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CHAPTER 5

Aesthetics of Decoloniality and Feminist Interrogation of Geography in Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry: A Study of Space and Agency in Kashmir

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Abstract

The chapter aims to adopt a decolonial approach in its analysis of Agha Shahid Ali's shrewd rejoinders to the politicisation of religious identity in Indian-occupied Kashmir. Select poems in *The Half-Inch Himalayas* and *The Country Without a Post-Office* subtly unmask the violence in Kashmir and position state-action as a direct expression of male colonial aggression. His writing style bypasses the permeable boundary between literature and activism to mediate an exilic representation that aims to dismantle the seductions of colonial rhetoric and power. Ali also adheres to, at least in some measure, Kenneth Burke's conceptualisation of poetic form, which positions his engagement with contradictory impulses of Romantic strain and decolonial thought in an aporia of exile. The chapter's emphasis on Ali's decolonial approach is coupled with the adoption of feminist approaches to geography, which forms the next section of this chapter. The study aims to utilise and develop the works of Emirbayer and Mische, who argue that human agency is a temporally embedded process that involves social engagement, which foregrounds space as an active agent that contributes toward the production and performance of gender identities. Anindita Datta's engagement with spatiality concurs with the research findings of Emirbayer and Mische, but she adds that human agency is also a spatially embedded process and the location of an individual in spatial or geographical context is as significant as other intersectionalities and social determinants that influence the nature and extent of agency. Considering the conjunction of space and agency in Ali's poetry, the chapter maintains that the reiteration of Kashmir's association with femininity complicates its positionality as a 'paradise' because while it appears to purport the myth of Kashmir's deification in abstract terms, it compromises in actuality the production and performance of gender identity. Sara Smith, for

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instance, explores how intimacy and reproduction in Ladakh can be read as a site of geopolitical practice that utilises the body as an instrument of territory-making. The chapter analyses in totality Ali's challenge to coloniality in an endeavour to comprehend, within and beyond feminist geographies, his decolonial interrogation of political inheritances and his incessant attempts to retrieve Kashmir in his exilic poetics.

Keywords: *Decoloniality, Feminist Geographies, Space, Agency, Agha Shahid Ali, Kashmir*

Aesthetics of Decoloniality and Feminist Interrogation of Geography in Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry: A Study of Space and Agency in Kashmir

Colonial Presents, Decolonial Visions

Ali's poetry partly intertwines local histories of Kashmir to challenge the totalising tendencies of the metanarrative created by state-sanctioned national history. In embodying decolonial motifs and symbols, it inaugurates a pluriversal methodology of articulating the trauma of colonial occupation in Kashmir. Decoloniality emerges as the predominant thematic consideration in his work on account of its ability to portray the anguish of exilic state, which can be viewed as an outcome of spatio-temporal transformations following the 1947 India-Pakistan Partition.

Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh (2018) argue that concepts of decoloniality cannot be confined to the rhetoric of definitiveness because of their resistance to linguistic systems that are rooted in the discourse of modernity. The structural disobedience of decolonial thought to universal signifiers and colonial logic characterises the extent of its trans-local and trans-national scope. Kashmir's inability to maintain its independence from the communal power play of Partition makes it a geographical site of contestation without national borders in Ali's works.

The decolonial position, developed chiefly by Mignolo and Walsh, remains distinct from postcolonial and anti-colonial modes of analysis. Decoloniality transcends postcolonialism's objective to bring about ideological transformation within the academy. It intertwines the epistemic agenda of its scholarly project with concrete political goals to reorient existing modes of analysis of colonialism.

'Postcard from Kashmir' (2008, p. 19) illuminates Ali's decolonial approach by inaugurating the discourse of belongingness in terms of geography. The Kashmir that "sinks into

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my [his] mailbox" is a textual reminder of the material Kashmir, which is defined by its geographic borders and cultural traditions in conventional geopolitical rhetoric. Here, the physical space of Kashmir gets equalised to the very evocation of its cultural memory via textual means, thereby rescuing *Kashmiriyat* from political compartmentalisation. Ali's approach materialises in literary expression the warning articulated by Frantz Fanon in *Wretched of the Earth*, a seminal text that is indicative of violent propensity of the colonial order to divide geographies for social exclusion (2005). Consequently, textual compression of geographic memory overcomes the limitations of spatial dimensions within which Kashmir remains rooted, and allows the narrator to recollect memories of a homeland without the need for personal visitation.

This notion of belongingness transcends spatiality to reclaim Kashmir from colonial metaphors of feminisation or communal vitriol. Such a process of recovery at the individual level is important for disrupting the rationalist vocabulary of national belonging. By shifting the idea of belongingness from the national to the individual level, Ali prevents homogenisation of private experiences, needs, and expectations. The narrator overcomes classificatory restrictions through embodied struggle as an exiled Kashmiri, and subsequently convokes what Maldonado-Torres (2008) calls a "decolonial attitude."

Ali's contingence on the textual configurations of the postcard complicates the decolonial attitude of his narrator. Postcolonial reassessment has characterised textuality as a problematic agent, given that the colonial gaze of textual documentation has exploited its self-proclaimed superiority over oral cultures and traditions in colonies for the development of colonial expansionism. However, the narrator's rejection of locationist markers developed by the nation-state subverts his reliance on the tangible textuality of the postcard. For him, a postcard from Kashmir is as evocative of *Kashmiriyat* as Kashmir itself. By resisting a conventional understanding of regional boundaries, the narrator participates in the process of self-definition to prevent his subscription to colonial codes that characterise the contested borders of his homeland. This prevents him from internalising the territorialised grammar of the axiomatics of colonial occupation.

Decolonial positionalities also help to uncover distinct perspectives that displace the rationalist modes of justification offered by the colonial state. Ali utilises this motif by briefly, and subtly, developing a portrait of Kashmir and its colonial realities in 'Cremation' (2008, p. 41).). The

process begins in 'A Monsoon Note on Old Age' (2008, p. 35).), when the narrator describes Kashmir as "death's far off country." The poet narrator directs its address to a recipient, to whom he describes his vision of his life after fifty years. His description of a largely static vision ends with the assertion that he "overexpose[d] / your photograph, dusting / death's far off country." The metaphor immediately constructs a visual image of the narrator's geographical detachment from the recipient, whose "country" is an isolated land with fatalities.

Considering the thematic continuity in the poems of *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987), it can be assumed that the geography in question is Kashmir. Ali's linguistic choice evinces not only a comment on Kashmir's literal and metaphorical isolation, but also an important remark on the social cost of military regimentation in a colony. This continues in 'Cremation' (2008) which is as follows: "Your bones refused to burn / when we set fire to the flesh. / Who would have guessed / you'd be stubborn in death?"

The deliberate unwillingness of the bones "to burn" illustrates the metaphysical refusal of the deceased bodies to accept cessation and consequently admit silence. In context of Kashmir, the "bones refuse[d] to burn" because death contributes to the increase in number of supposedly incidental and deliberately undocumented casualties that mar social histories of the region. Ali, thus, reiterates his social protest by weaving in his poetry wounded Kashmiri bodies in an effort to reveal the violence of colonial occupation, disrupt the colonialist rhetoric of the Indian state, and develop metaphysical modes of protest directed against oppressors.

Ali's most potent usage of decolonial strategy occurs in 'Farewell' (2008, pp. 144-146) which blurs the boundary between religious and political struggle. To characterise the Kashmiri struggle for freedom only by political dimensions is to ignore aspects of domination that are influenced majorly by religion. The dichotomy between the religious as a private sphere and the political as a public sphere has its roots in European Enlightenment. This is why the Eurocentric distinction between both realms is obsolete for Kashmiris, who do not find themselves in European histories.

Salman Sayyid (2021) insists that Kashmiri emancipation necessarily requires an outlet that can enable the articulation of Muslimness. The popular tendency to avoid Muslim expressions in protest rhetoric is not an outcome of concern for the ontological equivalence of religious faiths, but rather an extension of systemic violence against Muslim subjectivity. In India, for instance, both Hindutva and secular nationalist regard Muslim as the 'Other.' Consequently, the reality of

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occupation in Kashmir transcends political contestations because of the consensus on the domestication of behaviour of Kashmiri Muslims. Advocates of secularism are, therefore, complicit in enabling politically-motivated oppression in Kashmir.

Ali's 'Farewell' (2008) assumes the guise of a love poem as it sets out to tackle religious conflicts at the backdrop of Kashmir. It can be read as the lament of the Muslim population of Kashmir for Kashmiri Hindus because of the latter's departure during the exodus. As a lover's lament, the lover dextrously recognises the beloved's absence, acknowledges its ramifications, and longs for a different outcome. Ali's poetic oeuvre ensures that the lover is not ascribed with the rhetoric of victimisation, which prevents the poem from becoming a biased communal narrative.

The emergent effects of the beloved's departure are immediately pronounced: "They make a desolation and call it peace / When you left even the stones were buried." "They" appears as a reference to the military agents of the state, who deploy violent measures to assert their dominance and demonstrate their allegiance to totalitarian nationalism. That the nation-state reconstructs stony "desolation" as "peace" highlights its investment in the creation of an Orwellian dystopia for Kashmiri Muslims under the pretext of restorative justice that masks beneath its garb an obvious sense of violent xenophobia. "Even the stones were buried" connotes the extent of death and destruction with which the Kashmiris navigate. The distinct differentiation between the lover and "they" subtly implies that this violence, or its repercussions, does not extend to the military quarters, possibly because of impunity granted by the state.

Popular discourses on the exodus in Kashmir are either politicised for the exacerbation of existing communal conflicts or presented as totalising metanarratives. Ali, who is cognisant of his narrational positionality, manages to create a lasting fracture in contemporary renderings of the violence after the exodus. He does not negate or nullify the displacement narratives of Kashmiri Hindus, which continue to define the social reality of the exodus. Instead, he constructs a differing mini-narrative that articulates in some measure the mandated creation of conditions of extremity.

Ali's decolonial ethic also finds expression in 'I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight' (2008). Set in the 1990s, the poem articulates the poet narrator's helplessness at Rizwan's calls for consolation for the depiction of the nature of violence in Kashmir. The trope of communal tension mirrors the one in 'Farewell' (2008), though the feeling of longing is replaced by disappointment and fear. When the narrator sees "men removing statues from temples," he "beg[s]" them: 'Who

will protect us if you leave?' His question to the Kashmiri Pandit community opens multiple interpretative possibilities.

First, it demonstrates the existential dependence of Kashmiri Muslims on Kashmiri Hindus, who constitute a small proportion of the region's population. The contingence of the demographical majority on the minority is propelled by the foreknowledge of the state's invocation of sectarian distinctions for the prevention of solidarity building across inter-faith communities. Rekha Chowdhary (2001) argues that Kashmiris are governed by an ethno-cultural identity that "has always remained primary in Kashmir" (p.161). The preeminence of this identity explains why "the cultural and philosophical orientations of Kashmiris" have maintained a continuity. Ali's poetry, in contrast, reveals the reality of inadequacy of a shared identity in overcoming the divides created by religion.

Second, the socio-religious dependence of Kashmiri Muslims on Kashmiri Hindus exposes the complex binaries of belongingness. Ali necessitates the reconsideration of populist characterisation of Kashmir as an Islamic majority: demographics do not constitute majority-minority relations in the manner in which social markers of identity do. 'I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight' (2008, pp. 147-149) formulates a literary protest directed against empirical modes of inference and analysis. It shows that in constructing statistics on population as the primary indicator of social relations, the state becomes complicit in exploiting colonial logic and exhibiting epistemic arrogance.

Third, the communal tensions that compel the uni-directional dependence of one religious community over another reveals, if only in some measure, the absence of solidarity among Kashmiris. In emphasising the narrator's disappointment at the migrating Kashmiri Hindus, Ali extends his political commentary by foreshadowing the state's exaggerated exploitation of communal divides, a measure that can further diminish the scope of inter-faith solidarity for Kashmir's political freedom. These constitute some of the many interpretations pertaining to the multitudinous layers of socio-religious dependence with respect to the helpless tone in 'Who will protect us if you leave?'

Alis' ability to articulate relationality in terms of religion, solidarity, and human agency in his poem showcases his continued engagement with decolonial thinking. That his verse produces plural meanings and understandings also resists the emergence of a decolonial universal truth,

which is, as Mignolo and Walsh (2018) point out, a totalising idea that is not compatible with decolonial concepts.

Feminist Reading of Geography

Joan Scott's seminal essay titled, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis' introduces a cogent feminist criticism of theories of women's subordination and outlines deconstructionist methods to build agendas for future scholarship (1986). Her development of gender as a category and gender history as a mode of inquiry overcomes several demerits in the discipline of women's history, which, in lending emphasis on social history inquiry, fails to account for "persistent inequalities between women and men." Its ahistorical approach lacks the vocabulary to discuss historical constructions of socially legitimate relationships characterised by power hierarchies.

Scott perceives gender history to be a more effective alternative. In its engagement with Derridean deconstructionism and Foucauldian concept of dispersed power, her rewriting of gender within the domain of gender history offers the promise of accommodating pluralist visions that transcend the ambit of women's history. However, in spite of its popularity, Scott's work has been indicted, particularly on account of its poststructuralist underpinnings. Judith Bennet (1989) is apprehensive that Scott's focus on gender as a category can intellectualise "the inequality of the sexes." Joan Hoff (1994) critiques Scott for obeisance to and reconstitution of patriarchal power, insisting that poststructuralist inquiry erases "woman as a category of analysis."

There is formidable scholarship on both the advantages and repercussions of the categorical use of gender for literary analysis. In this section, I will first define the relationship between gender and space, and subsequently focus on Ali's 'Snowmen' (2008, p.23) to assess the deconstructing of gendered geography. Anindita Datta's work, which remains central to my understanding of spatial configuration of gender relations, builds on Scott's and Judith Butler's theorisation of gender (2021). In using a relational approach to gender performance within the ambit of feminist theory, Datta manages to overcome the criticism against the theoretical underpinnings that define Scott's work.

Datta argues that the co-constitutive relationship between gender and geography affects the agential capability of inhabitants. Intersectional feminist theory widely acknowledges the function performed by social modalities. Markers such as race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and citizenship affect the constitution and reception of individual identity as well as experience. Datta

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contends that space "has an equal role in *scripting* or shaping these [gender] performances. (2021, p.2)".

This does not mean that spatiality necessarily enables individuals; the particularities of geography can either enable or constrain. What is of greater significance is its relationship with gender. In 'Snowmen' (2008, p. 23), Ali foregrounds gender and violence against the backdrop of Kashmir's geography. His spatial imagery creates a feminist ecosystem, not in the depiction of individual characters, but rather in the subversion of conventional significations pertaining to Kashmir's geography.

The geographical region of Kashmir is popularly branded as a 'paradise,' particularly in India. Hazrat Ameer Khusro's poem expresses this sentiment by juxtaposing it with the aesthetics of English Romanticism: "If there is a paradise on earth, / It is this [Kashmir], it is this, it is this[i]." Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of post-Independent India, is a testimony to the pervasiveness of this romanticised idea:

> Like some supremely beautiful woman, whose beauty is almost impersonal and above human desire, such was Kashmir in all its feminine beauty of river and valley and lake and graceful trees. And then another aspect of this magic beauty would come into view, a masculine one, of hard mountains and precipices, and snow-capped peaks and glaciers, and cruel and fierce torrents rushing to the valleys below. It had a hundred faces and innumerable aspects, ever-changing, sometimes smiling, sometimes sad and full of sorrow (1941, p. 223).

Nehru's articulation feminises the Kashmiri landscape, which is problematic because political or cultural attempts to engender geography typically serve to justify colonial endeavours. The presentation of England in majestic symbolism where 'the sun never sets' is a case in point. To define Kashmir by its femaleness and femininity is to not only sanction exploitation, but to also actively solicit it. The emphasis on the distinction between popular perception of femininity and masculinity serves to concretise gender essentialism. It also fulfils another strategic purpose: the masculine beauty of the mountain entices the colonist to conquer the land and escalate its political position by vanquishing a land of mammoth proportions. The feminine beauty enables the colonist to visualise in materiality the political advantages of exploitation. What this encourages is a system of linguistic bias that effectively promotes structural inequalities.

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Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that human agency is a "temporally embedded process of social engagement" (p. 963). Anindita Datta develops their research by positing that agency is also spatially embedded: this implies that the location of an individual in spatial or geographic context is as significant as other intersectionalities and determinants in influencing the nature and extent of individual agency. Space, she argues, gets foregrounded "not as a passive container but as an active agent in the production and performance of gendered lives" (2021, p.6).

Considering the conjunction of space and agency, the reiteration of Kashmir's association with femininity complicates its positionality as a 'paradise.' It may purport the myth of Kashmir's deification in abstract terms, but it compromises in actuality the social production and performance of gender. Sara Smith (2021), for instance, explores how intimacy and reproduction in Ladakh can be read as spaces of geopolitical practice that utilise the body as an instrument of territory-making. The politicisation of the intimate decision concerning procreation illustrates one of the many examples of masculinist views of both the territory and the body in the supposedly passive female landscape of Kashmir.

'Snowmen' (2008) effectively resists the problematic reductionist interpretations of Nehru. Snow, whose whiteness generally becomes a convenient mask to occlude the brutalities caused by state intervention, transforms into a material reminder of spectrality in the poem. Ali positions his ancestor as a "man / of Himalayan snow" who carries "a bag / of whale bones" (2008, p.23). His resistance operates on several levels: the de-romanticisation of snow is, for instance, accompanied by its association with human signifiers for the purpose of underscoring generational violence.

The motif of exile adds another layer to Ali's engagement with spatiality. Lawrence D. Needham (1993) avers that the narrator's recognition of his ancestor as a man of Himalayan snow enables Ali to "claim[s] a legacy of change and transition" (p. 12). His observation is worth quoting at length:

> Re-creating the past, providing his own version of it, is thus enabling, unburdening him of generations of snowmen on his back who would press him into winter. At the same time, the past is the necessary ground for change; the poet rides into spring on the melting shoulders of the snowmen. (1993, p. 12)

Exile is, according to Edward Said, "the unsealable rift" forced between "the self and its true home." He claims that "a poet in exile — as opposed to reading the poetry of exile — is to see

exile's antinomies." Ali's poetic form reflects the ambivalences of exile that Said discusses in his work, formulating for him a creative outlet to articulate his emotional anguish. His production of a feminist narrative with decolonial potential resolves some questions, but remains fraught with many more.

Notes

[1] Some scholars contend that the poem was falsely attributed to Khusro on account of his popularity.

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