Chapter III

America in the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali

After the First World War, Black people began seeking equal rights in America, and the country saw itself changing, to some extent, from the traditional white dominated society to a more or less an egalitarian one. Afro-Americans began to write about their struggles for equality, and against racism as they “sought to break free of Victorian moral values and bourgeois shame” (Harlem) which culminated in Harlem Renaissance (1918-1937) that led to an overall literary and cultural revival of the Afro-Americans. After the Second World War, people migrated on a large scale to America and other western countries for jobs better education etc. Thus America got transformed into a multicultural society with people from China, India, Arabia and African countries immigrating to the United States. Each community began to write about their lives in diaspora, their culture, their relationship with the lost home, and about their struggles and identities. Of all these communities Asian Americans were one of the majorities. The chapter will introduce a background of the Asian-American literature, and will particularly refer to South-Asian American literature and specify the Indian-American poets. The chapter will try to situate Agha Shahid Ali in this context, and discuss “Americaness” in his poetry: his themes and concerns in relation to America.

Asian-American literature began to flourish after the Second World War, with the publication of Jade Snow Wong’s Fifth Chinese Daughter in 1950. However, its roots are found at the end of 19th century when a Chinese graduate student, Yan Phou Lee, published an autobiographical work in English, When I Was a Boy in China (1887), about his life in China. Nevertheless, it was the movement by students at San Francisco State
College in 1968-who protested against non-inclusion of literature from Asia and other parts-that led Asian-American literature become part of the curriculum. With publication of *Aiieeeee!*, an anthology of Asian-American writers, Asian-American literature got stamped in America. The anthology was named “after the racist misrepresentation of “oriental” speech, embodies the suppressed voice of Asian America,” (Susie J. Pak, and Elda E. Tsou 178) where the writers in the preface stated: “It is fifty years of our whole voice” (qtd. in Susie J. Pak Elda E. Tsou 178) besides proclaiming “that a true Asian American sensibility is non-Christian, non feminine, and non immigrant (qtd. in Wong 8).” The anthology, however, is not fully Asian-American as it only covers three ethnic groups of Asia—Chinese, Japanese and Filipino. Asia is usually divided into three geographical areas: East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. East Asia includes China, Japan, and Korea; South Asia includes India, Pakistan, Bangladesh etc; and Southeast Asia includes Singapore, Philippines, Cambodia and Vietnam etc. Asian American literature is usually refers to the writings from East Asia only, but critics like King-Kok Cheung notes, “The term ‘Asian American literature’ generally describes works by writers of diverse national origins—Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, East Indian, Pakistani, Vietnamese, Thai, Cambodian, Laotian, and Pacific Islanders” (qtd. in Huang 5). Likewise an e-journal published by the United States Department of State entitled “Multicultural Literature in the United States Today.” (Multicultural) has two separate chapters on Asian American Literature, one on “East Asian Literature (32-36)’ which includes writers like Jennifer Lee, Birch Minch Nguyeni and Ha Jin. Onother chapter “Middle East and South Asian American” (32-53) has put the writers from South Asia and Middle East together; it discusses South Asian writers like Akhil Sharma, Tamim
Ansary and Agha Shahid Ali. Sometimes South-Asian American poetry is referred as a separate category or sub category e.g. in Harold Bloom’s edited book *Asian-American Writers*, the first essay by Ketu H. Katrak is “South Asian American Literature” in which writers from South Asian origin like Agha Shahid Ali, Meena Alexander, Sara Suleeri and many others have been discussed. Even the term South-Asian-writers does not describe the single category of writers but writers belonging to different regions within South Asia. Ketu H. Katrak points out:

> Writers from South Asian nations (themselves often invented as nations by the British) encompass a multiplicity of ethnicities, religions, languages, and cultures. Hence the category ‘South Asian American’ does not indicate a monolithic whole, but rather a collection of differences that are often more compelling and significant than any similarities (6)

Themes of Asian American literature are very diverse ranging from writing about the mother land in diaspora, writing as a hybrid writer, where two identities merge, and in most advanced way, it is Asian writers writing with American sensibilities in the American melting pot culture. Themes of Asian-American writers, however, are not much different from the general concerns of the poetry; yet, having a hybrid identity, their thematic concerns vary to some extent, e.g. Kim notes that Asian-American literature “elucidates the social history of the Asian-Americans in the United States” (qtd. in Huntley44). Writers like Huang think that contemporary Asian-American writers compete with American writers, but, he observes that the tag Asian-American still remains even though their thematic concerns are more American than Asian-American (3). Maxine Hatong Kingston suggests that we should do away with hyphen in the
Chinese-American "because the hyphen gives the word on either side equal weight.... It looks as if a Chinese-American has double citizenship... Without the hyphen, 'Chinese' is an adjective and 'American' a noun; a Chinese American is a type of American (qtd. in Huang 3)." This concept of de-hyphenization particularized for Chinese-American literature can be equally practical for the Asian-American literature of which Chinese-American is only a part.

Since the chapter deals with the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali, it will mainly concern itself with his poetry in context of the South-Asian American writing in general and Indian American poetry in particular. There are many Indian born American poets like Agha Shahid Ali, who share a similar culture and write with similar sensibility. It is important to introduce some of them like Meena Alexander, A K Ramanujan, Vikram Seth etc, so as to contextualize Ali. Meena Alexander(1951-) writes about her experience in exile, her identity and cultural displacement. Living at various places and having undergone multiple exiles, she develops into a kind of global writer. She has published many poetry books which include *Illiterate Heart* (2002), *Raw Silk* (2004), *Quickly Changing River* (2008). In *Raw Silk* she talks about Post 9/11 scenario in America, Gujarat pogrom against Muslims and apartheid conditions in South Africa. There are undercurrents of feminism and post colonialism in her poetry but she is neither an avowed feminist nor a post colonialist. Vijay Seshadri (b1954) an Indian American poet has published with many reputed poetry journals in the U S. His collections are *Wild Kingdom* (1996), *The long Meadow* (2004). He deals with profound philosophical issues and writes about America and its events; however, Indian thoughts and ideas always tend to intrude with his American sensibility. Jeet Thayil (b1964) is an Indian-American poet
and librettist besides being an amateur musician, and writer of a debut novel *Narcopolis*(2012) which was short listed for Man-Booker-Prize. *60 Indian Poets* is his famous anthology covering the whole gamut of Indian English poetry since Independence. There is not much “Indianness” (as it is traditionally called) in his poetry but he is mainly concerned with himself; being a drunkard, drug addict and sex addict, his poetry has a mark of these “vices”. Vikram Seth (b 1952-) is a multicultural poet and a novelist who has had an experience of living in various parts of the world (London, San Francisco, China and India) which ultimately become the locale for his writing. Seth’s started his poetry with *Mapping* (1980) and he went on to write many other poetry books including the verse novel *The Golden Gate* (1986) which consists of six hundred sonnets written in iambic tetra meter. The novel depicts the yuppie subculture of San Francisco. Seth has also translated three Chinese poets into English published in 1992, *Three Chinese Poets: Translations of Poems by Wang Wei, Li Bai, and Du Fu*. Seth’s poetry is multicultural with various subjects and sensibilities but he “ultimately remains an Indian writer” (Reisman 35).

Agha Shahid Ali like above mentioned poets has also lived and experienced both Indian and American cultures and traditions, therefore, he writes with a somewhat similar Indian-American sensibility. Agha Shahid Ali had his early schooling in America while his parents were pursuing doctoral degrees in Ball State Teacher’s College, Indiana. The stay, however, was short and he received further education in Kashmir and Delhi. He left for America in 1974 and would visit his parents during summers in Kashmir. He went to live in America till his death in 2001 and died an American citizen.
Diasporic writers are usually concerned with their homeland and diasporic writing tends to be writing more about their native country than adopted country. Some writers, however, transcend this nostalgia and start writing about their second home. Ali has written about both. Although, in much of his poetry, he writes about home, but his anthologies like *A Walk through Yellow Pages* (1987) and *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991) focus entirely on America. However, Ali is not an American poet, like Walt Whitman, who saw America “singing, the varied carols” (Whitman); but he is a post-war poet of loss whose main concern is the victimization of the underprivileged. Ali travels through America to sketch its geographical and psychological landscape; besides much of the Ali’s poetry on America is concerned with Native Americans—destruction of Native American people, culture, places and languages in the post-Columbian times. Ali’s concern with the Natives is quite peculiar; he is neither a white settler nor a Native American, but a diasporic writer writing about the original inhabitants of America. Native American writer who writes about his people is well aware of his history; therefore, his writing about the injustices, crimes and sufferings of the past is a kind of “writing back”. On the other hand a European-American writer constructs the victims of history in such a way that catastrophe appears to be natural rather than an organized crime. The outlook of the settler, in most of the cases, is justification of their crimes of the past, and a delusion is created by constructing natives as a kind of “poor” victims of history. Salzer views it thus:

When European-American writers write “Indian,” they are not writing as Indians. ... Rather they are creating romantic and stereotyped imaginary Indians which become, in their texts, “the real thing.” ... As
most ventriloquists, these writers succeed by creating illusions for their audiences’ entertainment.

In ventriloquism, the “dummy” apparently speaks, and the skill of the ventriloquist maintains that illusions. ... When the “dummy” is a doll, the act can be seen as harmless. On the other hand, when the “dummy” is a human being or represents a human culture, then the joke of a ventriloquist, The European-American writer, may inflict insult, damage, and cultural violence. (10-12)

Ali also chooses to write about the Native American people with whom he did not share any history or culture, and unlike European-American he is not a settler colonialist either. Ali point of view is that of an outsider’s, but his attitude is humanistic and empathetic, unlike sympathetic approach of the European-American writers. Ali sees them as fellow sufferers along with different people around the world who, like Native Americans, have suffered in history or are suffering. Thus Ali’s attitude towards Natives in his writing is neither European-American writers’ “construct” nor Native American writers’ “writing back”.

American Indians or Native Americans who are the subject of Ali’s lament and loss refer to the indigenous people who are believed to have inhibited the land in Americas since for more than 11000 years, since 8000 BC to be more exact. The arrival of Columbus and his discovery of America in 1492 was a great calamity for the natives; their population 54,000,000 to 100,000,000 in 1492 was reduced to a total of 265,683 in 1910 (Denevan). Phil Lucas says about it, “They didn’t move to Hawaii, they didn’t go to Sweden. Where did they go? They are gone, killed” (qtd. in American Holocaust). Pre-
Colombian Era was for them an era of culture and civilization: speaking their own language, following their own tradition, and living with mutual friendly relationship with other clans. Settlers destroyed everything, and Ali seems to feel their pain and suffering, and in some poems he appears to be a Native American carrying the burden of history, and looking back at his culture and language in pain and lament.

Ali's poem "Leaving Sonora" is about Hohokam tribe, a Native American tribe that lived in Sonoraian desert in New Mexico. Ali believes that certain places "insist on fidelity" (Ali 116) and, he feels that the desert asks to "Be faithful, / even to those who no longer exist" (Ali 116). Ali goes on to compare the pre-Columbian Sonora with its present day. He imagines a woman who could see the transformation of history: in the culinary ashes she could imagine the transformation of coal into diamond, something which actually happens inside earth, but Ali finds its proximity on earth with transformation and extinction of Indian Americans. Ali overviews the desert as he moves in the plane and sees all the history buried for he could see nothing but "blue lights fade into the outlines of a vanished village" (Ali 116). The poem sketches the loss of Native American history and the loss turns into a very profuse lament which he carries on in other poems. In the poem "I Dream I Return to Tucson in the Monsoons" which follows "Leaving Sonora", Ali dreams of his visit and he sees nothing except rain, silence and the desert. Ali uses images like sun, moon and ocean to lament about the lost tribes and longs "for the vanished love." As he moves on he sees everything vanished: "Below me is a world without footprints/ I am alone I'm still alone/ and there's no trace anywhere of the drowned" (Ali 117).
In “Crucifixion” Ali talks about a Native American tribe Navajos and their custom of climbing up to Sangre de Cristos which literally means “blood of Christ” where on each Easter they would crucify a bachelor before lashing him with yucca fibers. Nobody would tell anybody his whereabouts; not even the parents would know his grave for two years, which was a custom. This silence about his death leads to kind of disappearance of the bachelor.

... you don’t know that Silence,

answered by its own echo from every
direction, is at the moment turning

all history to flesh— so that you will

again be filled with sorrow, ...(Ali 113).

The poem goes on to reflect upon the grief of parents which will fall on them as they will not be able to find the grave of their son. Ali also seems to juxtapose his own exile and living away from his parents with Native American exile from history as “son won’t be/ returning, never coming home” (Ali 115). The image of an altar and dawn of blood gives it a historical significance of the crucifixion of Christ: “and when far behind you the dawn is blood” (Ali 115). The poem thus emerges as an ode to the loss of the vanished tribe from history and makes one feel that they were all crucified by the settlers, and no blood seems to wash off the sins of those who usurped their land and history.
In "Beyond the Ash Rains" Ali is very direct about the vanishing tribes. The poem is written in first person where a Native American tribesman seems to be speaking his point of view:

When the desert refused my history,

refused to acknowledge that I had lived

there, with you, among the vanished tribe,

two, three hundred years ago, ... (Ali 110).

It may also be Ali imagining himself as a tribesman lost in the epoch of history speaking about the lost history.

In the part one of his poem "In Search of Evanescence", Ali mingles the past of American Indian history with the present day America which tends to forget history and wash "history off the shelves" (Ali 121); washing away dust from the books as it seems that acknowledging history has become burdensome for them. Ali compares the past and the present; the present is symbolized by consumerist culture like "glass sneakers" "mirrors lying on coffee table"; the past is symbolized by "moving the weather from sky to sky" "vanishing rainbows" "sun's quick reprints" (Ali 121). The past American Indian history which was as natural as the metaphors represent seem to be engulfed by "the walls of ceilings"—forced capitalistic modernity. As Chiu notes:

By aestheticizing the plight of the lost ones, Ali asks us to imaginatively identify with them and their situation, rather than
succumbing to the tendency in modern society for people to identify with victors, not victims, and to live only for the moment, with “‘no memories, families, or past’” (34)

Agha Shahid Ali’s poem “Eurydice” alludes to a Greek myth related to Eurydice (an oak nymph and one of the daughters of Apollo (the god of light)) who died of a serpent bite. Her husband Orpheus goes to the underworld and seduces the god of the underworld, Hades by his charming music, and manages to get her back on a condition that the pair will not look back at any moment of time during their way to the world. But when they had almost reached the world, Orpheus looks back and Eurydice disappears right away. The poem juxtaposes the Eurydice myth with Nazi concentration camps where a prisoner (read Eurydice) is “brought limping to Hell” (Ali 107). Now a “rare passenger/ in a river-green van” (Ali 107), arrives in Belsen to take the prisoner home; playing Beethoven he moves guards to tears, but the departure of Eurydice is held back by papers which are handed to him; he skims through them and leaves the prisoner alone “in a sudden/ tunnel of mustard twilight” (Ali 109). The poem tries to sketch a bleak image of loss, death, destitution. By juxtaposing the Greek myth with the Nazi reality Ali is hinting towards another vanished reality: death of American Indians who like prisoners in a Nazi concentration camp, and in gas chambers vanished into thin air. Here also “The smoke hangs down its arms/ over the chimneys, /clearing the ghost-washed air.” Bob Haozous says that “this world loses six million Jews, and world feels sorry; it loses fifty million indigenous people … world doesn’t care” (qtd. in American Holocaust). Ali seems to say the same.
Besides death of the Natives at such a large scale, their languages are also dying
due to overwhelming power of the dominant language/s. In the late twentieth century, the
United States established boarding schools for the natives so as to teach them language,
culture and religion of the whites. These schools were run by or affiliated with Christian
missionaries, where natives were not allowed to practice their religion, speak their native
language and were forced to adapt American culture. In addition schools promoted
adultery, incest and alcoholism, none of which was a part of the Native culture. These
“Reservation Camps” as Adam Fortunate Eagle would say “were no more than glorified
concentration camps.” (qtd in American Holocaust). This concept has been very
thoroughly dealt by postcolonial critics who have talked about marginalization of
languages by the language of the powerful. Bill Ashcroft et.al says that “One of the main
features of imperial oppression is control over language. The imperial education system
installs a 'standard' version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all
‘variants’ as impurities” (6).

Agha Shahid Ali in part four of the poem “In Search of Evanescence” talks about
death of Native American languages. The poem is in the first person narration and the
speaker seems to be the last speaker of the language whom somebody wants to live so
that the language may live which was the pride of the tribe, and as beautiful as any other
language.

A language will die with me

(once

spoken by proud tribesmen

in the canyons east

103
It has the richest consonants
for any cluster of sorrows ... (Ali 125).

Extinction of a language is a global phenomenon now which is affecting many "minor" languages resulting in the end of many languages to which American-Indian languages is no exception. There were hundreds of languages spoken in America before the advent of Columbus out of which hundreds died away up to the 19th century and more than hundred survived when they were brought under studies in the late 19th century. James Crawford writes “While Krauss (1992b) estimates that 155 indigenous languages are still spoken in the United States, he classifies 135 of these—87 percent of the total—as moribund.”(18) These languages are only spoken by the older generation and the young speak only English.

Ali in the poem equals language with prayer which needs to be saved, the way prayer needs to be granted. Thus prayer which amounts to faith, a source of survival, is perfect only in one’s own mother tongue. Therefore, speaker’s plea to save the language is to save his own being.

Someone wants me to live
so he can learn

those prayers
that language he is asking me
questions
He wants me to live
and as I speak he is freezing
my words he will melt them
years later
to listen and listen
to the water of my voice
when he is the last
speaker of the language (Ali 126).

Epigraph used in the poem “In Search of Evanescence” which talks about the loss
seems to applying to the Native consciousness. The idea of vanishing is very strong in the
poem and very near to the Buddhist nirvana, which means extinguishing or unbinding.
(The History) It seems to be same for the Native American tribes which Ali imagines to
be a kind of his alter ego. Ali has talked explicitly about this subject of vanishing in his
poems “A Nostalgist’s Map of America” and “In Search of Evanescence” where he
invokes Emily Dickinson. Dickinson’s obsession with death is amazing that makes Ali to
use the concept in defining the vanishing of the Native American tribes. Besides alluding
to the Dickinson’s poem “A Route to Evanescence” and using it as an epigraph to
describe the bleak conditions of the Natives, Ali draw from it many other metaphors,
images and meanings to discuss other issues. It is important to write something about the
Dickinson poem before proceeding to Ali’s poem as he alludes over and again to this short poem of Dickinson.

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 – (qtd. in Ali 118).

Evanescence is a tendency to disappear, to vanish away, to fade away to evaporate as if it didn’t exist at all. The poem describes the movement of the humming bird which moves so fast that it disappears before the description of the movement can be completed. The movement, moreover, does not leave any trace of its happening as everything comes back to order before one could visualize the entropy. The poem is somewhat cryptic as Christopher E. G Benfey calls it “a riddle in verse (89).” Dickinson juxtaposes movement of humming bird and the mail coming from Tunis. This poem is considered to be the signature poem of Dickinson as she is believed to have sent it as signature to the letter to at least seven of her friends (Benfey 89). There is a revolving wheel, with resonance of green colour which suggests reverberating sound full of images; rush of red dye. These descriptive images are followed by events which are very fast and end in no time. The first line appears to be the title of the poem and rest of the lines tend to describe and justify the title: how evanescence happens. The poem can have multiple
meanings Benfey calls the poem an attempt to define “Evanescence” itself (89), and John F. Lynen says:

The object is not so fully conceptualized nor so generalized as to be called a humming bird. It is a "route," a "resonance," a "rush," in short it is this particular something- neither object nor event-.... the poem carries us towards concept... [which is] so particular that it hasn’t a name, or rather, has as its true name, the entire poem. (131)

The poem is also about travel of a bird, letters, rail and above all, the imagination. The short time taken by the bush to adjust itself after touched by hummingbird depicts the time taken by the mail to reach Amherst from Tunis. Logan Esdale says that “the poem is ... a companion to her early letter in which she observes that “the world is full of people travelling everywhere”” (18). Logan Esdale says that in the poem “hummingbird is a courier (18).” Ali’s allusion to the Dickinson’s poem is not merely a reference to the poem, but Ali has situated his poems, “A Nostalgist’s Map of America” and “In Search of Evanescence”, in it. These two poems deals with two things (which are also subject of the Dickinson’s poem): evanescence and travel; besides being an elegy on the death of his friend Philip Paul Orlando. His concern with travel and death of his friend will be dealt later in the chapter. Emily Dickinson was very much influenced by Buddhism which comes to light when one goes through her letters and poems.(see Uno, Sluytet,)

The poem in discussion, “A Route to Evanescence” also hints towards her Buddhist inclination. Wheel is a Buddhist symbol which represents cycle of life and to achieve “nothingness” or “nirvana” one has to go beyond this cycle of life, which is signified by “evanescence” in the poem. Ali seems to be well aware of her Buddhist influence whose
principle, according to Peters, is “that all things originated in nothing, and will revert to nothing again (qtd. in Uno 57).” Ali’s has many reasons to be obsessed with evanescence: it is vanishing of the American Indian tribes, loss of his friend Phil, and universal loss or fatalism. Ali’s search for evanescence is not his Buddhist inclination towards nirvana like that of Emily Dickinson, nor has it much to do with post modern angst. Ali feels the loss of time, people and passing away of everything. His mapping and travel is a part of that “passing away”, which is more of tragic vision of life rather than Buddhist escapism or postmodern pessimism.

Ali’s poem “A Nostalgist’s Map of America” which has been discussed above in the context of American Indian identity and his obsession with evanescence, also deals with travel and mapping of America. The poem begins with the memories in which Ali recollects moments he spent with his friend Philip Paul Orlando to whom the poem has been dedicated. The journey begins from Pennsylvania, and as they move with speed they leave behind trees with same resonance of emerald as we find in Dickinson’s poem, “A Route to Evanescence” which has been discussed above. It is accompanied by sense of loss and desire for evanescence which he believes will compensate the loss. Ali’s play with Dickinson’s poem is an attempt to find a perfect aesthetic to express the sorrow for his friend who is dying of AIDS. The whole poem seems to be geographical, emotional and aesthetic journeys mapped together. The journey which began in Pennsylvania ends in Southern California and in the whole poem he wants to console his friend, making him believe that everything will be alright. The last lines of the poem is a “rush” of emotion which puts the whole poem in “resonance”, and a second relook at the poem makes us realize that it is nostalgist’s mapping of America. The word “resonance” which Ali uses
over and again “invokes all kinds of meaning that the term “exile” evokes: the purpose of travel, the meaning of loss, and the illusion of belonging, and much more.” (Mai 42) At the end of the poem poet is in pain and profound longing; he tries to cope with the reality which he tried to evade through the whole poem.

this is least false: “You said each month you need new blood. Please forgive me, Phil, but I thought of your pain as formal feeling, one useful for 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”(Ali 120).

Ali concern with mapping and travel can be categorized under the genre of travel writing, a genre of literature that focuses on writing based on travel experience. Travel writing can be based on a range of writings like journalism, history, politics, sociology, environmental concern or a scientific study which can take any form—fiction, non-fiction, poetry newspaper article, blog and so on. Talking about American travel writing Hamera Judith and Alfred Bendixwn say that “The genre is itself in motion and, in the process, reveals much about the changing cultural desires and anxieties both of the traveler and the American reading public. (2).” Ali’s book A Nostalgist’s Mapping of America is also a kind of a travel writing in which he makes us travel across America
focusing on pre-Columbian America and trying to revisit it in the context of modern American map.

Agha Shahid Ali while mapping America first of all draws a rough and true map of Pre-Columbian America in which we find no straight lines drawn to separate various states of America which have been divided only to name them United States. Pre-Columbian States are based on various tribes living in certain specific areas with individual cultures and language which differentiates them from the other states. Now America has only one language and a singular culture to a large extent (although with traces of multiculturalism). Ali like any other travel writer, in the words of Judith and Bendixen “creates American “selves” and American landscapes through affirmation, exclusion, and negation of others, and interpellates readers into these selves and landscapes through specific rhetorical and genre conventions. (1)

In part two of “In Search of Evanescence” we find Ali continuing mapping America. Ali comes back to Pennsylvania and Phil, and continues “mapping America, the city limits/ of Evanescence now everywhere” (Ali 122). He regrets that he did not tell Phil his routes of evanescence. In part five Ali deliberately copies Dickinson’s style and quotes her other poems so as to refer back to her evanescence poem. It hovers around the same theme: evanescence, an escape from the wheel of life.

“There is -so much-of it-
I want to get outside-of it all-
I would-if I could-
Even if it killed me-” (Ali 127).
In part six Ali again goes back to Pennsylvania and Phil again comes in question where he feels that "Phil was afraid of being forgotten" (Ali 128). And he regrets not to have consoled the friend as he should have done. In part nine Ali follows the same pattern and invokes Keeffe and his obsession with Phil does not stop and he says: "I've bought tickets for us to Evanescence, Phil, /and you will be with me as we pass the ghost towns- (Ali 131). At the end of the part Ali’s concern heightens and he implores with regret, pain and longing:

I’m saying to a stranger what I should have said to you: “I have no house only a shadow but whenever you are in need of a shadow my shadow is yours.” (Ali 128)

Ali’s search for evanescence is also the search for a resting place which one can call home. Ali’s exile from his homeland and his journeys through America make him a restless traveler in search of a place. He tries to find evanescence in Pennsylvania where the poet feels that “There has to be one” here. As the travel continues he tries to find it in Southern California as he could not find it in Pennsylvania: he doesn’t find it but Phil will soon find it as he is dying and will vanish away. Ali’s whole journey in to find evanescence is a tragic journey of loss and passing away of time, place and people.

Besides mapping the US and North America Ali also contours South America. Ali in the poem “I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror” drives through Utah and views South America in his rear view mirror. Ali’s mapping of South America is a continuation of
mapping America; rather he completes mapping Americas. While mapping America his second home he maps various states of the USA, but in this case he maps various countries of South America. The travel which is described by the poet as a visualization he sees in a rearview mirror is actually an imagined travel through recent history of South America; it is a looking back in nostalgia or a political travel in a post colonial world or in an ongoing neo-colonial age where he is trying to map the continent in aftermath of colonialism and continuation of American imperialism. “Landscape is “a construct of the mind and of feeling,” according to Yi-Fu Tuan, a human invention that “can take place only in the mind’s eye.”” (Stowe 26) Ali considers it on same lines and critiques this colonial construct.

While mapping the continent he starts from the lower countries seeing Argentina then Paraguay followed by Uruguay. Thus while moving northward the mirror reflects Columbia, Brazil and Peru. Ali does not describe the countries merely by names but the way he sees them through the glass of the mirror or the way the mirror reflects them. “I see Argentina and Paraguay / under a curfew of glass...” (Ali 161) Then he goes on to see that “The night in Uruguay/ is black salt” (Ali 161) and “Columbia vermilion, Brazil blue tar ... / Peru is titanium white” (Ali 161). By using these descriptive words for these countries Ali is trying to show economic importance of these countries because of which they have been the subjects of colonialism and now are the subjects of the economic imperialism. Now he sees different vision of these countries: “I see Peru without rain, Brazil/ without forests-/ .../Sedona Nogales Anasazi” (Ali 162).

Mapping almost whole of the continent while traveling further north the mirror reflects nothing but Chile, and Ali’s vision stops at Santiago, capital of Chile and his
journey ends here. Now mirror, memory and history centers on the Chilean coup de at of 1973, referred by many as the first 9-11, in which democratically elected Socialist President Salvador Allende was overthrown by the Military dictator, Augusto Pinochet which resulted in the death of about four thousand people and forty thousand were taken to National Stadium which was used as a concentration camp (Yousaf). Death in the stadium became rife, as Ali says, “Those about to die are looking at him, / His eyes ledger of the disappeared. / What will the mirror try now?” (Ali 163). Ali is describing what follows the coup: football stadium which has now become an interrogation centre where death is ubiquitous. He describes the catastrophe, “They dig till dawn but find only corpses. /He has returned to this dream for bones. /The water darkens. The continent vanishes” (Ali 163). Thus at the end of the poem mirror ceases to reflect, mapping stops and the continent vanishes. Thus the poem, like the reflecting mirror, startles and terrifies the reader, as he visualizes the horror. Ali invites the reader to look at the perils of neo-colonialism and American Imperialism which is seen as a continuation of the age old imperialism.

As Harley says cartography is “primarily a form of political discourse concerned with the acquisition and maintenance of power” (qtd in Howard 140). In the process of colonization cartography had an important role to play as the process was chalked out on paper e.g. maps used by Christopher Columbus which helped him in discovery and rediscovery of America. Thus the colonial project “relied heavily on the science of mapping.”( Howard 148) Thus Ali’s drawing of map and contours across continents can be explained in the following statement by Graham Huggan:
So while map continues to feature in one sense as a paradigm of colonial
discourse, its deconstruction and/or visualization permits a ‘disindentification’
from the procedures of colonialism (and other hegemonic discourses) and a (re)
engagement in the ongoing process of cultural decolonization. (411).

Besides talking about the catastrophe that befell on American Indians and human
right violations in South America, Ali also pens down some poems dealing with other
kinds of human rights violation in the United States. In “The Keeper of the Dead Hotel”
Ali makes us remember the victims of the Bisbee deportation of July 12, 1917 when
about thirteen hundred miners were deported in cattle cars to Hermanas, New Mexico
covering a distance 320 km in 16 hours through the desert without food or water. Since
the Victims were Mexican Americans they were discriminated by Caucasian supervisors.
The poem sketches the scene of a dead hotel where rich senators would gamble and drink
and their wives, with all their coquetry, would charm the gathering; now it is empty but
haunted by wife of one of the senators. One of the wives wants to know what happened
as everybody seems to be silent on the issue and conditions are created to make it appear
that nothing had ever happened. “she hears a whisper” “Something/ has happened. What
is it?”(Ali 137). Years after letters arrived for her and when the keeper read them, “No
one answers, / But each night a voice cries out: “Fire!”” (Ali137). The Image sketched by
the poem is haunting and gothic, through which Ali tries to recreate the ghosts of history.
She desperately wants to know what had happened and this desperateness to know haunts
the whole poem. During that time the government had issued an order that the news
should not be published; New York Times, however, did talk about the incident
suggesting that mass arrests were a better option. (Bisbee)
Every silence in the world

has conspired with every other. Unanswered

she is leaving this city again, her voice pressing him back into the silence

of ash-throated men in the desert... (Ali 137-138).

Agha Shahid Ali has carried on this idea in some poems parodied from Grimms tales. Here, Ali, by simply copying the old tales, tries to show how ideologies work in the hierarchy of power structures. He uses the technique of parody; an important literary practice used by modern writers to retell something in a new way, so as to reinterpret it on the basis of modern techniques, philosophies and forms. Ali parodies two tales of Grimm Brothers by deconstructing them to tell us about the violence and ideology used in language by the dominant to augment power. Grimm’s tales, first published in 1812, have been entertaining and educating the European and American children for centuries. In the Modern era Grimms tales have gone through enormous critical study, keeping in view the rise of modern critical theories like Marxism, Psychoanalysis, and Feminism etc. The fairytale, “Little Red Riding Hood”, which Ali transforms into a poem, has received a good deal of criticism, ranging from Psychoanalysts to Feminists. Ali is not the first one to deal with the tale, but the tale is so interesting that it has interested many painters, sculptors and writers.

Little Red Riding Hood’s story is embedded in our cultural unconscious, and its endurance signifies its continuing relevance and interest to artists, critics and audiences of popular culture. The potential for change embodied in the fairy tale is recognised by artists who add their interpretations to a heritage of adjustment. (Bonner)
The tale like many other tales originally belonged to the oral tradition over years passing from generation to generation. But it was Charles Perrault who first put it into written form in French; later on Grimm Brothers translated them into English. Perrault’s version of the tale is a bit different from that of Grimms’. The tale goes like this that Little Red is given a pot of butter and cake by her mother to be given to her ill grandmother who lives in a back of a nearby forest. On her way to Granny’s house she meets a wolf who asks where she was going. Red tells wolf the whole thing besides the address of her granny which the wolf wants to know. Wolf takes one path and she takes the other one. Wolf reaches before the little girl and he gobbles down granny, and hides in her bedding. When little Red reaches granny’s house, the wolf tells her, in the voice of granny, to unclad herself and come to bed, she follows his orders and wolf gobbles up her as well. The tale has a moral too: young girls should not wander alone and talk to strangers.

However in Grimm’s version, Red is not asked to take off her clothes, but she is eaten up as soon as she enters the room. Moreover both Granny and Red are saved by passing a huntsman as he rips open the belly of wolf while he sleeps on. They come out alive and belly of wolf is filled with stones and when he tries to get up he dies of weight of the stones. When Little Red came out she cried “Ah, how frightened I have been! How dark it was inside the wolf” (Grimm) Thus Perrault’s version ends on a tragic note while as Grimms version ends on a comic note. Moreover, Grimm does away with the part with explicit sexual connotations like taking off clothes by Red and sleeping with the wolf. Therefore Grimm’s tale, as Hanks and Hanks would say, sees to it that “American
children are carefully sheltered from “the facts of life,” specifically from the facts of sexuality and death” (68).

Feminists have argued that the tale has given a negative portrayal of woman who is being asked to be dependable on men and every time they need saviours like huntsman to save her. Jack Zipes has given a pictorial detail of the portrayal of Little Red during the Victorian era where he has shown pictures that make the Little Red look seductive and cunning. It is she who takes the blame of what she suffered: rape. Thus “women portrayed as eager to be seduced or raped.” (Zipes 80). Vallone writing about the photograph by Charles L. Dodgson (1857) in which Agnes Grace Weld, who represents Little Red Riding Hood, has protruding eyes and looks very strange and cunning (pic. in Vallone 195), says that “Carol Mavor describes this stare as combining girl and wolf, consumer and consumed ... Mavor’s reading of the photograph reverses the story so that the girl becomes the predator, her animal nature directed at the viewer through her eyes”(195). Zipes would say that hood which Little Red wears stands for “an iconic sign of the seducer, the femme fatale” (qtd in Talairach-Vielmas 261) Talairach-Vielmas deliberates on the point saying that “Little Red Riding Hood simultaneously appears as an image of lust and desire—not particularly fearing to mate with the wolf.” (261)

Thus tale, its pictorial description and criticism through years have given a negative representation of women and a moral which actually is the implicit male hegemony as Nodelman would tell us that the tale “is a cynic’s knowing comment on innocence: innocence is stupid.”(71) Women would only challenge this male chauvinism and cynicism in the late 20th century as feminism had become popular and women would get more rights. Ali seems to be well aware of the tale and its criticism over the years. He
deconstructs the whole trend; we find no feminism, no psychoanalysis; he rather questions everything. His title itself questions the tale, "An Interview with Red Riding Hood, Now No Longer Young"; the title suggests that Red is no longer little but mature enough to think about the past in knowledge.

Since interviewee is no longer little but quite young now, she answers questions very daringly. When asked what happened after the wolf had died? She says that her father bought whole of the forest and searched for wolves who, however, "escaped, / like guerillas" (AH 98). He cut down the forests and now has a timber industry of his own; and she proudly adds "I, of course, am an heiress (Ali 98). When asked about granny, she says that she had night mares and always felt that wolf was going to eat her up. However, she adds, granny is no more. To the last question that if she had any regrets, she answers:

Yes.

I lied when I said it was dark.

Now I drive through the city,

hearing wolves at every turn.

How warm it was inside the wolf! (Ali 99).

Ali, to use Derrida's concept, deconstructs the whole text, so that the text is analyzed and dismantled in order to reveal the inconsistencies and contradictions within the text so that fraud of stable or a single meaning within a text gets revealed. The basic aim is to dismantle the centre by privileging the erstwhile marginalized or playing with the centre-margin relations. It is strategy to "read the text against itself so as to expose
what might be thought of as the “textual subconscious” (Bertens 73), or what Christopher Norris says that “the signs of that struggle[of a text] are there to be read in its blind-spots of metaphor and other rhetorical strategies.”(19). Ali’s poems therefore can be read as deconstructive reading of the fairy tale.

In the Little Red Riding Hood, even though Little Red may be criticized as seducer or coquette, but the fact remains that the wolf is the villain of the story whom Grimm calls “big bad wolf” and Perrault calls “wicked Wolf”. In Grimm’s tale wolf is dissected and filled with stones which implies that he got his just desserts. Burns notes that “In Red Riding Hood, the evil, mesmerizing darkness of the Wolf echoes the image of the darkness of night and death.”(30). Burns further goes on to quote from the Dictionary of Symbols where the wolf is being cited as “the “symbol of evil,” the “monster” who lived in the depths of the earth and who would “break out of this prison . . . devour the son” (31). Thus wolf is the evil personified who is cunning, crafty, sly, rapist and what not. Ali’s “The Wolf’s Postscript to “Little Red Riding Hood” questions the position of wolf as the wolf says, “First, grant me my sense of history…” (Ali 100). It further goes on to say that I have been made a scapegoat so that kindergarten in posterity will learn a moral lesson that little girls should not talk to strangers. Wolf deconstructs the whole plot saying that I could have gobbled the little girl there and no need for me to ask the address of her granny: as a forest dweller, I knew it better. In addition, wolf asks that if I was sleeping when the huntsman ripped by belly apart and filled it with stones and garbage. It was only done, he asserts, so that children may laugh at my big fall.

Ali’s “Interview” is actually a parody or pastiche of the original story. Ali parodies the original with a purpose. Parody is usually written for the “highly ‘knowing’
and literate audience, for whom criticism is merely a part of literature, not a separate
industry.” (Parody 167) Or, “a critique of a view of life already articulated in art.” (Parody
167) Pastiche on other hand is quite similar to parody but it is less of a critical re writing
and more of a satirical deconstruction. Therefore, Ali’s parody is not mere poetic form of
already story in prose but he is writing with serious implication: a purpose of getting into
the heart of the original. His parody is not to be seen as a postmodern technique which
comes very near to pastiche, which Marxist critics like Jameson have severely criticized,
but Ali’s parody is more a rereading of history with a purpose. Hutenson’s notes :

While Jameson saw in postmodern parody only emptiness and pastiche
(Jameson 1992: 17), others saw in it the very embodiment of a postmodern
paradox (Hutcheon 1988: 11). Parody ... both installs and subverts at the same
time. ... parody engages the history of art, and through it a larger social and
cultural history (122)

Implicitly Ali unveils the lies of colonialism, capitalism and history where the use
of language plays a very important role. George Orwell says in his notes about the use of
language that “political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging
and sheer cloudy vagueness...political language... is designed to make lies sound truthful
and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.” (qtd in Jones
34). Wolf, therefore, represents cannibal of the history whose representation is totally
dependent on the construct of the Powerful (read Prospero); now represented as a wild
animal who can gobble down an “innocent” person. Tabish Khair talks about
representation of the “other,” saying that westerners have constructed “… non-Europeans
as basically unmitigated/lurking cannibals (waiting to jump out of the skin of European acculturation at any moment and gobble up Europeans)” (4). Thus instead of darkness inside the wolf, we find warmness, but that has been hid in the cold construct of language. The two “fractured fairy tales” of Agha Shahid Ali, Lawrence says, “show the violence at the heart of language practice, how words are used to silence and exclude, masquerading under the guise of the “truth” when in fact operating as a self-justification in the interest of preservation of power.”(16)

Thus Ali’s engagement with America is manifold: his concern with its geography, the Natives, power structures, and above all his own life in this matrix. Ali has woven all these themes while writing about his second home, and all these concerns hold on to Ali’s pain and loss of the bygone time and its happenings. While parodying “Hansel and Gretel” story Ali tries to situate himself in this new home. The story is about Hansel and Gretel; two children in the forest abandoned by their parents. They are captured by a witch who makes the girl to do menial jobs and fattens the little boy to be eaten up later on. However the story ends on a happy note with witch being killed and two children returning back to their father, happy ever. Ali, in the poem, “Hansel’s Game”, rewrites the story on his own pattern by making himself the little boy, Hansel who plays “with every Gretel in town including Gretel,” (Ali 102) his sister. Ali tells how her mother forces him to leave the home: “Darling, go out into the world, / the womb’s no place for a big boy like you” (Ali 102); and he leaves it but he “knew the ending” (Ali 103). therefore, he dealt with the witch beforehand. The poem can have multiple meanings, on the one hand it is Ali’s life in exile and his longing for home; it could be his concern with the power structures as in the case of other parodies, or it could be, as “Bettelheim sees
“Hansel and Gretel” as a kind of coming-of-age story, in which the children learn effective ways of dealing with the world. (qtd in Walter 323). Thus Ali is no more a child, but a mature enough who knows the plot; and he will not succumb to the American dream, whose reality he finds hidden beneath the fabric of language.
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