

‘Homing Desire’ in Agha Shahid Ali's Poems

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Abstract

This paper extends the critical application of Avtar Brah's theoretical concept of 'homing desire' to Agha Shahid Ali's National Book Award-finalist collection, *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001). While earlier scholarship on Ali frequently centres on the geopolitical fracture of Kashmir and the aesthetics of postcolonial exile, this study examines how the poet shifts the locus of displacement from the purely political to the deeply personal through the terminal illness and death of his mother. In this collection, the maternal figure and the motherland become inextricably fused; the loss of one mirrors and magnifies the permanent inaccessibility of the other. By mapping the Shi'a paradigm of Karbala onto contemporary diasporic grief, and by utilizing rigid poetic forms like the *canzone* and the *ghazal*, Ali demonstrates that the diasporic project of constructing a "home" is a permanently incomplete architectural endeavour. Through close textual analysis, this paper argues that in the face of absolute loss, grief itself evolves into a transhistorical diaspora space, rendering poetry the final, albeit unfinished, sanctuary of belonging.

Keywords: Agha Shahid Ali, Diaspora, Homing Desire, Transnational Grief, Kashmir, Karbala Paradigm, Postcolonial Poetry, Elegy.

INTRODUCTION

The diasporic condition is inherently marked by a profound sense of dislocation, compelling writers to navigate the precarious, often volatile boundaries between a newly adopted hostland and an increasingly inaccessible homeland. In the canon of postcolonial Indian English poetry, this negotiation frequently manifests through recurring motifs of exile, memory, cultural hybridity, and linguistic alienation. However, in the poetry of Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali, the conceptualization of exile transcends traditional geographic and political borders to encompass a pervasive existential and spiritual alienation. Ali occupies a unique intersectionality as a postcolonial subject, a diasporic intellectual in the United States, and a witness to the ongoing devastation of Kashmir. Consequently, his poetic oeuvre operates not merely as a reflection of displacement, but as an active, linguistic intervention against erasure.

While Ali's preceding collection, *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997), meticulously articulates the trauma of a politically ravaged Kashmir—exploring the breakdown of civic life and the militarization of his homeland—his 2001 collection, *Rooms Are Never Finished*, introduces a devastatingly intimate dimension to his diasporic consciousness. Written in the harrowing aftermath of his mother's death from brain cancer at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York, the collection masterfully intertwines private bereavement with the public, historical tragedy of Kashmir. This intersection forces a re-evaluation of diasporic longing. This paper utilizes Avtar Brah's concept of 'homing desire' alongside theories of transnational mourning to analyze how Ali constructs an elegy that defies borders. In *Rooms Are Never Finished*, the desire for home is complicated by the absolute finality of maternal death, rendering physical return impossible and forcing the poet to build an emotional and linguistic homeland out of the architecture of grief itself.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: HOMING DESIRE AND TRANSNATIONAL MOURNING

To adequately deconstruct the thematic complexities of Ali's poetry, one must move beyond simplistic binaries of "home" and "away." In her seminal text, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996), postcolonial theorist Avtar Brah distinguishes the literal, often politically or geographically impossible return to a country of origin from what she terms 'homing desire.' Brah posits that homing desire is an affective, psychological yearning to establish a sense of belonging amidst conditions of displacement. She argues that the "diaspora space" is not merely a physical location inhabited by migrants, but rather a conceptual, intersectional zone where borders, memories, power dynamics, and identities continuously collide and reshape one another. Thus, homing desire is not a regressive nostalgia for a fixed, idealized past, but a dynamic, ongoing process of reimagining and reproducing identity.

This formulation aligns closely with Stuart Hall's assertion that cultural identity is an act of "becoming" as well as "being"—a fluid positioning constructed through memory, narrative, and myth. Similarly, Edward Said's reflections on exile as an "unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place" highlight the inherent sorrow of the diasporic subject. However, in *Rooms Are Never Finished*, this established theoretical framework must be expanded to accommodate the profound intersection of diaspora and terminal mourning. For Ali, the concept of home is not solely tied to the geography of the Kashmir Valley; it is

corporeally manifested in the figure of the mother. When the mother dies in the American diaspora, the 'homing desire' is fractured twice over: the desire to return to a pre-conflict Kashmir is compounded by the impossible desire to resurrect the maternal body. Consequently, Ali's poetry illustrates a process wherein transnational grief itself becomes the very landscape the diasporic subject inhabits.

ANALYSIS

In *Rooms Are Never Finished*, the traditional diasporic tension between homeland and hostland is profoundly destabilized by the hyper-local, clinical space of the hospital room. The sterile, mechanistic environment of Lenox Hill Hospital in New York stands in stark, agonizing contrast to the sensory richness, cultural warmth, and communal history of Kashmir. For Ali, his mother's illness in exile represents a deeply unnatural state of being. Because the mother is traditionally, politically, and metaphorically aligned with the "motherland," her physical deterioration mirrors the political deterioration of Kashmir. When Ali undertakes the harrowing physical journey of transporting his mother's body from the United States back to the subcontinent for burial, the "myth of return"—a foundational concept in diaspora studies—is tragically subverted.

The return is achieved, but it is a return rooted in death and absence. The homeland receives the diasporic subject not with restorative embrace, but with an open grave. This grim reality shatters the psychological sanctuary of 'home,' pushing Ali's homing desire entirely into the realm of the abstract and the poetic. This is most spectacularly rendered in the collection's magnum opus, "*Lenox Hill*." In this poem, Ali confronts the spatial and emotional dissonance of grieving a Kashmiri mother in an American hospital. The poem registers the impossibility of protecting the motherland (and the mother) from destruction. He juxtaposes the medical terminology and harsh lighting of the hospital with the mythic landscapes of the Himalayas, realizing that both spaces are now domains of loss.

The poem explicitly addresses the hierarchy of grief, placing the mother's death above even the vast political tragedy of Kashmir. Ali writes with devastating clarity:

For compared to my grief for you, what are those of Kashmir,
and what (I close the ledger) are the griefs of the universe
when I remember you—beyond all accounting—O my mother?

By elevating private grief over national catastrophe, Ali does not diminish the suffering of Kashmir; rather, he personalizes the trauma of the diaspora. The mother's absence creates a void that cannot be filled by any physical geography, rendering the poet permanently "unhomed." The homing desire, deprived of a living recipient, must therefore seek refuge in the act of artistic creation.

Faced with a dual tragedy that resists ordinary consolation, Ali seeks a framework capable of containing his immense sorrow. He brilliantly appropriates the Shi'a Islamic paradigm of Karbala—the historical martyrdom of Imam Hussain (the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad) in 680 AD. In Shi'a theology and culture, Karbala is the ultimate symbol of righteous suffering, cosmic injustice, and perpetual mourning. By weaving the imagery, rhetoric, and liturgical rhythms of Karbala throughout *Rooms Are Never Finished*, Ali achieves a remarkable temporal and spatial synthesis. He maps a seventh-century historical trauma from the deserts of Iraq onto the late-twentieth-century violence in the mountains of Kashmir, and further extends it to his private grief in a New York hospital.

Through the traditional mourning poetry of the *Marsiya* (elegies for the martyrs of Karbala), Ali creates what can be described, through Brah's lens, as a transhistorical "diaspora space." In this space, temporal boundaries collapse. The mourning for Hussain becomes indistinguishable from the mourning for Kashmir, which in turn becomes indistinguishable from the mourning for his mother. 'Homing desire' here is articulated through universalized suffering. As Ali noted in his prose writings, the lamentation rituals of Muharram provided him with an emotional vocabulary that transcended personal isolation. Grief is socialized and elevated to a sacred duty.

In poems invoking the Karbala motif, Ali suggests that to be exiled from home is a form of martyrdom, and to mourn is the only authentic way to inhabit a broken world. By locating his personal and national tragedies within this grand, mythic continuum, Ali finds a paradoxical kind of home. He belongs to a lineage of mourners. The landscape of grief becomes a shared, transnational homeland that connects the exiles of history with the exiles of the present. Therefore, the 'homing desire' finds fulfillment not in the recovery of the lost object, but in the faithful, continuous act of remembering and lamenting its loss.

If grief is the new homeland, poetry serves as its architecture. The title of the collection, *Rooms Are Never Finished*, functions as a profound metaphor for both the diasporic condition and the

process of mourning. A room—a fundamental unit of a home, meant to provide shelter and enclosure—remains permanently incomplete for the exile. Because the diasporic identity is inherently fragmented, and the physical homeland is either destroyed by war or defined by the mother's absence, the project of "re-homing" can never be brought to a satisfying conclusion. Ali reflects this incompleteness through his meticulous, almost obsessive engagement with strict poetic forms.

Ali's aesthetic strategy for containing his uncontainable grief relies heavily on forms that demand repetition, circularity, and rigid constraint. The poem "*Lenox Hill*" is written in the grueling *canzone* form, a complex structure inherited from Dante and Petrarch. In a *canzone*, the poet must repeat the same five end-words throughout all the stanzas without variation in their sequence. For "*Lenox Hill*," Ali restricts himself to the words: *Kashmir, mother, universe, die, and night*. This obsessive, claustrophobic repetition formally enacts the inescapable loop of diasporic longing and trauma. The form itself becomes a psychological prison, mirroring the mind's inability to move past the moment of loss.

Furthermore, Ali's celebrated use of the English *ghazal* plays a crucial role in his architectural project. The *ghazal*, with its autonomous couplets, strict rhyme (*qafia*), and repeating refrain (*radif*), perfectly embodies the tension between unity and fragmentation. Each couplet is a distinct "room," yet they are bound together by a continuous thread of longing. Additionally, the collection includes Ali's masterful English translations of the exiled Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz. By bringing Faiz's Urdu laments of political exile into the realm of American poetry, Ali engages in linguistic "re-homing." He uses the English language to house the grief and aesthetics of the East, creating a hybrid cultural continuity that serves as a sanctuary for the displaced subject.

CONCLUSION

Agha Shahid Ali's *Rooms Are Never Finished* offers a profound, elegiac recalibration of diasporic literature. By expanding the critical lens of Avtar Brah's 'homing desire', it becomes evident that the collection navigates a terrain where the geopolitical displacement from Kashmir is inextricably linked to the existential displacement caused by maternal loss. When both the physical homeland and the biological homeland are removed from the exile's grasp, the desire for belonging can no longer be satisfied by geography, nationalism, or the myth of a literal return.

Instead, Ali demonstrates that grief itself must be inhabited. Through the rigorous architecture of traditional poetic forms such as the canzone and the ghazal and by situating his contemporary sorrow within the ancient, mythic paradigm of Karbala, Ali constructs a permanent textual monument to loss. While the physical rooms of the diasporic home are never truly finished, and the wounds of exile remain unhealed, Ali proves that poetry provides the enduring, resilient walls within which transnational grief, love, and homing desire can permanently reside.

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