

## Mapping Homeland: Mythical Politics in Agha Shahid Ali and Mahmoud Darwish

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**Abstract:** Mapping as an impersonal knowledge tends to de-socialize the territory it represents fostering an abstract and socially empty space. This study analyses the poetry of exile in Agha Shahid Ali and Mahmoud Darwish and their poetic maps of homeland—Kashmir and Palestine—created from exile suggesting an alternate tradition of cartography. It argues that while the poets implant the minority myth of Andalusia evoking mythical relationship between father and son, they tend to evoke a human bond between the nation-state and its subject-citizens as a means to create a socially erotic space. On the one hand, the study brings to the fore the patriarchal notion of bodyscaping in the discipline of humanities which the homeland as ‘mother’ evokes; and on the other, the mythical equanimity between the relationship of father-son and nation state-subject citizens counters erotic voyeurism. Moreover, the creation of Andalusia, a mythical land of perfection, demystifies the idea of homeland—Kashmir in case of Agha Shahid Ali and Palestine in case of Mahmoud Darwish—as a means to undo its geographical boundaries and sovereignty of its hegemony. And the filial desire between father and son gains a re-examination within the discipline of Humanities and the academic discourse of exile and homeland. In short, this paper attempts to make sense of exile as an illusory homeland through Islamic / biblical myths and relations such as between Yaqub and Yusuf (Jacob and Joseph), and between Abraham and Ishmael, and argues that the exiled poets as the exiled mythical sons foil the biblical strategy of plotting death of the weaker / feminine sons.

**Key Words:** Mapping, Cartography, Kashmir, Palestine, Andalusia, Homo-Erotic, Bodyscaping, Homeland, Exile, Death.

### TEXT

In the Koran, Joseph said to his father Jacob, ‘Father, I dreamed of eleven stars and the sun and the moon: I saw them all bow down before me.’ His father replied, ‘My son, tell your brothers nothing of this dream, or they may plot to harm you—Satan is man’s sworn enemy’” (Sura 12 Joseph, 236-7; MAS Abdel Haleem, 2004: 2004, 2010, 2016). The quote from the Biblical myth of Joseph suggests of a prophecy made by the Biblical character who is later forced to live in exile by his brothers. Endowed with the divine power of prophecy, Joseph could foretell the future of his people. And in real life it is the poets—Mahmoud Darwish and Agha Shahid Ali—who in exile could foresee Andalusia, the Biblical homeland that stands for a rare combination and commingling of three cultures—Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Why do the poets—Darwish and Shahid Ali—write of Andalusia in exile? How do they map a personal homeland against all oppressive forces by implanting the Biblical myth? How does the myth and exile of Joseph and of Ishmael serve to counter the enemy in brother / father back in Palestine or Kashmir? Darwish is a Palestinian poet in exile in Paris, and Shahid Ali

is an expatriate, choosing to live in exile in America. Both the poets implant Biblical myth to remap homeland and represent the relationship between their personal and political state. One straight and the other gay, both perform the wandering son—Darwish as Joseph while Agha Shahid Ali as Ishmael—the Biblical characters who were forced to take exile in foreign lands by their brothers and their father respectively. Exile is so strong a condition in their life narrative that the two poets foresee the future of their homeland while being away from it.

As “wandering exile” Darwish (Said, 1994) writes *Eleven Stars* (1992) in Arabic. With a tone of fatigue, he senses fatalism and ennui in relationship to the fortunes of the Palestinians and predicts for his homeland a fate similar to that of Andalusia. The Biblical Al-Andalus from once being a grand cultural apotheosis had faced extinction and had gone into oblivion both metaphorically and physically. Agha Shahid Ali translates Darwish’s *Eleven Stars* into “Eleven Stars Over Andalusia” into English published in the poetry collection *Rooms are Never Finished* (2001) and writes the poetry collection *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* (2004) with a hope to recreate his lost homeland Kashmir in the image of Andalusia and the promised land of Ishmael.

Darwish and Shahid Ali’s obsession with geography, place and space is embedded in their personal history of exile which has deep roots in the disappearing history of Palestine and Kashmir. The significance of spatial representation in their poetry may be comprehended from their biography. Darwish was born in the upper Galilee in Acre in the village of Birweh in 1942. From a tender age of six he had remained on an arduous journey with his family as a refugee first in Lebanon, then in Northern Palestine, followed by Moscow, Cairo, Beirut, Damascus, Paris, Jordan and ending in Ramallah in Palestine with his burial. Labeled present-absentee by Israel he portrays his plight in his poems making it a journey through his mindscape and against the disappearing landscape of Palestine, his homeland. On the other hand Shahid Ali, born in Kashmir in 1949, completed his education in Kashmir and New Delhi and chose to stay in exile in America returning once every year to his homeland Kashmir with a hope of being accommodated in a culturally devastated Kashmir. Being close to his mother he wandered with her from place to place for her treatment of brain tumour. Devastated with his mother’s death Shahid Ali himself died of tumour, as his mother, and was laid to rest in America, his surrogate homeland. Disheartened with turbulent historical and political scenario of Kashmir and disturbed with his sexual identity Shahid Ali leads a

closeted life writing poetry to project a personal identity that approaches political, personal and cultural loss.

In Agha Shahid Ali and Mahmoud Darwish re-creation of maps, geography and the matrix of space-place may be seen. Spatiality involves both the empirical and the discursive. However, the absence of particular space or time in their poetic texts is the imaginary land presented which truly is a mental space as claimed by Chris Barret in *Early Modern English Literature and the Poetics of Cartographic anxiety* (2018). Both the poets are in journey that ends with their death and it can be claimed that their journey never ends in spite of death. Hence journey becomes more significant than its end. And their love for men and for landscape goes parallel in their poetic texts. Therefore, what can be witnessed is their personal world or home-making quality in their poetics of homeland. The personal maps of the poets are in opposition to the political maps and include boundary-less space where travel is not restricted based upon any identity—national, gender or sexual. The poetic maps are all-inclusive embracing the higher spirit of human creation—culture, myth, language and history. In Shahid Ali while painting the American landscape, the image of Kashmir and places from the entire Indian sub-continent is reflected on the fore. And both the poets Ali and Darwish re-create themselves as the one who embody their homeland within themselves. Disinheriting the structure of home to attain freedom within its permits the poets in their struggle contend the geographical boundaries of their homeland.

Why does the nation / home long for a cartographed form in the two poets and where does this longing take them? The impersonal map or geographical structure de-socializes the territory the poets represent, fostering a notion of socially empty space. Sumathi Ramaswamy in *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India* claims human form and to be specific female form is associated with the pictorial representation of a country in order to picturize a sovereign national territory as a culturally and religiously plural body politic (2010: 2). The geographical map of a country may not generate devotion in human being to the extent of giving up one's life. Embedding male devotion to and desire for man / woman with the implanted Biblical myths do the poets create a 'mental tension' in imagining 'homeland' not as a geographical entity but as a somatic being embodied in the figure of the mother. I suggest that the desire for mother / motherland found in the poems of Darwish and Shahid Ali in turn projects a 'desire' for the father or for brothers within the triangular relationship among father, mother and sons. Transforming desire for the dispossessed land into unrequited

love for the unattained beloved seems to be the crux of the poems by the two poets. The beloved being the mother in Darwish who is sought in the poems, the separation from her creates a continuous presence of the mother within the son. The poem “Passport” serves as a poetic space where Darwish unites with the beloved mother:

Oh, gentlemen, Prophets,  
Don't ask the trees for their names  
Don't ask the valleys who their mother is  
From my forehead bursts the sword of light  
And from my hand springs the water of the river  
All hearts of the people are my identity  
So take away my passport. (quoted in Hamdi, 2016: 3; Darwish, 2015)

Being the creator of her children her beauty and her maternal traits are inherited by the son Darwish who can gain a glimpse of not only the mother in him but also of all her sons. The beauty of the mother can be seen in the character of Joseph in the implanted Biblical myth of Andalusia as well as in the character of Boabdil (Abu Abd' alla), the last king of Granada in the poetic sequence *Eleven Stars* who looked at his lost kingdom for the last time, sighed and wept. The similarity in the characters of Boabdil and Joseph is also seen in Darwish and the poet in the poetry sequence “weeps like a woman for what you failed to defend like a man” who could not save Palestine like the failed historical and Biblical characters (as quoted in Shamsie, 2015). Further in translating the poetry sequence into English does Shahid Ali associate himself with the characters and bids farewell to his enchanted homeland Kashmir—the paradise on earth—while succumbing to brain tumour like his mother.

Introducing the Biblical emotion between father-son or between the brothers, Darwish identifies himself with Joseph. Making him an epitome of ‘beauty’ the myth evokes an erotic desire among women in general and in the father and the brothers in specific. In the poem “There is a Sky beyond the Sky for Me” the poetic persona shares his bedroom with Lorca—the poetic brother and an avant-garde Spanish poet of Andalusian origin—but fails to evoke love in him transcending differences. Darwish writes:

Some of my words of love will fall into  
Lorca's poems; he'll live in my bedroom

and see what I have seen of the Bedouin moon

... ..

In a while I'll emerge a stranger

from the wrinkles of my time, alien to Syria and to Andalusia

... ..

So expel me slowly,

and kill me slowly,

under my olive tree,

along with Lorca... (2010, 303)

Jealous of Joseph for being loved and preferred by their father more than themselves, the father's affection generates a case of jealousy resulting into hatred among the brothers. Competing for father's love the jealous brothers do not kill Joseph but abandon him. And so are Boabdil and Darwish who are cast off from Andalusia and Palestine respectively. Darwish wanders in exile throughout his life dying to return to the embrace of the father and the brothers. The 'sumud' reflected in his poetry in fact is fatal. It is the metaphoric death that is the goal which seems to be ingrained within the desire of return as projected in the myth and in the national culture. The enforced homecoming evoked emotionally may be seen as an emotional compulsion to submit to the enemies where enemies are brothers who would kill the lover-brother to be in good books of their father. The submission to either the brothers or to the father would risk his life and in turn his existence and his identity.

In the poem "Who am I after the Night of the Strangers," the seventh poem in the sequence of *Eleven Stars over Andalusia*, the poetic persona is woken up from his dream only to realize his apparent extinction. His family members once loving have become estranged and his illusion of being loved and wanted comes to an end. Hence, the nights turn dark and days seem obscured and risk his existence. The identity seems threatened along with his language, his time, history and his world passes by him. The bleakness within makes the road murky and losing home he finds himself in a tent becoming a nomad with no roots and no streets to call his own. As a derelict he leads to his own death:

Through others I once walked toward myself, and here I am,

losing that self, those others. My horse disappeared by the Atlantic,

and by the Mediterranean I bleed, stabbed with a spear (2010, 307).

The filial love remains unrequited and his presence unacknowledged makes him unseen and unloved and there dawns a realization, “Love has no heart... / no heart in which I can dwell after the night of the estranged...” (2010, 308). Father maintaining sovereignty exercises hegemony over warring brothers. It is the conquerors who come and go while the conquered have no face, “It is difficult to remember my face in the mirrors” Q.

With enmity and resultant separation the brothers make a continuous presence within the memory of each other. In the poem “In the Exodus I Love you More” the ninth section of Andalusia sequence the poetic persona is deeply in love with the enemy, “In this demise I love you more” (309). It is in the memory and in the poetic texts that the poet is able to reconstruct the absent love and lost homeland. The imaginative endeavour is predicated upon the experience from past history and present conditions of alienation and challenges the memoricide, i.e., the erasure of memory of an entire nation, history and culture. The poetic creation of home arranges a physical space constructing a geography of an imagined space and identity that can survive with the presence of erotic passion withstanding destruction and extinction.

The transitory existence of the perished physical space and of emotion soon is realized and Darwish questions the presence of homeland, “In which Andalusia do I end? Here / or there?” (308). The paradox of filial bond deepens and the poetic persona is shaken off his dream by the repeated betrayal symbolic in the continuous sound of violin. It rings in the dark reality in the character in the concluding section of the Andalusia poetry sequence. The reality of the Biblical myth as a strategy to plot death of the feminine sons collapses the dialectic of hope and questions the filial bond and the expected duties. Leaving the issue unresolved, Darwish in yet another poem “Mural” (2003) voices his astonishing denial for home or for its people, “I don’t want to return to anyone. I don’t want to return to any country. / After this long absence, I want only to return to my language in the remotest / depths of the dove’s cooing” (as quoted in Hamdi, 2016: 9; Darwish, 2003: 145-146).

Shahid Ali’s loss of mother, home, homeland or his exile is like the great fall of man from Eden and the loss of perfection. The purity of culture, art, ghazal is all lost to modernity that brings in its wake a strong resistance. Shahid Ali, as the name suggests is a ‘witness’ to such worldly destructions who as a dejected lover rues over the loss of his beloved and sings the

pangs of separation as a bard for people to remember the historical loss. Re-creating Islamic myths in his poetry inspired by Andalusian form “Ghazal” Shahid Ali revives the forgotten form as a means to revive the lost history and trans-culture of Andalus and of Kashmir. In yet another myth projecting filial relationship between Abraham and Ishmael the poet Shahid Ali identifies with Ishmael and asks for being called “Ishmael tonight.” The biblical son Ishmael is made to wander out in the desert with his mother Hagar who are turned out of the father Abraham’s house to solve the issue of paternal property claimed by both his sons—Isaac and Ishmael—and to maintain peace at home. Further the character also has to testify for his devotion to the father in accepting the proposal to sacrifice his life for the sake of love for the father. Shahid Ali like Ishmael is banished from homeland in spite of his filial devotion while the thirst for love is kept alive in him with the metaphoric ‘thirst’ for water.

In the poem “Of Water” published in the poetry collection *Call me Ishmael Tonight* (2004), water becomes the mirror and a means to quench thirst of love. The mirror image in water transforms love for self to the love for the similar, i.e., the father. Ishmael with his mother hence gets shattered in love for father. While they wander the father-God remains silent and beholds his emotion by beholding rain. Symbolic of absence of affection the emerging rainbow takes away rain and water leaving the poetic persona alienated and wanting. The poetic persona expecting to be in illusion of father’s love proposes veiling of the lover as a means to continuance of his life in separation against the shocking death upon realization of the lack of love. The beastly lover should not unmask nor the black stone of K’aba that stands for devotion to the lover God be unveiled. The ‘promised land’ with which Ishmael was lured and turned out of the house loses significance and the poetic persona exhausted by capitalism, in the poem “Land,” claims, “Swear by the olive in the God-kissed land—/ There is no sugar in the promised land” (347). Oppressed for being “drunk in your capitalistic land” (347) the poet instigates to revolt, “At the moment the heart turns terrorist, / are Shahid’s arms broken, O Promised Land?” (348). He questions in the poem “Angels,” “Why is God so frightened of my crazy devotion to Him? / Does he think that, like Satan, I too will finesse angels” () and concludes by shaking himself from his performance as Ishmael and instigates to counter charge against the sexual violence of the powerful father-God:

You play innocence so well, with such precision, Shahid:

You could seduce God Himself, and fuck the sexless angels (2010, 342).

In retelling the myth of love and sacrifice Shahid Ali evaluates the politics of exile at the back of which lies murder. Enacting the saga of separation he makes exile his permanent condition in his compositions of ghazal and attempts to foil the patriarchal agenda of killing the feminine son by making himself a martyr in his poetic creations. Moving beyond human emotions of love / hatred for the father-God wishes him well transcending pain and claims in “Forever,” “You’ve forgiven everyone, Shahid, even God—/ Then how could someone like you not live forever?” (370). Thus poets counter the politics of exile through their poetic creations and attain martyrdom.

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