

Perspectives on Grief and Exile in Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry

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ABSTRACT: Ali, a secular Shi'a Muslim from Hindu-dominated Kashmir, describes himself as an exile due to his ability to inhabit multiple circumstances and historical and national backgrounds simultaneously. Living in exile is a temperamental way to live "among" places, lamenting a homeland that has been abandoned and to which one is unable to return. Ali views "travel" as a workable solution to an emotionally taxing problem, exploring the possibilities of traveling while grieving. He is an approachable poet who sees opportunity in his tri-cultural opportunities, rather than just accepting him as a suffering poet stuck in articulating personal or cultural trauma. In his poem "The Dacca Gauzes," Ali travels while confronting loss, raising doubts about the poem's capacity to travel. Traveling requires motion, making it a process rather than a setting. The fundamental difference between traveling and going into exile is the issue of will or consent. Ali's poetry allows for connection between the author and the reader, triggering a network of memory and cultural and personal losses.

Keywords: Agha Shahid Ali; grief; exile; travel; The Dacca Gauzes

I. INTRODUCTION

Agha Shahid Ali transitions between public and private grief in the preface of his poetry collection *The Rooms Are Never Finished*, lamenting both the loss of his mother and Kashmir. The opening line, "To a home at war, my father, siblings, and I brought my mother's body for burial" (p.16), blends personal loss with national strife by switching between and uniting "home" and "war" at the location of "his mother's body." He then goes on to give a more detailed account of the violence, mentioning the kind of weapons (nuclear powers) and the quantity of people killed (70,000). This is all part of the "ongoing catastrophe." The final sentence then jumps ahead in time and space to his mother's death, which occurred "in a hospital in Northampton, Massachusetts, on 27 April 1997—we were with her at my brother's home in Amherst." After that, he switches to a different kind of disaster. An additional temporal wrinkle is that the first shift in time to Kashmir occurs before his mother's passing in Amherst, indicating that Ali is returning to each location in a unique way. This merging and crossing, admitting the two distinct places and times, is a perfect example of Ali's poetic interpretation of memory as connections across boundaries that create richness through loss. By "traveling" between America and Kashmir, he achieves this dual elegy for mother and country. This is a technique he employs in many of his collections, which are heavily invested in capturing and complicating geographies. These hybrid crossings express a postcolonial poetics that transcends boundaries of identity and mutually mourns and enriches.

Since Ali's poetry addresses issues of postcolonial identity and loss, it is common to read him as a trauma poet. The ghazal is an Urdu/Persian form that Ali is well-known for having championed in American poetry. Nida Sajid (2012) interprets this form as mimetic of trauma, arguing that the recurring refrain and rhyme, which are broken up by new lines, create a "structure of longing and belonging" that "replicates the diasporic desire for an imaginary homeland and complicates the trauma of physical displacement and exile" (p. 87). This reading of the form completely replaces the idea of home and implies that the trauma of exile is mirrored in the physical relocation across geographic borders. Similarly, critics Hussain, Zahra, and Murtaza (2019) highlight the political violence in Kashmir by arguing that the ghazal's repetitive form "perpetuates the impression of frequency and recurrence of horrific events which...each falling night and rising day witnesses" (p. 148). Additionally, they contend that Ali challenges the conventional ghazal clichés, addressing political violence and grieving via the dynamics of the lover-beloved split. Critics of trauma emphasize both the cultural trauma of postcolonialism, and the way Ali portrays violence in Kashmir. Similar to Sajid, Malcolm Woodland (2005) contends that ghazal refrains "seem to return like a traumatic memory of irrecoverable loss" (p. 260). Though they emphasize ghazals, all of these arguments for Ali's status as a trauma poet propose that one should read Ali's poetry in its entirety through the lens of the "traumatized ghazal." Thus, the ghazal becomes a metaphor for

Ali's poetry, which, after being taken from an unstable nation, was brutally translated into English. As Ali is an exiled poet, in this sense it is a form in exile.

When these critics refer to this as "trauma," what do they mean? Psychological trauma is a phenomenon that most of us are familiar with. It usually happens when someone experiences a traumatic event that "repeats" in their minds, condensing two separate moments of time together. Trauma is described as "actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence" in the DSM-5, the most recent standard classification for mental disorders (Pai, Anushka et al., 2017). The word "trauma" originated in ancient Greek and meant "wound." It was pathologized in the 1690s and meant "a Wound from an external Cause" (Oxford English Dictionary). However, in the 19th and 20th centuries, the definition of "trauma" changed from the body to the mind, referring to "a psychic injury, especially one caused by emotional shock the memory of which is repressed and remains unhealed; an internal injury, especially to the brain." This is how the Oxford English Dictionary defines it. Most of the time, when we use the word "trauma," we mean it in the broad sense described in this last definition, which emphasizes both psychological and biological aspects.

When critics refer to Ali as a traumatized poet, they mean that his poetics frequently address the personal and cultural trauma resulting from the widespread violence in Kashmir and the cultural trauma of postcolonialism. Critics most frequently focus on postcolonial trauma, which is a subset of social or cultural trauma. Although trauma is commonly understood to be a psycho-somatic event that occurs in a specific biological body, either physical or psychological, it can also affect an entire community, resulting in a collective trauma. Social or cultural trauma is physically based insofar as it involves harm to or dislocation of bodies within a distinct group. After that, the group as a whole internalizes this material violence. Ali uses poetry to explore patterns of cultural displacement and a sense of exile that are made possible by postcolonialism as social or cultural trauma. Because trauma synthesizes loss and memory—two other major themes in Ali's poetry—it also offers itself as a possible interpretive framework by attending to postcolonial physical and cultural violence. Although this interpretation of Ali as a traumatized poet helps to connect these important aspects of Ali, it falls short of explaining how he approaches each of the components in detail. Ali often elaborates on loss through his poetic reach rather than simply restating the memory of the harm.

For instance, Ali abruptly switches in the introduction between "the ongoing catastrophe" in Kashmir and "his mother coming to the States for treatment of brain cancer" (p. 16), drawing the reader across international boundaries and making us wonder how the two losses are related. But rather than being duplicates of one another, the two losses seem to mutually influence his simultaneous loss of his mother and a secure homeland in various cultural, geographical, and temporal contexts. His poems, as he states in "Leaving Sonora," "Be faithful, / even to those who no longer exist," are not the places where harm is inflicted repeatedly, but rather the places where he can (A Nostalgist's Map of America 29). Ali's poetry is undoubtedly influenced and provoked by cultural loss and violence, but it is frequently more expansive and transcultural than traumatizing and repetitive. The refrain in Ali's ghazals is frequently used by critics to support their claims that he is a traumatized poet, indicating that the pain is recurrent in memory. Through his technique as well as his tone, Ali elegizes by traversing space, time, culture, and form.

What can "traveling" offer in its place, and what are the boundaries of trauma as a critical approach to Ali? Without a doubt, Ali is a poet of memory; he frequently writes poetry in memoriam. Trauma has recently lost credibility as the leading theory of memory in the field of memory studies. However, researchers in memory studies have proposed alternative modes in its place. Traveling memory is one such mode, and it fits Ali as well. In addition to occurring within a country, Erll (2018) claims that this traveling can also occur between people, ideas, media, time, and space.

Erll first used this expression in 2011, and it fits with Jahan Ramazani's concept of "traveling poetry." As a means of "foregrounding how, through imaginative as well as literal mingling and merging, new coinages, new intergeographic spaces, even new compound identities come into being," traveling poetry "leaps across national and cultural boundaries," a mode that began in the modern context with Pound (2009, p. 60). Poetry is "traveling" when it emphasizes a dynamic articulation, which conveys how people in societies operate both within and outside of boundaries. Although those boundaries are acknowledged in this formulation to some extent, they are permeable and so permit an intersecting and interstitial method.

Ali's poetry combines Ramazani's and Erll's traveling memories, emphasizing dynamism in thought and articulation in his distinct elegiac idiom. In addition to "emigrating" his cultural memory bank into an American setting, Ali also transcends from his own cultural "homeland" into other idioms. Ali demonstrates a different way of memorializing loss that functions by virtue of a wealth of resources by writing in an elegiac mode across cultural boundaries. Focusing on trauma would confine him to a trauma-informed postcolonial dichotomy in which he would either idealize or resent the past that has been lost.

According to Ali and other elegists, elegy reacts to both loss and memory. It is memory that functions in the temporal space between at least two distinct timeframes, the before and after of the loss.

According to Peter Sacks (1985), the linguistic and artistic value of elegy is justified and explored through the presentation of memory and the representation of loss, the enduring reality and the lost one. In this sense, elegies inevitably move through space, culture, and mode in addition to time.

When Ali is grieving for something he loves like a component of his culture in "The Dacca Gauzes," he purposefully uses a wide range of resources. In addition, his grief-related subject matter transcends his own losses and pays poetic homage to the American continent. Ali exhibits traveling elegy as well as traveling memory by addressing loss with international imagery and language. In addition to drawing inspiration from Ali's own experience as a self-described "triple exile," this technique also functions as an elegiac device. This paper will examine the traveling elegy from "The Dacca Gauzes," which is an elegy about his culture. There will be three main elegy questions posed: First, how and why does he deal with the disappearance of a cultural relic? The second is: How do elegy, form, and the grieving process relate to one another? Thirdly, how do you grieve for something that you haven't lost but someone else has? Ali's answers to these questions are all related to his travels.

II. POETRY AND MATERIAL RECOLLECTION IN "THE DACCA GAUZES"

At least in the last thirty years, elegy has garnered new attention from critics. In the wake of Holocaust studies, which questioned the possibility of poetry and art after something so horrific that Adorno (1983) concluded that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," both this renewal of elegy and the beginning of memory studies have taken shape (p. 34). Terms like "consolation," "anti-consolation," "empathy," "witness," and "success" are frequently used to describe elegy because critical discourse on the subject has grown in response to pressing ethical concerns. This final term is very important because it is how many critics "put elegy into question," asking whether or not an elegy can succeed.

While different critics have different standards for success, generally speaking, once a critic poses the question of whether elegy can "succeed," they come to the conclusion that it cannot. Elegy has lost credibility as a poetic technique for a variety of reasons, including philosophical (since death and loss cannot be "articulated" purely) and ethical (because the poems are always "for" the mourner and not for the deceased). "At its best, the modern elegy offers not a guide to 'successful' mourning but a spur to rethinking the vexed experience of grief in the modern world," writes Ramazani about elegy. We require elegies that, despite being heavy with sorrow, can withstand the biting suspicions of the present (Poetry of Mourning, 1994, ix-x). Ramazani's method frees elegy from the moral obligation to restore a vanished reality or stop future loss; instead, elegy in his method becomes a "spur to rethinking," providing a beginning rather than an end. Poets like Ali may suffer with the idea that they can never replace something that has been lost, but writing poetry requires putting down even the most delicate thoughts. Success-related concerns are subordinated to issues of articulation and expression.

In his poem "The Dacca Gauzes," the following moral issues are raised in a postcolonial setting: In this poem, Ali laments the loss of a cultural relic rather than a dearly loved one. He raises issues for the reader regarding postcolonial elegy because he is lamenting the gauzes from Dacca, who are situated in both his culture and family line. This raises several questions regarding either complicity or provincialism. Postcolonial elegy is often categorized by critics into one of two "camps": either it is charged with viewing the past through the lens of the colonizer, or it is imbued with utopian nostalgia for a vanished precolonial past. Once more, we are suggesting that there can be no "success" of postcolonial elegy if we doubt its existence. Whether postcolonial or not, there are two neutral, fundamental questions that can be asked of elegy that do not lead to success: how do we write about loss, and why would we write about it? To start with the "why," critics frequently inquire as to "for" whom an elegy is intended, i.e., for the living or the deceased. Fuss (2013) argues that while "elegy speaks to both audiences, forced to negotiate the impossible ethical demands of a genre that strives neither to disrespect the memory of the dead nor to ignore the needs of the living," it is also possible for "what might be ethical for one (the dead) to be unethical for the other (the living)" (p. 5).

However, Ali laments the passing of "transparent Dacca gauzes" (15), rather than a deceased individual, which elevates ethical dilemmas above interpersonal ones. This deescalates the ethical dilemma in a sense because there are less risks involved in acting on behalf of an artifact than in acting on behalf of a person. However, things get murkier when Ali says, "In history we learned: the hands / of the weavers were amputated" (15), a line that cruelly mimics the violence. He makes clear the material network of the gauzes—a network of people and their bodies—by referring to the "weavers." The question of who benefits from this becomes less evident, even though the ethical stakes may be somewhat reduced. We can tackle the why by first examining Ali's method of approaching this elegy. How is a lost material artifact chosen?

As was already mentioned, Ali calls attention to a particular gauze and the production network that exists within and through it. "The poem graduates from a local dispossession to a global theft," according to Vidyan Ravinthiran (2019, p. 650), charting Ali's transition from a well-known heirloom to an incident of postcolonial violence. In a postcolonial setting, loss is so systemic and irreversible that the poet and reader already recognize the futility of any attempts to "bring back." Therefore, if we wish to think in such terms, the

memory is not "innocent." There is, at minimum, a before and an after, and the "post" in "postcolonial" places us perpetually in the "after." Ali has to examine the "after" and make a decision about it in order to be "after" the violence and write about a "before." While Ali occasionally makes overt trips, such as in the introduction to *Rooms Are Never Finished*, in "The Dacca Gauzes," he subtly moves between Bengal and Britain between now and then, nearly beneath the words themselves. The phrase "The Dacca Gauzes" naturally places us in Dacca, and the epigraph—"... for a whole year he sought to accumulate the most exquisite Dacca Gauzes. – Oscar Wilde/The Picture of Dorian Gray"—introduces British postcolonial consciousness. It is in this space between the title and the epigraph that Ali presents this frame of traveling (15). We are already traveling not only between London and Dacca but also between the nineteenth century and "now." Ali moves between these dichotomies as early as his epigraph, refusing to accept one option over another—for the living or the dead, in the past or the present. Even before the poem's text starts, we readers are already traveling through time and space. The gauzes are described in the epigraph as an exotic art that Dorian wishes to acquire. The gauzes are reduced to the role of—in a sense—evidence, demonstrating Dorian's sophistication and culture, detached from the social role Ali goes on to expound upon in the poem. Only to the extent that their production method is foreign does it matter. Ali, however, obscures the referent's identity in the epigraph; although Dorian is the literal antecedent of "he," Ali is the other figure who is attempting "to accumulate" these gauzes. The use of the verb "accumulate" tilts the scales in favor of a colonial mindset because it suggests that the gauzes are being hoarded; unless someone was gathering them for display, there is not really a need to have so many that you would be "accumulating" them. However, Ali plays with his own complicity as a colonial spectator throughout the collection *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, which includes the poem. For example, in the poem "Postcard from Kashmir," he wonders if he is visiting Kashmir as a tourist or as an exile.

Robert Stilling (2018) provides an insightful, archivally based reading of this epigraph that highlights two extratextual allusions that help us understand traveling as simultaneously innocent, complicit, and morally dubious. "Reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in Kashmir" was the poem's original title, and it is the first example of an extratextual reference provided by Stilling. This poem's title alludes to "After Seeing Kozintsev's *King Lear* in Delhi," another poem in *The Half-Inch Himalayas*. While acknowledging that it is impossible, both titles allude to the uncanniness of a postcolonial cultural experience in which Ali and the poem exist in two modes simultaneously. This demands that the subject divide themselves between the two modes in different ways. By renaming the work "The Dacca Gauzes," Ali acknowledges his involvement in the linguistic creation of the material object as a "hand" that endures to weave the ghazals, while also foregrounding the object as a symbol.

Stilling (2018) observes that in addition to the epigraph's direct quotation of the novel's text, Ali also subtly echoes the text throughout the poem. "Those transparent Dacca gauzes / known as woven air, running / water, evening dew," begins Ali's first stanza (15). "Weaved air," "running water," and "evening dew," which Stilling notes are "more than just poeticisms; they are the names by which specific varieties of muslin fabric were known and marketed in India, the West, and elsewhere," are among the literary hints made by Ali to Wilde (38). It is understandable why Wilde employs marketing terminology to characterize Dorian's ravenous appetite for foreign goods, but it is equally unexpected that Ali also uses this terminology, filtered through Wilde. As Stilling points out, they are "poeticisms" in the sense that they have aesthetic value. The terms "air," "water," and "dew" allude to their delicate nature and intimate connection to it, which is all the more intriguing given that they are obviously man-made as ornamental objects. However, the fact that these descriptors—which were taken from advertisements by Wilde for his novel—and the poem that follows are partially derived from outside the culture in which they were created implies that these terms are not from "within" that culture, if not because of an outsider's consciousness then at least because of an outsider's timeframe. Stilling continues, stating that Gray would not have searched "for a whole year" if these gauzes were not perceived as always being in short supply or in poor condition by the commercial market of the era, as well as by Wilde and Ali. At this point, Stilling laments the deterioration in the caliber of their industry, something that Wilde too lamented, and quotes "a commentary on the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition that further sums up the then commonplace notion that the making of Dacca muslins was a lost art" (45). Hence, it is possible that Ali is connecting himself with the impulse of elegy—the desire to find these gauzes in the face of their loss—rather than a purely colonial vision. What does it mean to search "for a whole year...to accumulate" the gauzes, according to Ali? Ali names them as words rather than physically accumulating them as objects; in this way, they "accumulate" in memory. Rather than duplicating the gauze making industry, he concentrates on his family's past and reconstructs the memory from there. While the gauzes' material diminishes, as Stilling contends, Ali expands his poetic vision beyond his family. One, "an heirloom sari from // her mother's dowry," belonged to his grandmother; it subsequently became "many handkerchiefs...distributed among / the nieces and daughters-in-law," handkerchiefs that, in the end, also vanish. In the poem, the gauzes' material gradually disappears rather than "accumulating." As a result, the gauzes' linguistic network—which also contains colonial texts like *Dorian Gray*—faces increasing pressure. The gauzes' medium changes inversely; the more linguistic, the less material there is. The question of what language

the gauzes require emerges as it shifts. The gauzes are both "known as" different commercial metaphors, but at the same time, Ali quotes his grandmother in the second stanza, stating, "No one now/knows" them. This creates a self-referential wobble. His failure to capture them in the poetry seems to replicate their loss in a way, but a large portion of the poem raises questions about what "knowing" might entail and how poetry can "know" what cannot be expressed in written form.

Ali conveys the memory of the gauzes both literally and artistically, despite the gauzes' material absence. He goes beyond the commercial metaphors that manipulate form and assonance to create images of the gauzes while playing with history and aesthetics. The sentence "In history we learned... the looms of Bengal were silenced" (15) embodies this idea. The ruined or abandoned looms literally stopped producing sound, but Ali also implies that sound is used to create the gauzes; The poem uses its own linguistic sounds to retell the story of the artifact and the process. The poem's central theme is a true story about a gauze: his grandmother's sari, which was part of her marriage dowry, "proved / genuine when it was pulled, all / six yards, through a ring" (15). The poem seems to be pulling through in its form, which is a long column of brief, three-line stanzas. He uses assonance to imply the softness of the gauzes and to repeat the same "pulling" motion in the final stanza.

in autumn, should one wake up
at dawn to pray, can one feel that
same texture again.
One morning, she says, the air was
dew-starched: she pulled it
absently through her ring. (16)

The aural and semantic qualities of the words "fall," "dawn," "prayer," "air," "dew-starched," and "absently" all evoke the elegance and delicate nature of the gauzes. For his grandmother, the metaphor of the woven air that he first used becomes a language-reified memory. The elegy for the gauzes is not complete until his grandmother's memory and his own recollection of her memory are presented; this cannot be accomplished. The reader will see by the end that this elegy does not even attempt to return the gauzes to reality. In both practice and criticism, the essential aspect of the elegy genre is that there is no turning back the loss; it cannot be reversed. Ali is describing irreversible colonial violence in this instance. Instead, Ali is striking a balance between cultural memory and loss. In the context of the elegy, the collective memory of the Dacca gauzes can only be a memory, but within the poem's framework, the "shared memory and social imaginaries" between him and his grandmother "are co-produced in an open-ended dynamic" (13). This is in line with Ann Rigney's theory of social memory (2021). However, since the memory of a lost reality has been successfully presented, including both its memory and its lost in the framework, the creation and conveyance of that memory cannot then "fail."

Ali's elegy, limited to the poem's text, laments and reconstructs the cultural treasures destroyed by colonialism's violence. "I think of people who because of historical forces have lost so much... I mean, these things are in my way of looking at the world," he states in an interview with Christine Benvenuto. The historical force is evident if we look "underneath" the poem; it is his way of expressing the violence's existence and paying respect to it. It was a horrific act, yes, but only because it was passed down to us, becoming legend, and it became entwined with a ravishing imagery and family history, he says in another interview, explaining why the subject matter piqued his interest (*The Verse Book of Interviews*, p. 139). Therefore, the elegy is about a chance for community as much as the chasm of loss. The elegy "travels" farther out once we see the gauzes as objects that are handled, both by hand and in text, by a community of people, Ali included. Ali draws our attention to the linguistic and material gauze network. The gauzes traverse precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial contexts in which they are produced and responded to in diverse ways. The linguistic and material networks seem to pull in different directions—one is a network of family history, and the other is a network of violence, as he puts it. Ali wryly and immediately introduces the network of violence in the epigraph, but he later works in and out of it to regain a sense of familial identity.

By referring to the gauzes as "ravishing imagery," Ali also acknowledges that his admiration for them may be purely aesthetic and unrelated to moral considerations; in other words, the image of the gauzes is "ravishing." Ali's poetry exhibits a subdued insistence on beauty's triumph over both him and us. In the seventh stanza, he uses the word "amputated" to break up the poem's beauty. It is possible that a different phrase, like "cut off," would romanticize the violence more than the word he chooses, which is harsh and clinical. However, Ali makes a bold choice in elegy that may exploit cultural trauma but has not given way to it by selecting the gauzes, crafts renowned for their elegance and associated with femininity. His grandmother told him the story of the cloth, pulling it through a ring, and having it "distributed among the nieces and daughters-in-law." In Stilling's words (2018), the poem "indicates that aestheticism of the nineteenth century and postcolonial representations of colonial history are entangled in ways that complicate our understanding of both periods" (p. 38). Ali takes on an aesthetic object as a lost cultural history and opens the poem with a quotation from Wilde, thus adopting an aestheticist viewpoint in his language and approach to poetry in "The Dacca Gauzes." But

because the gauzes are lost, they are foreign to him not because of culture but rather time. By firmly establishing the perspective in the poem in a familial line through his grandmother's direct or indirect remarks, Ali opposes this move. The poem's central idea is that, in a way, Ali is reinterpreting his grandmother's words while balancing his own viewpoint—which is captivated by history both as an agent and as a spectator—against that of someone who views history as "History of little use."

This elegy style might be taking the bereaved and transforming them into its own medium. By alternating between the gauzes of Wilde and his family, Ali repeatedly muddies the waters regarding the "success" of his elegy. Rather than imposing a conclusion, he suggests that there is no right or wrong answer when it comes to the safety and success of words over material because the latter has a memory that language can access and expand. This is due to the fact that language "travels" while gauzes do not. Unlike material, which vanishes, language carries history farther and wider because it contains history in syntax and semantics. How is the language of Ali transmitted here? Rasheda Parveen (2014) contends that Ali's use of English in all of his poetry, including "The Dacca Gauzes," gives it an instantaneous "hybridity of cultural differences." As we have seen, his language also moves between colonial aestheticism and native culture, navigating between Wilde and his grandmother, as well as visiting a past that has been lost and an imagined fabric that exists in the present and possibly the future, given the grandmother's claim that autumn air can mimic it. The poem's form "suggests a rejection of grand narratives, but also the vigors of local resilience twinned with its own aesthetic 'texture,'" writes Ravinthiran, drawing a negotiation between the gauze as symbol and the gauze as a particular family heirloom (2019, p. 651). The material and history of the gauze and all of its complications are mimicked by Ali's methodological approach, which balances imagination and history.

The nondurable quality of decorative arts offers a resource for figuring out the potential for decay in the circulation of poetic forms as they are translated across languages and cultures, subject to the same historical processes as material artifacts, according to Stilling's argument, which ultimately holds that the gauze will eventually deteriorate (2018, p. 40). But the poem recovers the gauze in all its complexities, preserving a complicated and familial past. Ravinthiran (2019) asserts that "Virginia Jackson's 'material referent' is both present (the atrocities of colonial trade) and absent (the sari itself)" and that "the immaterialities that close the poem—a spiritual-aesthetic metaphor for essences and experiences, which transcend received economies—might have us reconsider the trope of materiality essential to historicism" (p. 651-2). Stilling (2018) contends that the poem, and especially the "prayer," are highly immaterial and therefore more brittle than gauze. Poems can extend the historical line through imaginative art, even though they are rooted in history.

Regarding his decision to write in English, speculating on the precise rationale behind it is probably not going to be very fruitful. His Anglophone Irish Catholic education, which exposed him to the English language and literature, most likely had an impact on him. Readers can tell he felt English was the idiom he needed for his poetry, even in the lack of a clear response. But does this shift in literary preference toward English mean that Eastern languages like Urdu or Kashmiri are being abandoned? "When I picked up the pen, everything happened in English (it was not a choice)," claims Ali in *The Verse Book of Interviews* (134). Since Ali's poems "bring together the loss of language and the loss of script," according to Ananya Kabir (2007, p. 192), they "suggest...an infinite displacement of primal loss of the mother tongue," which may also imply that Ali's use of an imported language makes him sorrowfully complicit in this destruction. She quotes from Ali's "Ghazal," which says, "These words were said to me in a language not Arabic / The only language of loss left in the world is Arabic" (*The Country Without a Post Office* 74). Even though Ali did not speak Arabic, this couplet captures the endless displacement that Kabir talks about—a language of loss that is lost and repeatedly conveyed to us in a different language, suffocating over a lost language. However, I contend that Ali's poetry functions more through displacement than through travel. I see the lines visiting past and present histories with a lighter foot, all of them rife with colonial influences but insisting on the imaginative ambiguity of a postcolonial successor, rather than moving endlessly backward in search of an unachievable desire.

After this analysis, it is worth going back to the original questions regarding the elegy. Does elegy wish for the beloved to return? Is it possible? Ali's approach to elegy in "The Dacca Gauzes" expands a linguistic network with reference to a lost material network, using words to travel among various interpretive options, rather than trying to bring the gauzes back to the world or the reader, or to import a lost past to a new one. Words are a more powerful medium than saris and handkerchiefs; the gauzes, for instance, come to us through imagination but return to the grandmother through sense memory. That is the worth poetry, not history, can provide, and that is how Ali turns historical gaps into poetic openings. The gauzes "travel" further through the poem than the Dorian Gray residence, and they do so more "accurately" in that Ali's writing prevents misinterpretation of the gauzes, unlike that of the material objects. "We do not write poems with ideas, but with words," Mallarmé wrote to Degas (1973, p. 93). Because Ali's elegy is composed of words rather than gauze, it offers a network of memory and language that grieves while it creates, rather than punishing itself for failure.

III. CONCLUSION

"I'm not an exile technically, because I haven't been kicked out of any place, but temperamentally I would say I'm an exile, because it has an emotional resonance," Ali says in an interview with Eric Gamalinda. "The ability to inhabit several circumstances and several historical and national backgrounds simultaneously makes up the exilic," Ali continues. Here, secular Shi'a Muslim Ali from Hindu-dominated Kashmir, who worked in America for most of his working life, admits that living in exile is a temperamental way to live "among" places. A negative but powerfully emotive state, to call oneself an "exile" is to lament some homeland that has been abandoned and to which one is unable to return. Ultimately, in a potentially startling interview with Christine Benvenuto (2002), Ali states, "You meet immigrants all the time who say, oh, I feel like I've lost my culture and my roots, and I say please don't be so fussy about it. The aircraft operate" (261). This snarky reply implies that although Ali finds resonance in "exile," he views "travel" as a workable solution to an emotionally taxing problem. Although it is not always necessary to choose between being a "traveler" or going into exile, Ali is a traveler who is exploring the possibilities of traveling while grieving.

Ali says he is a poet of temperament a lot, but he does not always explain what he means by that. Upon first reading him, the reader might get a grasp of his temperament, which was melancholic, elegiac, mournful, and constantly searching for something that had been left behind. However, later on, the reader will realize that Ali is a poet of travel—travel over exile, because travel is open and exile is lost—because of his lush language, his innate curiosity, his humor, and his wit. He is, of course, both. Ali can be seen as an approachable poet who sees opportunity in his tri-cultural opportunities, rather than just a suffering poet stuck in articulating personal or cultural trauma. In Ali's "The Dacca Gauzes," the poet travels while confronting loss, raising doubts about the poem's capacity to travel. It is possible to keep elegy from dying in the face of death by reading it as travel rather than trauma or exile. Both trauma and exile are nouns, which are grammatical stops used to locate and summarize meaning. However, because traveling requires motion, it turns into a process rather than a setting. However, the fundamental difference between traveling and going into exile is the issue of will, or even consent. The traveler voluntarily leaves their home, knowing that they will return once the exile is torn apart. This conception of elegy may seem surprising, given that all the losses these poems lament were taken against their will. While Ali acknowledges and discusses the discomfort of travel, in "The Dacca Gauzes," travel turns into a chance for connection between the author and the reader. Cultural and personal losses take part in a network of loss, which in turn triggers a network of memory, rather than occurring in a vacuum. Even if we depart at the poem's conclusion, we can return and continue to participate in the network of memory by traveling to a place of consideration through Ali's poetry.

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