

The Traveling Poet Agha Shahid Ali

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Introduction:

While Agha Shahid Ali's Kashmir poems focus on the complex rootedness of home, his other poems evoke the routed-ness of traveling. Travel always played a significant role in Ali's life. As Lawrence Needham has noted, —Being in-between comes naturally to Ali. Growing up in Kashmir, Ali lived in America as a child and studied in New Delhi before he traveled again to the United States as a graduate student. He then settled in America as a poet and professor and taught in several universities across the country. In —A Tribute to Agha Shahid Ali: After You', Christopher Merrill recalls that Ali claimed he was exiled from Kashmir, from India, and from his mother tongue, Urdu. However, Ali's travel within and between America and South Asia is largely voluntary¹. —To be in a diaspora, writing the exile's or the expatriate's poetry, is a privileged historical site, today sometimes facilely so, Ali writes in 1999. In the same essay, he takes up Edward Said's differentiation of —exile from —expatriates or —émigrés in —Reflections on Exile. According to Said, —exile originated in the age-old practice of banishment. The homeless anguish of exile is a forced —solitude experienced outside the group, whereas —expatriates or —émigrés refers to those who —voluntarily live in an alien country out of choice. Although Ali acknowledges that his identity as a poet in America is more that of an émigré in Said's sense, he would prefer to call himself an exile —for its resonance, for contrast to the near-clinical expatriate' and émigré. Assuming an —exile identity for the —resonance of the term, Ali makes a conscious choice to live and write in a poetic way. The word —resonance invokes all of the meaning that the term —exile evokes: the purpose of travel, the meaning of loss, and the illusion of belonging,

and much more. If exile writing is usually preoccupied with —departure, nostalgia, incompleteness, rootlessness, leave taking, and dispossession, as Oscar Campomane has said about many Filipino-American literary works, Ali's travel poems actually reflect thoughts on space and displacement as a postcolonial, transnational traveler. His collection *A Nostalgist's Map of America*, for example, focuses on travel in America, but the memories and the experience of the routes written here lead to thinking beyond this land. —I See Chile in *My Rearview Mirror* juxtaposes the landscape of the Southwestern United States with imagined views of the military and political turmoil in South America; —Eurydice also clearly shows his political critique in a broad sphere by rewriting the myth against the background of the Nazi horror. What kind of travel writing is this, and what new meaning does the poet give to the landscape, the traveling routes, and the locations he writes about?

Bhabha in the introduction to *Location of Culture*:

It defines —unhomely as —the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations. Unlike a state of homelessness, his notion of the —unhomely reinvents Freud's concept of the uncanny in the postcolonial context. With analyses ranging from Tagore's *The Home and the World* to Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, Bhabha shows how the unhomely moment happens in the dislocation and relocation of the home and the world and refers to the condition where the distinction between home and world, between the private and the public, between the personal and the political, are compromised. Situated on flights, at airports, or on journeys of various kinds, Ali's travel poems embrace the liminal, unhomely condition of someone who is a traveler (mostly the poet-speaker himself, though in very few cases someone else). His collections *A*

Nostalgist’s Map of America and Rooms Are Never Finished, especially, highlight an unhomely travel that constantly troubles textual, geographical and cultural boundaries and reconsiders the notion of belonging, not merely through subject matter but through style as well.

Discussing the transnational perspective of Ali and other South Asian American writers, Srikanth reminds us that American authors such as Herman Melville, Henry James, Ernest Hemingway, and Gertrude Stein have established a long tradition of writing about travel beyond their homeland. To contextualize Ali’s poetry in the transnational writing of American authors can be helpful indeed, yet Srikanth’s over-general contextualization leaves out too much, specifically how America’s relationship with the rest of the world has been changing dramatically from the time of Melville to the global era, and how today’s South Asian American writers may approach the relationship of America to the world from a fundamentally different perspective than the Anglo American authors of a century or more ago. Considering Ali’s graduate study of English literature and his poetry writing in America since the 1970s, it is more illuminating to examine his transnational perspective in light of the trope of travel and the transnational turn in postwar American poetry.

Critics of twentieth-century American poetry have noted the importance of travel as both a thematic concern and a mode of writing and thinking, but this body of work has merely attended to mainstream poetry, of which Elizabeth Bishop’s poem —Questions of Travel is a classic example. In Brazil, her speaker poses an endless array of questions about the meaning of both home and travel: Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?

[...]

Is it right to be watching strangers in a play
in this strangest of theatres?

[...]

*‘Continent, city, country, society:
the choice is never wide and never free.
[...] Should we have stayed at home,
wherever that may be?’*

Robert von Hallberg in his influential book *American Poetry and Culture 1945-1980* (1985) devotes a chapter to travel poetry, in which he reads

poems such as Bishop’s in the context of the United States’ emergence as a military and economic power after World War II. He argues that travel poems of this period tend to focus on monuments and other exotic cultural sights and thus form —part of America’s cultural claim to global hegemony. Linking tourism and imperialism, he finds that though poets like Bishop did not sharply oppose imperial power, they did occasionally voice —a sense of imperial doom and a measured skepticism about expansionism. Although focusing on mainstream poets with a centrist perspective, von Hallberg’s contextualized reading invites us to consider what poets on the margin critique U. S. imperial power.

Jeffrey Gray in a recent study, *Mastery’s End: Travel and Postwar American Poetry* (2005), also focuses on mainstream poets, including Bishop. The book turns away from critiques of empire and imperialism and instead focuses on travel as an individual experience of —absence or loss as opposed to a trope of —colonial mastery. He disagrees with Caren Kaplan’s view of Bishop’s —Questions of Travel in her study of the metaphoric use of travel and displacement in contemporary theories. In her book *Questions of Travel*, Kaplan briefly comments on Bishop’s questions as inadequate for interrogating meanings of home and displacement in the context of the aftermath of colonialism and the rise of neocolonialism. In contrast, Gray reads the poem as showing a rather apolitical —irony of the quest for Eden. He does not distinguish colonialism from travel nor does he historicize his claim about —mastery’s end. In his reading of Bishop, the poet/traveler is an unstable entity —driving to the interior in a rather empty, decontextualized manner³. His reading of Derek Walcott highlights a —flight from the political to the personal without much attention to the poet’s ambivalent responses to British colonial culture and thus fails to articulate the inextricable relationship of travel in Walcott’s poetry to the history of —colonial mastery. If von Hallberg’s centrist perspective is understandable, given that the book was published when decentralization and multiculturalism had yet to become major topics in the study of American literature and culture, Gray’s lack of historicization and his failure to take into account the United

States’s colonial past and present renders his argument questionable at best.

Bishop raises her questions about the notions of —home and —travel, as von Hallberg and Kaplan have noted, from the perspective of a privileged first-world tourist, who follows a route from the center to the periphery. That perspective misrecognizes those of a foreign country as behaving as —strangers acting on a stage. Bishop herself has actually set up a background of colonial history against which to read the questions she poses: the poem in the 1965 collection is placed immediately after —Brazil, January 1, 1502, a poem that revisits the history of the Portuguese colonization of Brazil, specifically the imposition of Catholicism and the appropriation of territory. Conscious of the imperialist impulse of many Euro-American traveling experiences and her own complicity in it, the speaker/traveler of her poems nevertheless does not attempt to resist or subvert that impulse. Her —questions of travel, thus, are only a beginning begging for further interrogation. To what degree does colonial history shape a contemporary traveler’s perception of the —foreign? How would power relations determine our notions of travel, the —home, and the —foreign? If a privileged first-world tourist’s voice represents merely part of the picture, is there an alternative kind of travel writing? If so, how would this alternative travel writing approach the relationship of the home to the world?

Travel:

An examination of travel writing by Asian American poets such as Shahid Ali could greatly enrich the work done on travel and postwar American poetry. Following von Hallberg’s example of socio-political contextualizing, one would find that Ali’s travel poems are concerned with questions of displacement, nation, and imperial power. If poems like Bishop’s stop short at merely hinting at United States imperial culture, Ali’s poems about journeys between South Asia and America demonstrate how the history and aftermath of colonialism always mediate the traveler’s movement and perspective. James Clifford, in the introduction to his study of travel, argues that travel is a —norm,¹ as constitutive of human culture as dwelling. He asks whether there are possibilities of —discrepant movement¹ that do

not conform to the —world’s violent polarization into West and East, empire and colony, developed and backward. Looking for the traveling route that bypasses the center-periphery dichotomy, Clifford seems to overlook the possibility of questioning and critiquing binary politics — a metaphorical bypassing or subversion — even when one follows the center-periphery route physically. The border-blurring, unhomey travel in Ali’s poems leads to compassionate identification with the victims of imperial expansion and neocolonialism. Drawing attention to the geographical locations, languages, and forms of writing marginalized by dominating political, historical, and cultural narrative, these poems manifest transnational and transcultural travels via a different route than Bishop’s and reveal a critique of power and its fixed binaries through both their subject matter and forms.

Take the central section of A Nostalgist’s Map of America, for example. Opening with the title poem, the section brings the reader along on a thought-provoking journey that mixes the personal and the political, the local and the global. Written for a dying friend, the poems’ tightly controlled language and form preclude the sentimentalization of death. By taking Dickinson’s poem —A Route of Evanescence⁴ as the section’s epigraph, Ali’s poem here first relies on a mode of intertextual travel that enables readers to rethink the text’s literary rootedness. Dickinson has been largely characterized as living and writing in isolation, but recent critics have found her far from isolated intellectually, indeed, actively engaged in her culture and historical moment through reading, correspondence, and poetry writing⁴. Ali’s numerous allusions to Dickinson align with this new reading of her. For example, referring to Dickinson’s mention of —Cashmere, several of Ali’s Kashmir poems have not only put the home in South Asia in interesting connection to Amherst—Dickinson’s as well as his own home in America—but have also highlighted Dickinson’s writing as openly linked to the world beyond her home. Here, ushering in the poem —A Nostalgist’s Map of America, Ali’s use of —A Route of Evanescence again sheds new light on Dickinson’s highly concise, imagistic, and enigmatic poem:

A Route of Evanescence
With a revolving Wheel—
A Resonance of Emerald—

A Rush of Cochineal—
And every Blossom on the Bush
Adjusts its tumbled Head—
The mail from Tunis, probably,
An easy Morning's Ride—

Dickinson's poem depicts a flying hummingbird touching the tip of a bush blossom, its ephemeral fleeting movement evoking the image of a postal vehicle carrying —mail from Tunis. This local scene in the poet's observation is linked to the outside world through association, and the distance— from Tunis to Amherst—collapses in the moment the images are revealed. The poem, after all, was written at the time of early development of telegraphy and other communication systems that brought the continents closer than ever. Ali's epigraph invites the reader to revisit this classical figure of American literary tradition—to contextualize her in her time and to see the rather worldly perspective latent behind her isolated position.

Following Dickinson's lines, the poems in this section revolve around routes, both geographical and metaphorical. —A Nostalgist's Map of Americal deals with the speaker's melancholy upon knowing that Phil, a close friend, is dying of AIDS⁵. The poem's geographical and emotional mapping, not without homoerotic undertones, reveals a spiritual search for belonging under the burden of identity⁶. Opening with the recollection of a driving tour toward Phil's home in Philadelphia, the poem moves from the landscape of —the dead center of Pennsylvanian to sunny Southern California, whence the dying Phil calls the speaker. The —map of Americal thus outlined by the journeys is first a personal, emotional map. The speaker nostalgically recounts a time with Phil, when art—represented by Dickinson's poem —A Route of Evanescence—was appreciated for art's sake and the journey home was carefree. Now upon the disclosure of the tragic news, the speaker finds himself at a loss for a genuinely comforting response, for all the words in his mind seem —false. Even Dickinson's poem—and art in general— remains powerless before the reality of AIDS. Word play is all that can be managed for the speaker's catharsis:

[...] Please forgive me, Phil, but I thought
of your pain as a formal feeling, one
useful for the letting go, your transfusions

mere wings to me, the push of numerous hummingbirds, souvenirs of Evanescence seen disappearing down a route of veins in an electric rush of cochineal.

In regular quatrains like these throughout, the poem's elegiac sensibility restrains itself from falling into sentimentalism. The speaker transforms Dickinson's hummingbird image at the end by associating it with the disease. He thus leaves more questions than answers for his readers. If language and art have insurmountable limits in the face of death, where can one find refuge and where is the ultimate home for an artist? Putting the nation in the title, Ali calls to mind the social and political issues related to homosexuality and to AIDS as a domestic plight of the United States as well as an international problem of the contemporary world. The poem's sorrow also lies in the irresolvable problems around the suggested homosexual identity of the poet and his friend. What does Phil's moving from home to the West Coast in the last stage of his life tell about the burden of his identity and of his —dis-ease? What does the speaker's—and the poet's—caution about his own sexual orientation say about his sense of belonging as an ethnic minority traveler in the United States? For Asian American artists like Ali, does travel represent an inevitable escape from roots, or does the route instead point to an attempt to reconstruct the conception of belonging in unhomey travel?

Ali's poem series —In Search of Evanescence continues the meditation on language, art, and travel, and with more intertextual and intercultural references Ali's question about the personal quest increasingly opens to thinking on a larger scale. Positionality in the world becomes not just an individual concern but involves the reality and future of nations and cultures. Strung together by an elegiac mood in response to Phil's dying, the series nevertheless is as much about the speaker's reflection on his own transnational journey as about memories of Phil. In Poem 2 of the series, for example, the poet-speaker, in looking back to the last summer before parting with Phil, weaves the personal with the historical and the political. The poem opens the recollection about —that final summer seven years ago with a line from Thomas de Quincey, —It is a year of brilliant water. De Quincey's line will recur

throughout the poem series, calling to mind the Victorian literary tradition with which Ali's education in India must have armed him. The poet-speaker quickly turns to describing his travel across America, when suddenly he reaches this surrealistically unhomey point:

[...] But even

when I pass—in Ohio—the one exit
to Calcutta, I don't know I've begun
mapping America, the city limits
of Evanescence now everywhere.

The juxtaposition of —Ohio and —Calcutta, interestingly, is both surprising and natural. —Calcutta, the name of a major city in India, Ali's home country, is actually also the name of a small town in Ohio. The Capital of British India from 1772 to 1912, the Indian city's name was originally in Bengali as —Kalikshetra. —Calcutta is marked by a foreshortening and Anglicization under British rule. Cultural geographer Yvonne Whelan notes that the colonizers act of —naming places is their way of —claiming space. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam in their study on Third World film also argue that —the power of creation is inextricably entwined with the power of naming and that naming —played a crucial role in colonial history, as the discoverer' gave names to places as a mark of possession. The name —Calcutta, then, is loaded with the colonial history of South Asia. In 2001, the city changed its official English name to —Kolkata to restore its Bengali pronunciation and largely to eliminate the legacy of British colonialism⁷. While the Indian city struggled to erase the name —Calcutta because of its colonial history, the name continues in use in America. The United States in general, and the state of Ohio in particular, seems extremely fascinated with exotic places, always naming towns and cities after foreign places. It remains a question whether the local people were familiar with the complicated history of the Indian city when the small community in Ohio picked the Indian name for itself in the early twentieth century⁸. The displaced, de-historicized use is worth considering in its own historical context. For behind the apparently apolitical fascination of America with the foreign, one sees twentieth century history marked by the fall of old empires and the rise of American imperialism.

References:

1. Jeannie Chiu mentions Ali's particular kind of —exile status in a footnote to her essay, and Maimuna Dali Islam gives more attention to the issue by explaining how with a student visa and then a work permit Ali was able to travel freely between the United States and India.
2. Examples of this criticism can be seen in Esdale and Perelman, both appearing in recent issues of *The Emily Dickinson Journal*.
3. For the reason for writing this poem and —In Search of Evanescence see his interview with Ansari and S. Paul.
4. Nelson and Dharwadker, both in survey articles, mention in passing the undertones of homosexuality in Ali's poetry, particularly in regard to *A Nostalgist's Map of America*. Criticism of Ali's poetry has remained silent regarding this issue. See Nelson and Dharwadker, 255.
5. For the transformation history of the Indian city's name, see *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
6. Ibid
7. The town changed its name to Calcutta in the early twentieth century, according to the information I got from the Historical Society of Ohio, the Calcutta (OH) Chamber of Commerce, and the Historical Society of East Liverpool, OH.
8. Ibid