ISSN 1799-2591
Theory and Practice in Language Studies, Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 279-284, January 2024
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1401.33

Mapping the Cultural Landscape of the Homeland: A Semiotic Analysis of Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry Collection

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***Abstract*—The widely renowned and exhaustively researched Kashmiri-American diasporic poet, Agha Shahid Ali, has received acclaim for his portrayal of themes such as loss, longing for the homeland, nostalgia, hyphenated identity, hybridity, and dislocation, among others. However, within the purview of new historicism, this paper intends to examine the interplay of literature, culture, and history. Using Clifford Geertz's framework of "thick description," the paper analyzes Agha's poetry as a cultural artifact with ethnographic value. Through a semiotic analysis of select poems based on Bakhtin's notion of chronotopes, the paper aims to unravel themes of fragmented identity, cultural memorialization, and the preservation of imaginary homelands. The paper also attempts to explore that Agha Shahid Ali, actively engaged with the socio-political turmoil in his homeland. He sought to reconcile the tensions between different traditions and religious communities, envisioning a personal utopia rooted in his privileged position. His poetry reflects his historical context, facilitating a symbolic exchange between the fragments of Kashmiri culture. Through intertextual references, religious symbols, and social emblems, Ali constructs a significant and experimental narrative about Kashmir.**

***Index Terms*—culture, semiotic analysis, symbolic exchange, chronotope**

I. Introduction

New Historicism highlights the interdependence of history and literary texts, emphasizing how they mutually shape each other. According to the critic Clifford Geertz, a text can be seen as a symbolic exchange of cultural elements situated within a historical context, which itself is a discursive field. Traditionally, two main approaches to studying literary texts exist: the formalistic and the historical. However, recent developments and overlaps between Cultural Studies and literary criticism suggest that interpretative rules do not come from external sources; rather, they emerge from within the text during its creation. This process involves the construction of meaning, which isn't a final signified but is instead a result of encounters between different cultures, often leading to multiple interpretations and heteroglossia. New Historicism, a prominent literary theory, also underscores the intricate interdependence between literary texts and the historical contexts in which they emerge. This perspective offers a fruitful avenue for analyzing Agha Shahid Ali's poems, which frequently grapple with the historical and political upheavals in Kashmir. For instance, within his collection "The Beloved Witness: Selected Poems," one can explore the poem "Farewell" as a textual artifact that adeptly encapsulates the emotional and political turmoil experienced by the Kashmiri diaspora. In this analysis, the poem emerges as a poignant reflection of personal narratives intricately woven into the broader tapestry of historical events (Greenblatt, 1989). Cultural Criticism, on the other hand, directs attention to the cultural dimensions embedded in literary texts. Within the corpus of Agha Shahid Ali's poetry, a recurrent theme is the exploration of syncretic traditions and the harmonious coexistence of diverse cultures in Kashmir. His adept incorporation of Sufi mysticism and references to Persian poets serves as a testament to this syncretism. Cultural critics are poised to undertake a comprehensive examination of how Ali's poetry navigates and celebrates the rich tapestry of cultural diversity within the region. This analysis will underscore the dynamic interrelationship between culture, identity, and literature, as manifested in his poetic creations (Eagleton, 2008).

Intertextuality and Heteroglossia, concepts rooted in Mikhail Bakhtin's literary theory, are particularly pertinent to Agha Shahid Ali's oeuvre. His poems intricately weave multiple cultural and linguistic references, resulting in a complex intertextual tapestry. Notably, in works such as "The Country Without a Post Office," Ali employs references to various poets and historical figures, contributing to the heteroglossic nature of his poetry. Cultural critics are poised to delve into an exploration of how these intertextual references serve as reflective mirrors of the cultural and historical strata of Kashmir (Bakhtin, 1981). Power and Representation, discussed by Greenblatt (1982) in his book, *Power of Forms in the English Renaissance*, as key facets of New Historicism, come into sharp focus when analyzing Ali's poetry. His verses actively engage with power structures, notably the conflicts between diverse religious and political groups within the Kashmiri context. Cultural critics can undertake a nuanced analysis of how Ali's poetic representations both

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challenge and potentially reinforce existing power dynamics. This examination further enriches the ongoing discourse concerning Kashmir's complex history and multifaceted identity.

II. Discussions

A. *Exploring Ali's Poetic Voice*

Agha Shahid Ali, celebrated as the most prominent poet of the Kashmiri diaspora, dedicated himself to exploring and reimagining the complex socio-political landscape of his homeland. His homeland was marked by discord stemming from tensions between different religious communities. According to Ali, these communities had historically coexisted in harmony, united by shared syncretic traditions and heritage. At the core of his poetry lies a profound desire to reconcile these two viewpoints, creating his personal utopia. However, this vision is occasionally critiqued for its association with his position as a privileged elite. Ali's poetry is deeply influenced by his immediate historical conditions, resulting in a symbolic exchange between the fragmented aspects of Kashmiri culture. This exchange forms the basis of his experimental and culturally rich poetic narrative about Kashmir.

Agha Shahid Ali's poetic voice is a fusion of diverse and evocative images and recurring symbols, skillfully used to convey the memories of his homeland steeped in pain and suffering. Home serves as a catalyst, providing a crucial cultural context that connects his succinct verses. Much of his work is written in a nostalgic style, invoking elegiac pastoral imagery and depicting a haunting dream vision of a city transformed into a desolate graveyard. In his piece "The Blessed Word: A Prologue," he presents eighteen different Roman transcriptions of the word 'Kashmir,' highlighting the global use of these variations. Yet, none of them capture the untold story of the turmoil engulfing his homeland. Ali's words resonate with a sense of urgency as he expresses his desire to fill the void with his narrative, tracing it back to the original Sanskrit term 'Kasmira' or desiccated water, deeply rooted in the local myths and folklore of the valley. His poetry became a source of inspiration for future Kashmiri writers who also grappled with historical and political turmoil. Their narratives engage in a dialogue with Ali's poetry, collectively bearing witness to the events unfolding in Kashmir. However, it's essential to exercise caution when designating him as the most representative voice, as the Kashmiri literary landscape is multifaceted and diverse.

In his essay "Beyond Borders, Nations, and Exclusivist Identities: Agha Shahid Ali's Poetics of Plurality," Abin Chakraborty (2016) writes that Ali embodied the spirit of his native home, where multiple cultures crisscrossed and coexisted in harmony (p. 60). One particular incident that greatly disturbed Ali was the exodus of the Kashmiri Hindus, popularly known as Pandits, from the valley. In this regard, Syed Humayoun (2014) writes that the departure of the Pandits from the valley was greatly mourned by the local Kashmiris, and Agha Shahid Ali does the same in many of the poems in "The Country Without a Post Office." Citing Ali's Farewell poem as an example, Humayoun (2014) contends that the poem begins with the subjective "I," reflecting Ali's personal sorrow at the departure of Pandits. However, in another poem, the central poem of the text titled "The Country Without a Post Office," this "I" changes into "Us," where the poet is seen representing all Kashmiris who mourned the exodus of Pandits. Even in times of deep repression and complete communication breakdown, as reflected in the poem, Ali wants to convey to his fellow Pandits that Kashmiris, though wounded themselves, have not forgotten them and share their pain. Then, as Humayoun (2014) states, in the poem titled "A Pastoral" from the same collection, Ali again turns to this subject and longs for the return of Pandits and peace. However, for Ali, this is only possible when "the soldiers return the keys and disappear" (Ali, 2009, p. 30). Ali's feelings, as Humayoun (2014) further argues, are not limited to repressed Kashmiris and Pandits; rather, his humanitarian concerns reach out to others as well. In a poem titled "Hans Christian Ostro," Ali (2009) grieves over the killing of a Norwegian traveler in Kashmir and writes: "I cannot protect you: these are my hands" (p. 76). For Humayoun (2014), Ali, in his lament, "represents all the Kashmiri people who are grieved by the death and feel that it is unjust" (p. 137). Daniel Hall also reflects on this incident and writes that the news of Ostro's death traumatized the local Kashmiris, as their culture highly values hospitality and generosity. Commenting on Ali's poem, Hall (2016) writes: "Much of the poem is oblique, but it ends with a particularly haunting image, perhaps of the Kashmiri people themselves mourning the young man's death" (qtd. in Shabir, p. 83).

Basharat Peer, Kashmir's first prose writer in English and a pioneer of this tradition, also grappled with a similar void that compelled him to write his acclaimed debut memoir about Kashmir titled "Curfewed Nights." This enduring image hearkens to the traumatic and vivid experiences of ordinary Kashmiri people and was deliberately drawn from Agha Shahid Ali's seminal poetry collection, "The Country without a Post-Office." Peer establishes an intertextual connection with the late poet and, simultaneously, with the violence-ridden history of Kashmir in which both were participants. He pays homage to the poet and recounts in his memoir an interview with a local veteran poet who aptly describes Ali's poetry as inherently political in nature, yet rarely compromising on technique. Political poetry, often veering into mere propaganda, finds a delicate balance in Ali's work, accommodating different voices and worldviews within its narrative. Indian writer Amitav Ghosh (2016), in memory of his late friend Ali, wrote an extended eulogy titled "The Ghat of the Only World," shedding light on Ali's liberal and secular outlook. Ghosh (2016) reflects on Ali's lament for the absence of Kashmiri Pandits from the valley and the fading of authentic Kashmiri cuisine, which Ali loved to prepare in a traditional Pandit style. Ali expressed deep concern over the Hindu-Muslim divide that engulfed his homeland during the 1990s and sought a remedy for this division in the shared cultural aesthetics of the community. He viewed Art as a space where irreconcilable differences could find common ground. Ghosh recalls Ali's emphasis on the formalistic

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aspects of poetry, especially when it carried overtly political themes. Ali, in a conversation with Patricia O'Neill, had expressed his dismay upon encountering politically charged poetry about the Armenian massacre, asserting that such poetry, if focused solely on taking positions or critiquing oppressive agencies, would risk compromising its artistic merit and devolve into mere news reporting. The political turmoil and violence in his homeland deeply affected Ali, serving as a catalyst for his most significant work, celebrated for its political potency and eloquent brevity. These nuances pervade Ali's entire body of poetry.

B. Semiotic and Cultural Underpinning

Clifford Geertz's (1973) seminal work, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, is a foundational text that delves into the concept of thick description and its profound implications for the interpretation of cultural phenomena. Geertz's (1973) exploration of thick description challenges conventional approaches to understanding cultures and highlights the need to uncover deeper layers of meaning within social practices and symbols. To gain a comprehensive understanding of semiotics as a field of study and its applications in literary analysis, one can turn to *Semiotics: The Basics* (2007) by Daniel Chandler. This book serves as an invaluable introduction to semiotics, offering insights into how signs, symbols, and cultural context come together to shape the interpretation of texts. Semiotics, as Chandler demonstrates, goes beyond the surface of language and delves into the intricate web of meaning that underlies communication. In the realm of literature and cultural analysis, David Daiches, in his work *Literature, Culture, and Society* (1984), explores the pivotal role that culture and semiotics play in interpreting literary works. Daiches draws on key concepts from Geertz and other influential theorists to illuminate how culture shapes the interpretation of literature. This book provides a valuable perspective on the interplay between culture, semiotics, and literature, offering a deeper understanding of the complexities of literary analysis within a cultural context. Together, these texts form a cohesive foundation for understanding the theoretical underpinnings and practical applications of semiotic analysis in the study of culture, literature, and society.

While as semiotic analysis of a text delves into both its semantic and syntactic elements, examining not only its lexical features but also the nuances of its intonational system. Manan Kapoor, in his biographical work, admirably acknowledges the lyrical essence of Agha Shahid Ali's final poetry collection, "The Veiled Suit" (2009), composed in the Italian lyric form known as canzones. The poet, in a lyrical tone, expresses his sorrow through a skillful manipulation of the prosodic structure. He makes powerful use of pauses, commas, and dashes to convey overwhelming pain, even employing italics to highlight the word "Kashmir." This deliberate syntactic variation transforms it into a slashed verbal sign, mediating a signified location marked by a fractured cartography. This unique style also evokes the work of Faiz Ahmad Faiz, who occasionally employed half-verses to ensure that emotions do not overshadow the poetic form. Agha Shahid Ali engages in a clever wordplay, employing the metaphor of the "tormented glass" to underscore his lifelong dedication to the art of poetry. This metaphor, intricately woven, carries a profound meaning regarding the fracturing and disruption of home. It is a self-referential metaphor, as he aligns himself with the fragile nature of glass, offering reflections on the socio-political and cultural landscapes of the Kashmir Valley.

Clifford Geertz's (1973) concept of "thick description" revolutionized semiotic analysis and the interpretation of texts. He argues that culture is not merely a backdrop for literary works but, in fact, becomes a text itself. Geertz suggests that meaning should be sought at the intersections of a cultural whole, which forms a complex web of relations. This idea extends to texts like poems, which are events and systems of symbolic exchanges that gain significance within specific cultural contexts. Geertz challenges the notion that rules governing the structure of a poem are pre-given or a priori; instead, he posits that they emerge from the text as it is constructed within its cultural domain, emphasizing the relational nature of meaning. New Historicism, a critical approach, emphasizes the interdependence of history and literary texts. It contends that a text can be viewed as a symbolic exchange of cultural elements within a historical context, which itself constitutes a discursive field. This perspective challenges traditional approaches to studying literary texts, which have typically been categorized as formalistic or historical. Recent developments in cultural studies and literary criticism suggest that interpretative rules do not originate externally but are constructed during the process of meaning-making. These rules may not be immediately evident, but they result from encounters between different cultures at crossroads, reflecting the dynamic nature of interpretation.

In Agha Shahid Ali's poem "Prayer Rug," featured in "Half Inch Himalayas" and seemingly apolitical, he assumes the role of an ethnographer of his own culture. Ali reminisces about the daily household rituals of the women in his homeland, providing a panoramic view of Kashmir's cultural landscape. Simultaneously, he weaves memories of his Muslim upbringing in Kashmir into the poem, emphasizing the diligent practice of daily rituals, driven by an intense desire and hope to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca. This creates a symbolic network of ideas, serving to convey the profound faith of ordinary Kashmiri people, embodied by his grandmother. Kazim Ali, in the introduction to his masterpiece work *Mad Heart Be Brave*, states that Ali strived hard to find an idiom for his poetry that does not fall into the mundane use of language. He was anxious about employing a metaphor that does not have a cultural referent. Many of his poems in "The Country Without a Post Office" are told using quotidian metaphors like the post office, and by including artifacts of modern technology like radio and television, which are eventually dismantled, indicating the usual experience of incarceration and the snapping of communication in the valley. Through the title “Country Without a Post Office,” the poet reiterates the impossibility of communication and the sudden blockage of postal letters by using everyday symbols like stamps and currency to capture the complexity of the catastrophe in a relatable vocabulary. Ali

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accounts with empathy for the sighs and trauma of both sides and betrays empathy for both sides. If the minarets have turned into tombs and the muezzin is dead, he at the same time also laments the separation of Kashmiri Pandits who, from a distance, desire to turn the surrounding Himalayan mountains to glass, so that they become closer to their home, which would be visible to them like transparent glass.

Commenting on Ali's dual orientation in this poem, Huzaifa Pandit (2023) in his paper, "The Country of Privilege: Problematizing The Country Without a Post Office." argues that the poet's nostalgia and the use of images like Paisley can also be read as a site of privilege and a production of his elite position. Pandit explains that Paisley is a motif shaped like an upturned tear and often thought to represent an almond blossom. Both these images can be read as signifying feminine beauty. Drawing upon this, he argues that "Paisley does not merely evoke the binary of oppressed versus oppressor but also a historical context. It is a reiteration of the oriental imagery of associating Kashmir with a passive mother/beloved in need of rescue". It seems that for Pandit, Ali's own position and privileged upbringing informed his poetic cosmology, with the particular use of images and motifs. "The speaker can afford to purchase new rare stamps with Paisley when all other stamps . . . . This mirrors the privilege historically enjoyed by the elite Muslim class in Kashmir" (Pandit, 2003, p. 78).

While it is true that Ali's own position and privilege might inform his poetic creation, a poet shows the ability to move beyond his historical and cultural conditioning. While living in a diaspora as an American citizen, he challenges his own position and accepts his responsibility to write about his homeland. Symbols like Paisley, Shawl, and other 'elite' symbols do not exhibit a single meaning but in the poet's hands, they acquire multiple meanings. Agha Shahid also struggles to connect immediately with the deprivation in his homeland. He writes:

> Fire runs in waves. Should I cross that river?
> Each post office is boarded up. Who will deliver
> parchment cut in paisleys, my news to prisons?
> Only silence can now trace my letters
> to him? (Ali, 2009, p. 205)

If Ali's images recreate a different past, they might also help him to envision another possible world, thus questioning the entrenched presence of the present. Guattari et al. (1983) in their work on minor literature write, "if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more possibility to express another possible community and forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility" (p. 17). In his poem "I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight," the poet uses a similar motif and repeats the phrase, pregnant with meaning, to precisely express the mental agony of the Pandits who, during the exodus, had dispersed to the plains. He writes: "Now and in time to be, / Wherever green is worn . . . A terrible beauty is born" (Yeats)

> One must wear jeweled ice in dry plains
> to will the distant mountains to glass.
> The city from where no news can come
> Is now so visible in its curfewed nights. (Ali, 2009, p. 178)

Ali uses the epigraph from Yeats' poem "Easter, 1916" to intertextually convey the grief and sacrifice of Kashmiri Pandits who were displaced and dislocated from their homeland and must wear jeweled ice as a token of memory of their beloved homeland, which is wrapped in a blanket of a crusty snow. Snow is the hue of our motherland, and one must wear it to become the true martyr and protector of one's home, which has become a place where death is perpetual, and someone's father may have tied a knot at the shrine in lieu of his son's sacrifice; only to untie when freedom is restored back to the paradise. The symbol of wearing jeweled ice is intentionally compared by the poet with Yeats' symbolism of wearing green, referring to Irish nationalism. This will satisfy their desire to be near or back to their home and will make their vision clear from a distance like transparent glass because Kashmir remains cut off and opaque for the rest of the world.

In another instance in the poem, the blood of the martyr which spills every day synthesizes into a phantasmal image of a necklace woven into sheer rubies, somewhere smeared on the snow-capped mountains. The poet invents a dream, mixing the pain and bringing the discordant binaries together on a similar plane at least through his unified poetic vision. This poem, which is the most popular among youth, is known for its verbal excellence and is filled with local cultural references and alludes to the ghostly shadows of the victims of the military operation.

> Likewise in the previous poem, the poet changes from the personal pronoun 'I' slowly towards "we," symbolizing the support shown by the Muslim brethren for their fellow Kashmiri Pandits. He writes: "Now every night we bury/ our houses — theirs, the ones left empty. / We are faithful. On their doors, we hang wreaths. (Ali, 2009, p. 5)

In the poem "A History of Paisley," the poet becomes a chronicler and directly addresses the reader, who is an alibi of chronology or a witness in absentia to the history of his homeland. The poet takes pride in being a part of the ten-thousand-year-old civilization and traces the history of Kashmir down to the gods of Hindu mythology, Shiva and Parvati. He tries to create a bond with his original antecedents. He writes: "You who will find the dark fossils of paisleys/ one afternoon on the peaks of Zabarvan" (Ali, 2009, p. 218). He writes a telluric poem to comment on the

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heritage of Kashmir, which is embossed on the landscape of Kashmir like an almond motif called paisley, which is a pattern profusely carved and stitched on the cultural artifacts of Kashmir and is symbolic of Kashmir.

(Look! Their feet bleed; they leave footprints on the street
which will give up its fabric, at dusk, a carpet) –
you have found — you'll think — the first teardrop, gem
that was enticed for a mogul diadem
into design . . . (Ali, 2009, p. 33)

But alas! no one knows about this link, and we all know it as "paisley," after a city in Europe because of the high demand for cashmere shawls in that place.

The poet laments its being now reduced to a commercial commodity and wants the reader to explore it like a cultural legacy with a deep history, unfortunately, which cannot be heard. This almond pattern is intricately etched in the soul of Kashmir, and one is reminded of the emblematic river Jhelum and is mythologized as emblematic of Shiva's courtship for his consort Parvati. Ali affirms with the mythic version of the geological creation of the Kashmir valley. The sonorous music coming from the anklets of the disgruntled Parvati still resounds in the empty and desolate spaces of Kashmir, where the soldiers daily pursue the fleeing militants, who leave their footprints just like hers. Here, two far-fetched historical epochs are juxtaposed together:

And you, now touching sky, deaf to her anklets
still echoing in the valley, deaf to men
fleeing from soldiers into dead-end lanes
(Look! Their feet bleed; they leave footprints on the street
which will give up its fabric, at dusk, a carpet). (Ali, 2009, p. 218)

Today, the new generation, which has replaced the old, is torn by the assaults of the military operations but is unknowingly contributing to the creation of a new collective unconscious. Due to inevitable historical erasure, this event will soon be unavailable to future generations and can only be traced in the most concrete form through cultural motifs, works of literature, or commercial artifacts, as the written records of history will be rendered incredible. The reader is unaware that there is a long history, which exists in the very topography, culture, and cartography of Kashmir.

It is noteworthy that Agha Shahid Ali in this poem appears to neglect the history of fabric designing or sozni work in the valley, which was a skill brought to the place from Persia and Central Asia by Sufis who had visited the remote place to spread the light of Islam. This may, however, be a part of the Muslim collective, which is the minority population of Kashmir, and is still practiced by Kashmiri artisans. Ali makes the reader realize that both Hindus and Muslims are mutual collaborators who make up the larger history of Kashmir, and that Kashmiri diaspora might not have the representative capacity for Kashmir. Hafsa Kanjwal (2023) in her paper, "Kashmir Diaspora Mobilizations: Towards Transnational Solidarity in an Age of Settler-Colonialism" argues that diaspora living in the USA and the UK and given their positionality might lead them to situate the Kashmiri cause within a matrix that would be palpable for the current secular and liberal international order.

III. Conclusion

The paper explores the interplay of position and privilege in Agha Shahid Ali's poetry and how significantly he can challenge his own conditioning while imagining another consciousness that questions his privileged notions. All the examples taken from the poems exhibit the polyvocal nature of Ali's poetry. However, a broad overview of his entire body of work reveals his deep personal desire to unify the two discordant positions and memories of the Kashmiri people. This desire stems from his strict adherence to the form of his poetry, his tripartite nationality, and the disheveled historical conditions of his homeland. One is reminded of Bakhtin, who argues that a poet, unlike a novelist, is not able to oppose his own poetic consciousness and his own intentions for the language he uses. He reiterates, "The unity and singularity of language are the indispensable prerequisites for a realization of the direct intentional individuality of poetic style and its monologic steadfastness" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 33). In summary, Agha Shahid Ali's body of poetry serves as a compelling vehicle for the exploration of the intricate interplay between notions of position, privilege, and personal consciousness. Through an analysis of select poems, it becomes evident that Ali's work possesses a polyvocal quality, mirroring the multifaceted dimensions of his homeland, Kashmir. However, a comprehensive examination of his entire oeuvre reveals a profound and deeply entrenched desire on the poet's part to bridge the chasm that exists between disparate positions and the diverse memories of the Kashmiri people.

Ali's unwavering commitment to poetic form, his unique status as a poet with a tripartite nationality, and the backdrop of tumultuous historical conditions in Kashmir collectively contribute to the shaping of his poetic vision. In this context, the insights of literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who made a critical distinction between the poet and the novelist, become particularly relevant. Bakhtin's assertion that a poet cannot extricate their poetic consciousness from the language they employ underscores the intricate and inseparable relationship between Ali's distinctive poetic style and the intricate layers of his identity.

Ultimately, Agha Shahid Ali's poetry serves as a testament to the transformative potential of literature in challenging and transcending the confines of privilege and position. Through the evocative verses that populate his works, Ali extends an invitation to readers to embark on a profound exploration of themes such as identity, culture, and the

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enduring human yearning for unity amidst discord. In traversing the labyrinthine landscapes of Ali's poetic universe, one is reminded that poetry, akin to life itself, represents a dynamic interplay of diverse voices and perspectives. It is within this rich tapestry of words that Ali extends an earnest invitation to all to contemplate the intricacies of privilege, position, and the shared human experience. Through this contemplative engagement, Ali's poetry becomes a conduit for fostering a deeper and more nuanced comprehension of the world we collectively inhabit.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study is supported via funding from Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Project number (PSAU/2023/R/1444).

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