" (pp. 13–14). The trains that he sees in his mind's eye:

> . . . rush by
> one after one
> on their roofs old passengers
> each ready to surrender
> his bones for tickets (pp. 17–21)

While fast and presumably fancy cars, like the motorist poet's, ply on the polished, shining road/river in Ohio, the trains witnessed in India in the poet's mind, are burdened with "old passengers" "on their roofs", "ready to surrender" "bones for tickets". Once more, like in the earlier poem, "Postcard from Kashmir", the distance between Ohio and India, between the American roads and the sobbing Ganges, become apparent. This reminds the poet of the connections between the global North and South both in colonial and neocolonial times, connections predicated mostly upon capital and violence, while also highlighting the unbridgeability and distance between the two. While America's neocolonial strategies mirror earlier colonial violence, through the reappropriation of the colonial city's name, Ali's poem suggests the persistence of the relationships of violence, exploitation, lack and want, through his image of "the empty cans of children" (p. 25), and the sounds that he hears from India "of vendors/bargaining over women" (pp. 29–30). Therefore, travel in this poem, "forces the poet and his reader not only to remember and reconnect in history but also to recontextualize in the postcolonial present" (Mai 2007, p. 9).

Like the collapsing of spatial boundaries in this poem, we find a collapsing of temporal divisions, confounding past, present and future, in "The Last Saffron" from *The Half-Inch Himalayas*: "Yes I remember it/The day I'll die" (pp. 23–24). Such temporal blurring, also seen in poems like "The Lost Memory of Delhi", becomes a "distorting yet heightening lens" (Kabir 2009, p. 188), to show how death, Kashmir and memory are deeply enmeshed in Ali's poetic imagination. Like spatial and temporal boundaries, linguistic demarcations are also obscured in Ali's poetry, and languages overflow into each other. Ali had said in his poem "Dear Editor":

> i am a dealer in words
> that mix cultures
> and leave me rootless (pp. 3–6)

In "Language Games", he foregrounds the complex imbrications between language, exile and poetry: I went mad in your house of words/[. . .] so you would/give me asylum (pp. 1–3). While the intermingling of languages and cultures in his poetry points to his "rootless"ness in the first example above, his poetic "house of words" also gives him "asylum" in the second poem, suggesting the "home" that Ali finds in his verse, as an antidote to his physical, cultural home/rootlessness.

These multiple blurred and obscured boundaries, point towards the vexed, overlapping contexts of language, culture, space and time in his poetry, inscribing loss and trauma, yet also interconnectedness

and intersections. While a landscape of loss informs Ali's poetics,[4] loss, displacement and *dis*location are simultaneously *re*located into a poetics of travel, *trans*locality and *trans*culturality. It is this dialectical relationship between the two—*dis*location and *re*location, the *loss* of home and *re*homing—that I consider to be the characteristic feature of Ali's oeuvre. The sense of loss haunting Ali's poetry is, as King suggests, not specifically that of the exile, but "[l]oss is part of the passing of time, history", attempting to retrieve "what has been lost in the process of living" (King 1994, p. 3). Ali's "nostalgia is not of an ideal world, a place of origins or roots, but of something missed, a past or future, relationships that will not develop, lives he will not have, histories he can not share" (ibid.). And while these losses, which have piled up "in the process of living"—the unexplored possibilities, unformed connections, missed opportunities, the "home" impossible to return to—mark his poetry indelibly, it also expresses the possibilities that *open up* in living, and the homes that one can *embrace* while losing others.

6. Ali's Formal Cosmopolitanism

One of the most noted characteristics of Ali's poetry is his movement across different poetic forms from around the world. He was much admired for his formal virtuosity, "for his striking and firm commitment to literary aesthetics" (Chambers 2011). Meta Jones and Keith Leonard have pointed out the "multiplicity of formal choices, innovations, and traditions that enliven the cross-pollination of [...] multi-ethnic poets" like Ali (Jones and Leonard 2010, p. 10). They draw attention to how such poets' cultural repertoire is formed through "flexible use of poetic form, [...] adaptation [...] and the complicated [...] ways in which ethnic selfhood is constructed [...] in verse" (ibid., p. 9). This kind of formal multiplicity and movement across different global poetic forms is a way of making a "home" of and of "re-homing" the world. I would like to term this kind of *poetic homing* of the world by Ali a *formal* cosmopolitanism. Yet, significantly, such a cosmopolitanism simultaneously becomes, for him, an idiom to articulate a disrupted and fragmented home. David Caplan has noted about Ali's formal experiments that his "prosodic choices dramatize his tangled literary and cultural loyalties" (Caplan 2004, pp. 53–54), suggesting how Ali's formal travels emerge from his multiple and entangled cultural influences and affiliations.

Ali was noted for his felicity in using complex and rigorous set metrical forms from across the world like the Italian canzone and sestina, the French villanelle, the Malay pantoum, and of course, the Urdu/Persian ghazal, which he was most famous for, for adapting their particular structures and rhythms to the English language. Among these I will focus, in particular, in the sections that follow, on Ali's experimentation with the forms of the Italian canzone and the Urdu ghazal, to demonstrate Ali's formal cosmopolitanism, and to show how formal experimentation becomes, for him, a mode of articulating both the loss of home, and the embracing of new homes through poetry.

Ali wrote three poems in the form of the canzone, the Italian or Provencal ballad form, of 5 to 7 stanzas, with each stanza echoing the first in rhyme scheme and stanza length, originally typically set to music. The most famous canzone by Ali is "Lenox Hill" from *Rooms are Never Finished*, written after his mother's death. Kabir notes that in "Lenox Hill", "the dying mother, the poem and Kashmir, space of dreams and memories, merge" (Kabir 2009, p. 139). These continuities between Kashmir, its histories and myths, the mother, Ali, dreams, and memories, are evident from the very beginning:

> (In Lenox Hill Hospital, after surgery,
> my mother said the sirens sounded like the
> elephants of Mihiragula when his men drove
> them off cliffs in the Pir Panjal Range.)
> The Hun so loved the cry, one falling elephant's,

4　Talking about how his poetry always articulated some form of loss, Ali had said: "I think of people who because of historical forces have lost so much. I mean, these things are in my way of looking at the world. I'm in one way or another obsessed with all that" (Benvenuto 2002, p. 266).

> he wished to hear it again. 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 (pp. 1–9)

In the poem, Kashmir and America, the Pir Panjal mountains and Manhattan, and Mihiragula the Hun and Lenox Hill Hospital all dissolve into each other in the mother's "hospital-dream of elephants". Just as the poet in "When on Route 80 in Ohio" had suddenly encountered a turn to Calcutta while driving in Ohio, bringing to the fore the historical and contemporary connections, as well as disjuncture between India and America, the hospital sirens in Manhattan recall the cries of the mythical elephants driven off Kashmir's Pir Panjal range by Mihiragula. Such entanglements reveal the inextricable interconnections between Kashmir, America, the mother, home, death, and loss in Ali's poetic imagination. This mesh of interrelations is enacted through the rigorous, exacting form and metre of the canzone. Each stanza, as we notice, is of 12 lines, each of 10–11 syllables, each stanza in turn containing interchangeably the same eight rhymes. The canzone typically also has some key words repeated throughout the poem, tied intimately with both the theme and the structure of the form. In "Lenox Hill", these key words are "Kashmir", "mother", "die", and "(uni)verse", highlighting once more the centrality of the connections between Kashmir, the mother, death and poetry/verse in the poem, as well as in Ali's poetic universe. Amitav Ghosh, in an essay written after Ali's death in 2001, describes "Lenox Hill" as Ali's greatest poem, terming the canzone a form of "unusual rigour and difficulty" (Ghosh 2002, p. 320). He comments that in the poem, "the architectonics of the form creates a soaring superstructure [...] Entombed at the centre of this soaring edifice lies his mother" (ibid., pp. 320–21).

The following lines from the poem heighten further the intertwining of the mother with Kashmir, as Ali's grief for his mother dissolves into grief for Kashmir. "Kashmir", the multiply repeated end-word of the stanza (other than mother), serves to underscore the centrality of Kashmir in Ali's mourning of 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)

"Lenox Hill" thus reveals the continuities between the loss of the mother and of Kashmir. Ali had signalled towards these continuities of loss, in his preface to *Rooms are Never Finished* saying, "To a home at war, my father, sibling and I brought my mother's body for burial. It was the only thing to do as she had longed for home throughout her illness" Ali (2002b, p. 15). Ali also wrote other elegies apart from this elegiac canzone. The most well-known among them is "From Amherst to Kashmir", also from the same collection, which similarly yokes personal and political tragedy, myth and history.

7. The English *Ghazal*: Negotiating the Dual Impulses of "Travel" and "Return"

The form that Ali was most noted for was, of course, the ghazal, the ancient seventh century "Arabic lyric, whose couplets operate within an exacting scheme of rhyme, repetition, and syllabic consistency" (Benvenuto 2002, p. 264). The form is known for its "use of repetitive images and phrases [. . .] elliptical metaphors, imaginative leaps and reliance on the reader to bring together a diversity of unrelated couplets into a supposed metaphoric narrative" (King 1994, p. 3). Ali identified the ghazal's "constant sense of longing" as "the peculiar fragrance of the form" (Ali 1995, p. 76). Other than the ghazals in *The Country Without a Post Office* and *Rooms are Never Finished*, his posthumous

collection, *Call me Ishmael Tonight* (Ali 2003), was a book entirely of ghazals. He also translated Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and edited an anthology of English ghazals, *Ravishing DisUnities* (Ali 2000). Ali described the ghazal as being "composed of thematically autonomous couplets [. . .] linked together strictly through rhyme and meter" (ibid.,). He elaborated: "[o]ne couplet of a ghazal may be political, another tragic, one religious, another romantic, and so on" (p. 82), observing that "[t]he form of the ghazal is tantalizing because it gives the poet the freedom to engage in different themes, issues and attitudes, while keeping himself gratefully shackled" (p. 76).

Malcolm Woodland observes that Ali's English ghazals, which stringently follow the metrical and formal requirements of the original form, and his strong plea for orthodoxy in the English ghazal, inscribe an underlying tension between nostalgia or a "nativist" impulse for cultural purity on the one hand, and recontextualisation, renewal and hybridity on the other (Woodland 2005, p. 250). The ghazal's refrain or *qafia*, repeated at the end of every couplet, as well as the *radif*—the word which ends the second line of each couplet—contributes to what Ali had identified as "the circularity of meaning", which lies at the heart of the ghazal (Ali 1995, p. 89). Simultaneously, the refrain, by appearing repeatedly in unrelated, thematically diverse and individually autonomous couplets, continually "accrue[s] new meaning" (Hollander 1985, p. 77), and provides "fresh energy or varied perspective" (McFarland 1982, p. 179). "The meaning of a refrain", says Woodland, "involves a complex and multidirectional hybridization": "[a] refrain poem [. . .] continually renews and refigures its own past [. . .] [and] a refrain's meaning is never fixed or final" (Woodland 2005, p. 253).[5]

The following examples, of Ali's use of the refrain (*qafia*) and the *radif* in the English ghazal, demonstrate the above point about the refrain establishing the ghazal's characteristic circularity of meaning, yet constantly accruing new meaning through renewal and recontextualisation.[6]

> I'll do what I must if I'm bold in real time.
> A refugee, I'll be paroled in real time.
>
> And who is the terrorist, who the victim?
> We'll know if the country is polled in real time.
>
> Now Friend, the Beloved has stolen your words—
> Read slowly: The plot will unfold in real time. ("In Real Time" 1–2, 15–16, 25–26)

While the *radif* "time" and the *qafia* "in real time" introduce the circularity as well as the contestations of time, the different couplets connote emotions of exile, conflict and love, among others. The rhyming words repeated in all the 11-syllable lines, before the *qafia* of the second line—"bold", "paroled", "consoled", "controlled", "cold", "untold"—further establish the repetitive, circular structure of the ghazal, while being imbued with themes typical of Ali's poetry like love, separation, exile, asylum, and the characteristic intermingling of the personal and the political (in the reference to the "refugee", for instance, in the first couplet).

The epigraph that begins "In Real Time", taken from James Merill, "Feel the patient's heart/Pounding—oh please, this once", also evokes the counterpoint between hope and hopelessness, between love and pain, which typically marks the relationship between the speaker and the beloved in the ghazal tradition, which we also see in the following excerpt from another ghazal.

> Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight?
> Whom else from rapture's road will you expel tonight?

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[5]　For more on the refrain and the use of repetition in poetry, see John Hollander (1985), Marianne Shapiro (1990), Mark Strand (2000).

[6]　Apart from the ghazal, some of the other poetic forms which Ali used like the sestina, villanelle or the pantoum, all have elaborate structures of repetition, suggesting retrieval and recovery, yet simultaneously progress and forward motion. For more on these, see Ronald McFarland (1982), Strand (2000), Shapiro (1990) and Joseph Conte (1991).

> I beg for haven: Prisons, let open your gates—
> A refugee from Belief seeks a cell tonight.
>
> My rivals for your love—you've invited them all?
> This is mere insult, this is no farewell tonight.
>
> And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee—
> God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight. ("Tonight" pp. 1–2, 5–6, 23–26)

In this poem too, we observe the counterpoint between the circularity of the *radif* "tonight", and the widely traversing couplets evoking characteristic themes of Ali's poetry: exile, asylum, Kashmir, farewell, and love. The rhyming words preceding the *radif* "tonight" evoke loss, exile, and homelessness: "farewell", "expel", "Ishmael". The reference to Ishmael (and thereby the Biblical narrative of his expulsion by Abraham) further intensifies the connotation of homelessness. We note again the reference to the "refugee" who seeks "haven", connoting the "haven" and the "home" that the form itself offers to the poet, seeking asylum from disappointment in love (for the beloved, for Kashmir). The last couplet also shows the ghazal's characteristic feature of the *takhallus*, by including the name of the poet at the end.

Ali's strict meeting of the rigorous formal requirements of the ghazal while simultaneously hybridising it by writing it in English and using loose free-verse, can be seen as enacting the dual impulses of "return" and "travel" that I have identified in his writing. They suggest the dual vectors of "travel" and "homing" which converge in his poetry. The final couplet from Ali's ghazal "In Arabic" aptly expresses this counterpoint between orthodoxy and plurality, return and travel: "[t]hey ask me to tell them what Shahid means: Listen, listen:/It means 'The Beloved' in Persian, 'witness' in Arabic" (pp. 25–26). While Ali adheres to tradition and cultural purity by including his *takhallus*, he reveals his origin to be anything but pure. His name is divided, having two different meanings in two languages. This multiplicity articulated in the very form of the ghazal and particularly in the refrain, expresses Ali's own multiple loyalties, and the counterpoint, in his poetry, between his roots in Kashmir, and his travels across spaces, languages and forms, which I have analysed in this article.

In conclusion, therefore, I reiterate that travel, both as a thematic and an aesthetic, becomes a metaphoric idiom to articulate Ali's experience of and emotions surrounding his disrupted and "disturbed" home, his displacement from home, and his desire for "re-homing". Travel and home, therefore, emerge as simultaneous and mutually constitutive conceptual and experiential territories in Ali's poetry. Indeed, formal "travel" itself finally becomes a kind of literary "home" or anchor, which provides Ali the structure and space to articulate complex, ambiguous, and amorphous ideas and emotions surrounding home, loss, displacement, death, and so on. As I have pointed out before, Ali's numerous references to the Kashmiri shawl in his poetry evoke the connotations of the itinerant and travelling artefact, which has, encrypted within it, narratives of travel and recontextualisation, but also of loss and violence. Like the travelling artefact, the metaphorically travelling poet, travelling across global poetic forms, linguistic and cultural heritages, suggests cultural plurality and transformation, while simultaneously evoking cultural loss, the irrecoverability and irreducibility of cultures, and their resistance to transliteration and translation. As Ali's poetry demonstrates, his aesthetics and poetics of travel and cosmopolitanism provide a powerful idiom, which simultaneously expresses loss, displacement, trauma and violence, and multiplicity and interconnectedness.

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