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TRACING THE QUEER IMAGINARY AND BELONGING IN THE POEMS OF AGHA SHAHID ALI AND C.P. CAVAFY

ANCHIT PANDEY

Research Scholar, Department of English, Patna University.

Email : anchitthepoet@gmail.com



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Abstract

Agha Shahid Ali and C.P. Cavafy hint about their queerness directly or subtly in their poems. The idea of queerness directly gets involved with the process of identity formation and tries to answer the question of belonging for these exiled poets. The imaginary space that they carve in their poems becomes their substitute for the homeland- a space they can belong to, without experiencing any alienation. This research article tries to analyze this imaginary space carved out in their poems. Agha Shahid Ali's poems are filled with traces hinting towards his queerness but these images never fully surface. C.P. Cavafy, on the other hand, has written several poems with homoerotic themes but has remained secretive about his queerness. They make abundant use of recollections and remembrances while writing. This imaginary created in their poems is a contested space because of the tension created between their sexual orientation and the normative in their respective socio-cultural environments. The article will show how their poems were shaped by this yearning for belonging to a space devoid of alienation. The article will also attempt to do an approximation of their sexuality through various factors like aesthetics, social sciences and other flows of cultural expression and social valuation present in their writing. Within the postulates of Queer theories aided by Bhabha's inputs on newness and cultural translations, the paper will also problematize the concept of Belonging.

Keywords: Belonging, Hybridity, Exile, Queer, Sexuality.

"Sometimes I forget completely
What companionship is.
Unconscious and insane, I spill sad
Energy everywhere. My story gets told in
various ways: a romance
A dirty joke, a war, a vacancy"
-Rumi.

Existing a century apart from each other and similarly oriented, these poets deal with their sexualities differently. E.M. Forster famously estimated that Cavafy was "a Greek gentleman in a straw hat, standing absolutely motionless at a slight

angle to the universe" (qtd. in Chiasson, "Man with a Past"). Agha Shahid Ali also stands at a slight angle to the universe, deviating from the normative, but not motionless. Cavafy is quiet, aloof and passive in his personal life. Agha Shahid Ali is dynamic and the life of the party. As Amitav Ghosh writes, "there was never an evening when there wasn't a party in his living room" ("The Ghat Of The Only World: Agha Shahid Ali In Brooklyn"). Agha Shahid Ali did not talk about his sexuality openly in his poems. C.P. Cavafy, on the other hand, has written several poems with homoerotic themes. Even then, it is not difficult to

find commonality between them. Both lived in exile permanently - in their lives - they simply did not fit in. Cavafy stayed in Alexandria, Egypt for most of his life and Agha Shahid Ali stayed in the United States of America for most of his life. Their poetry is shaped by their sexuality and they can also be read as an enquiry into their complex identities problematized by the unique spaces, they exist in. According to Bhabha, "Community is the antagonist supplement of modernity: in the metropolitan space, it is the territory of the minority, threatening the claims of civility; in the transnational world it becomes the border-problem of the diasporic, the migrant, the refugee. Binary divisions of social space neglect the profound temporal disjunction - the translational time and space - through which minority communities negotiate their collective identifications" (Bhabha 231).

These poets belong to this transnational time and space which Binary divisions of social space neglect. They are minorities, historically belonging to a small community of people by virtue of the geographical and queer space they occupy. It becomes clearer when Bhabha says that, "the discourse of minorities is the creation of agency through incommensurable (not simply multiple) positions. Is there a poetics of the 'interstitial' communities?" (231). Bhabha takes the example of Walcott and proposes to go beyond the "binaries of power in order to reorganize our sense of the process of identification in negotiations of cultural politics" (232). This approach investigates the cultural site where the poems of these poets are created - the subjective, performative, interstitial space - the site of expression against the binaries of division. This also allows one to look at their queerness as one of the functions of their identity and belonging. After all, these poets also always remain doubly exiled.

Belonging pertains to inclusion or exclusion, creating strong binaries between 'us' and 'them'. Nira Yuval-Davis in her book, *The Politics of Belonging*, writes, "The question of who is 'a stranger' and who 'does not belong', however, is also continuously being modified and contested, with growing ethnic, cultural and religious tensions within as well as between societies and states"

(Yuval Davis 02). She differentiates between 'belonging and 'the politics of belonging', saying that, 'Belonging' "becomes articulated, formally structured and politicized only when it is threatened in some way. The politics of belonging comprise specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging to particular collectivity/ies which are themselves being constructed in these projects in very specific ways and in very specific boundaries" (Yuval Davis 10). This implies that this sense of Belonging is constructed by an interplay of gender, class, ethnicity, race, and other social categories demanding a view from the perspective of intersectionality. The notion of intersectionality was originally developed by black feminist scholars in the US and the Merriam Webster dictionary defines intersectionality as "the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups" (intersectionality). It can be said that the identities of these poets and their politics cannot be seen without understanding the various intersections at which they exist - their sexualities, becoming one the major social locations which call for being probed. There is certainly a 'gap' between the realities these poets live in and what they desire. Agha Shahid Ali writes in one of his poems,

"This is home. And this is the closest
I'll ever be to home" (Ali 29).

A similar yearning can be found in Cavafy too who also yearns for a breathing place and his sexuality also becomes a contested field. He says in one of his poems,

"Within these dark chambers, where I live through
Oppressive days, I pace up and down,
Trying to find the windows" (Cavafy 13).

Daniel Hall quotes David Halperin in defining queer as "by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*. It is an identity without an essence" (*qtd* in Hall 67).

Hall also quotes Sedgwick defining the Queer as “a continuing moment, movement, motive-recurrent, eddying, *troublant*...Keenly, its relational and strange” (*qtd* in Hall 12). Combining these ideas, it can be said that the poems written by Ali and Cavafy voice their yearning to belong in special locations which they at the same time construct in their imaginations against the static, traditional notions of gender.

To understand their journeys to find the source of their yearning and their politics. Cavafy was born in 1863 in Alexandria and except for two periods lived there for his entire life. His parents were originally from Istanbul and moved to Alexandria only a few years before the poet’s birth. His father died when he was seven years old, and his family shifted to England. In 1882-85, Cavafy shifted to Istanbul (then Constantinople) from where he went back to Alexandria. He visited Greece only four times in his uneventful life. He was secretive in his personal life. In poetry, “His chief influence from Greek Literature was the epigram. The earliest Greek epigrams were actually epitaphs, that is, they were composted to be inscribed on tombs; this type of epigram is recalled in the poems Cavafy wrote in the guise of epitaphs for ancient Alexandrians” (Mackridge xiii). So, he was physically alienated from the land he was writing about and temporally distanced from the poets he most admired and borrowed from.

Brought up in Kashmir, Ali’s poetic construction comprises of three cultures - Muslim, Hindu and Western. He spent most of his childhood in Kashmir except for a few years when his family shifted to The United States of America where he completed his high school. Completing his higher education in Delhi and then after teaching there for a while, he finally shifted to The United States of America where he taught at several places. The return to the homeland happened once a year generally and like Cavafy, an exile for him was also more or less a permanent condition. Writing about him, Daniel Hall says that, “His later work in particular employs an unfashionable lavishness of diction and emotion” owing in equal measure, perhaps, to this extraordinary cultural inheritance and an equally extraordinary generosity of spirit”

(Hall 15). Agha Shahid Ali called English his first language and wrote in English all his life.

Writing about India in his famous essay “Imaginary Homelands,” Rushdie says, “it may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge- which gives rise to profound uncertainties-that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost’ that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind” (Rushdie 429). Only, the exile here is twofold and the alienation felt is not only due to the distance from their homelands but also because of the social locations of their sexuality which is demonized and is considered “unnatural” by essentialism and constructionism, both of which imply that identity endures through time.

Cavafy in his poem ‘Satrapy’ writes,

“And you accept them in despair,
those things you do not want. Your soul
craves other things, for other things it weeps”
(Cavafy 31).

At the same time within a patriarchal state, there is a fear of Queer because the very concept disrupts the notion of sameness, labelling it as chaos. Donald Hall writes,

“Queer is not chaos; if it were, it would be useless and dispensable...if it is to retain its ability to abrade the ‘natural’, queer must be continuously denaturalised itself. And this means posing and continuing to pose some very hard questions about its omissions, blindspots, normal practices, and nervous avoidances” (Hall 88).

So, the dominant creates binaries and demands to categorize multifaceted identities to belong to one side. They are doubly exiled and what Vardhan Nahar says of Agha Shahid Ali is also true of Cavafy,

"The liminal space he occupied was rendered nebulous by his undisclosed homosexuality. He was doubly exiled. A condition whose disorienting power, and aesthetic of uprootedness, nebulousness, and hopelessness are central to Shahid's works" (Nahar, *Call me Queer Tonight*).

Therefore, the creative impulse in Cavafy and Ali is driven by a desire to create imaginary homelands and to construct a space where identity-affirmation is not overdetermined and multiply reinforced. They are driven to construct a queer imaginary. The pursuits of these imaginations are unique to each one of them. Both make heavy use of remembrances and recollections in their poems. Memory is always in the center of their meditation. Peter Mackridge writes about Cavafy,

"Memory is involuntarily triggered by a chance encounter with an object or a person, as in the works of Marcel Proust, where the chance repetition of a set of sense impressions reawakens in a person's mind and body a whole world of past experience" (Mackridge xviii).

Agha Shahid Ali's interactions with the people are also through memories. He always looks at the homeland, the people there and the incidents that happen from far off, from a distance - they become images, paintings and postcards-often unchangeable. In his poem *Chandni Chowk, Delhi*, he invokes one such memory,

"A memory of drought
holds you: you remember
the taste of hungry words
and you chew the syllables of salt" (Ali 51).

The world that he remembers is imperfect and deprived. Not unlike T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland* where desire is present but is accompanied by naught-always lacking. In writing about the memory of sexual encounters, Cavafy is direct. Agha Shahid Ali is subtle to an extent that Vardhan Nahar feels that,

"Shahid was a closeted homosexual all his life, which while complicating his condition of exile and intersectionality, also amplified

both. Though the queer didn't necessarily flow into his poems, his condition birthed art that captured queerness through capturing the essence of 'desire', 'dissent', 'estrangement' and 'exile'. The feeling of exile is recurrent in queer aesthetics" (Nahar, *Call Me Queer Tonight*).

This closeted condition needs to be further examined. His conditions different from Agha Shahid Ali, Cavafy's time and location compelled him to be secretive about his love life. This, however, did not stop him from writing homoerotic poems. His queerness is traceable in his sensual poems and his major body of work is filled with male characters. Mackridge writes,

"The vast majority of characters depicted in Cavafy's poetry are male; he seldom depicts female characters except as the mothers of sons. The poems set in ancient times depict both homosexual and heterosexual characters. Those set in Byzantium present only one character who is clearly homosexual, while all the characters in poems set in modern times may be seen as homosexual" (Mackridge xix).

There can be various poems that can be picked to illustrate this. In a poem called, 'So Long I Gazed', he reminisces,

"Lines of the body. Red lips. Sensuous limbs. Hair as if taken from Grecian statues, always loverly, even when uncombed and falling a little over the white temples. Faces of love, as my poetry fancied them...within the nights of my youth, within my own nights, secretly encountered..." (Cavafy 99).

Agha Shahid Ali's poems are not so direct and require closer inspection. Cordova writes that "... his sexuality is hinted at only occasionally in his poems, Shahid, on a personal level, was always open about his gayness" (Cordova, *The Rhyming Dictionary, Leather Porn & Barbara Streisand's "Evergreen": My Week with Agha Shahid Ali*). Agha Shahid Ali always leaves hint and the same-sex connections that he makes with his characters are intense and intimate. In the poem, 'The Previous Occupant', he writes

about the person who used to live in the flat he was renting,

“And though he is blind in some prison, though he is dying in some country as far as Chile, no spray will get inside the mirror from where his brown eyes, brown, yes, brown, stare as if for years he’d been searching for me. Now that he’s found me, my body casts his shadow everywhere. He will never, never, move out of here” (Ali 64).

The occupant that Ali is talking about is brown. He emphasizes this by repeating the word three times. The previous occupant loves the same poets that the poet has loved. They have the same zodiac sign and it is almost as if the previous occupant had been on a search and that finally it is over. One body casts the shadow of the other and one has found a permanent home in the other. There are three people in the poem - the mother-like, kind, cooperative, non-sexual and distant landlady, Shahid and the previous occupant. This is also the poem where Agha Shahid Ali declares his fondness for Cavafy. In the opening stanza, he observes,

“...On the empty shelves, absent books gather dust: Neruda. Cavafy.

I know he knew their poetry, by heart the lines I love” (Ali 63).

Are these poems not declarations of a quest for home - a home where the poet is comfortable in his own skin, where he can, on two different levels, can freely declare love for self and a member of the same sex in his poems. Two poets from two different time periods meet at this common juncture, travelling on a common quest - doubly exiled and yearning for belonging in the metaphorical imaginary. So, it can be established that in both the poets, there is a transgression and at times they seem to be in-between. Whether this happens or is intentionally done on behalf of the poet, they are on a journey, towards home, towards space where they truly belong. Cavafy goes back to The Odyssey in his search and writes about Odysseus,

“When you set out on the journey to Ithaca,

pray that the road be long, full of adventures, full of knowledge” (Cavafy 37).

Agha Shahid Ali calls on Mandelstam and reinvents,

“He reinvents Petersburg (I, Srinagar), an imaginary homeland, filing it, closing it, shut-in himself (myself) in it. For there is the blessed word with no meaning, there are flowers that will never die, roses that will never fall, a night in which Mandelstam is not afraid and needs no pass. The blessed women are still singing” (Ali 172).

Even here is his existence bracketed, away from the main structure of the poem - but this is of his own choosing. It is a place where he feels, he belongs. It is an imagination that he identifies with.

Stuart Hall in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* writes,

“Cultural identity...is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something that already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural Identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (ed. Ashcroft et al. 435).

The quest for belonging is also a quest for identity. These poets in their journeys are changing every day, undergoing constant transformation. Their ‘Home’, their ‘Ithaca’ has not yet been attained and will never be because that would essentialize - instead, through writing which creates the imaginary, they look forward to continuous play - sexuality being one of the major parameters which determine the identity. Donald Hall writes,

“...interpellations- some of which I may eagerly seek or cling to, others of which may be imposed and imperfectly settle on me - can clash and/or support each other in different ways and very differently at different times” (Hall 181).

They are in a war zone, a space riddled with conflicts - politically and socially and the imaginary created by

the poetic performance has to solve this complication. Drawing heavily from American tradition, borrowing from Emily Dickinson and rendering an Urdu poetic form in English, he writes in a ghazal called 'Call Me Ishmael Tonight',

"God, limit these punishments, there's still Judgement day- I'm a mere sinner. I'm no infidel tonight" (Ali 374).

He is a sinner not an infidel and biblical and Islamic images coincide. His faith is unwavering, and he is challenged by the human constructions and the imposition of a reductive label on his identity. The last two couplets of the ghazal make it clear. Shahid laments,

"My rivals for your love - you've invited them all?

This is mere insult, there is no farewell tonight.

And, I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee - God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight" (Ali 375).

Not only there is a plea to exist on his terms, but there is also an anguish that can be experienced in the utterance - the sense of loss overcomes every other feeling. A similar feeling of loss can be found in Cavafy. He writes in the poem Days of 1903,

"I have never found them again - those things so swiftly vanished...the poetic eyes, the pale face...in the nightfall of the road...

I never found them again - those that I gained entirely by chance,

that I so readily abandoned; and that afterwards, in agony, I craved. The poetic eyes, the pale face, those lips, I never found them again" (Cavafy 107).

This is a challenge that Cavafy and Ali must face. What is present cannot be accepted as it is and what must be constructed, should be able to accommodate what is aspired. Cavafy gets down to it in his poems and openly. He chooses to show a particular strand of his memory which signifies this journey - the passage from fixity to fluidity. He writes in the poem Passage,

"Those things he timidly imagines as a schoolboy are now in the open, exposed before him. And he roams around and stays up nights, and yields to temptation. And as is right (for our Art) sensuality relishes his blood, so young and hot. His body is overwhelmed by deviant erotic rapture; and his youthful limbs succumb to it" (Cavafy 101).

The need for sensuality to create art is something that cannot be diminished or controlled. He declares that his impulses are driven by 'deviant erotic rapture(s)'. Annamarie Jagose quotes Alexander Doty, "Defining Queer as a term which mark[s] the flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non- (anti-, contra-) straight cultural production and reception" (qtd. in Jagose 96-97). Agha Shahid Ali in 'Call Me Ishmael Tonight', creates a similar space. In the same ghazal where he voices his despair, he also writes about his yearning,

"Mughal ceilings, let your mirrored convexities multiply me at once under your spell tonight" (Ali 374).

Agha Shahid Ali makes use of a poetic form, which in itself is crossing boundaries and under his treatment becomes truly borderless. Agha Shahid Ali brings Ghazal to English with a new treatment. He adapts the Persian poetic form to English in a way that he creates a new space of expression which has traces from his homeland Kashmir - a place that exists in between, his own identity. Vardhan Nahar writes,

"Queerly enough, Shahid occupied an undeterminable position not just with regard to his sexual identity, but also as a Kashmiri, belonging to a state whose boundaries are in a constant flux. Kashmir, with its much-disputed 'boundaries' is interstitial,- it is an 'in-between' space of simultaneity, both belonging and not belonging to India... It cannot be locked by boundaries, either of geography or of definitions" (Nahar, *Call Me Queer Tonight*).

Cavafy to sketch the in-between uses the image of a ship. Remembering an encounter, he writes that his soul evoked the lover out of time. That is the place

for their existence - out of time. Cavafy in the concluding lines of the same poem writes remembering the place,

“Out of Time. These things are all so very old - the sketch, and the ship, and the afternoon” (Cavafy 115).

Positions of poets like Ali and Cavafy cannot be fixed on maps. They cannot be pinned down to single labels. They do not fit in. They exist in the imaginary. Their sexualities and their ethnicities cannot be wholly charted. They treat history as an interactive text where they can return and which they can reinterpret according to their existence. Be it Cavafy’s ancient Greece or Agha Shahid Ali’s travels into key moments of Islamic and Kashmiri events, their interventions in these moments in time, shape up the queer imaginary and create a space where they can belong with their own identities. For Cavafy, they can be expressed in glimpses through memories that become timeless and transcendent. Peter Mackridge writing about Cavafy’s point of view on art says that for Cavafy,

“Art doesn’t represent reality, or imitate life, or copy nature; instead, it imposes its will upon the art-object, removing it from the contingencies that dominate the natural and social worlds” (Mackridge xxi).

Cavafy’s whole being is guided by the will to impose his will to imagine a reality where he fits in with all his queerness. Agha Shahid Ali’s will to create the queer imaginary-his closeted self, on the other hand, is created because of the conflict between what he wants and what he has lost. The art tries to compensate for the loss. The anxiety of loss can be felt in his poems like ‘Suicide Note’- in one single sentence! He writes,

“I could not simplify myself” (Ali 296).

Here, the opposite of simple can be read as queer. Therefore, an imaginary is created because of the conflict with the reductionist simple. So, Agha Shahid Ali becomes a spokesperson for the complex. He picks up the story of Majnoon, in a poem called, “From Another Desert” and declares his will.

“All night they knock, asking if the Beloved had ever passed.

All night I keep the heart shut I’m waiting for a greater madness. To declare myself to the hangman.

Can this be read as a declaration of his queerness? Agha Shahid Ali frequently quotes and is influenced by similarly oriented poets like Wilde, Hopkins and James Merrill. Both him and Cavafy, remain at a distance, the exile and their queerness always keep them in want of Belonging, perhaps more vocally in Agha Shahid Ali. No matter where he starts, he always looks for a return home. In the poems these poets write, everything is about Home. In a poem called Dear Shahid, Agha Shahid Ali, addresses himself,

“I am writing to you from your far-off country. Far even from us who live here. Where you no longer are” (Ali 194).

Love, even if it arrives, it arrives in Shadows. Cavafy in *That They Come* writes,

“Utterly in reverie and in suggestive rupture, and with scanty light- deep thus in reverie, I’ll drift into my visions, so that they come, the Shadows, so that Love’s Shadows come” (Cavafy 123).

It is clear that the space in which they exist and express is sketched in their memory and their imaginations- in their queer imaginations - one that is hidden and created due to desire arising from lack and longing. Agha Shahid Ali writes in *The Country without a Post office* -

“This is your pain. You must feel it. Feel it.

Heart be faithful to his mad refrain -

For he soaked the wicks of clay lamps,

lit them with each night as he climbed these steps ...

This is an archive. I’ve found the remains of his voice, that map of longings with no limit” (Ali 205).

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