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Aesthetics of Multidirectional Memory in Agha Shahid Ali's Selected Poems

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Abstract

This study explores the aesthetics of multidirectional memory and mnemonic devices in Anglophone poetry, particularly in Agha Shahid Ali's collection "Rooms Are Never Finished" and related poems. Drawing on Michael Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memory, which posits that collective memories of different histories of suffering, grief, and loss can coexist and interact rather than compete, the study suggested that Ali uses poetry as a site for negotiating overlapping memories. The study argues that memory in Ali's poetry functions as a dynamic, relational process rather than a static or singular narrative.

Through close readings of selected poems, the study demonstrates how Ali employs a range of mnemonic devices, including repetition, intertextual allusion, and sensory imagery that serve as mechanisms for remembering and reshaping personal and collective histories. Also, the study

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emphasizes the ghazal form's role in showcasing fragmentation, autonomy, and continuity in memory.

Keywords: Multidirectional memory, Mnemonic devices, Agha Shahid Ali, Ghazal form, Historical loss

جماليات الذاكرة متعددة الاتجاهات في مختارات شعرية لآغا شهيد علي

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المستخلص

تستكشف هذه الدراسة جماليات الذاكرة متعددة الاتجاهات والأدوات التذكارية في الشعر الإنجليزي، لاسيما في مجموعة آغا شهيد علي الشعرية "الغرف لا تُكتمل أبداً" وقصائد أخرى ذات صلة. بالاستناد إلى نظرية مايكل روثبرغ للذاكرة متعددة الاتجاهات، التي تفترض أن الذكريات الجمعية لمختلف تواريخ المعاناة والحزن والفقد يمكن أن تتعايش وتتفاعل بدلاً من أن تتنافس، تقترح الدراسة أن علي يوظف الشعر بوصفه فضاء للتفاوض بين ذكريات متداخلة ومتقاطعة. تجادل الدراسة بأن الذاكرة في شعر علي تعمل بوصفها عملية ديناميكية وتفاعلية وليست سردية ثابتة أو أحادية.

من خلال قراءات تحليلية دقيقة لعدد من القصائد المختارة، تُبين الدراسة كيف يوظف علي مجموعة من الأدوات التذكارية، مثل التكرار والتناص والصور الحسية، والتي تعمل لاستدعاء الذاكرة وإعادة تشكيل التاريخ الشخصي والجماعي. كما تؤكد الدراسة على دور شكل الغزل في إبراز مفاهيم التجزئة والاستقلالية والاستمرارية داخل بنية الذاكرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الذاكرة متعددة الاتجاهات، الأدوات التذكارية، آغا شهيد علي، شكل الغزل، الفقد التاريخي

Introduction

Memory studies have become one of the most influential interdisciplinary paradigms in contemporary literary criticism. Emerging at the intersection of history, sociology, philosophy, trauma theory, and cultural studies, it reorients literary analysis toward questions of

Remembrance, transmission, forgetting, and the ethical implications of representing the past. Rather than treating memory as a passive repository of experience, contemporary theorists conceptualize it as a dynamic, socially mediated, and politically charged process. Literature, in this framework, functions not merely as representation but as an active site of memory production. This finds its echo in Bosch (2016) who confirms that "Memory studies is a multidisciplinary field which combines intellectual strands from anthropology, education, literature, history, philosophy, psychology, and sociology." (p.2) According to this context, memory in different disciplines investigates how individuals and societies remember past events as cultural and social practices rather than merely psychological processes.

The work of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs is frequently cited by historians studying collective memory as their main theoretical source. Halbwachs laid the groundwork for it by emphasizing the idea of collective memory, as influenced by social structures. Later, the field grew because of postmodernism and cultural studies, which connected memory to identity, power, and narrative. In this sense memory shifted from being considered a purely individual capacity to being understood as a collective and socially constructed phenomenon. (Dessingué, 2015).

In the twenty-first century, memory studies have increasingly emphasized transnational and comparative dimensions. A crucial intervention in this regard is the theory of multidirectional memory articulated by Michael Rothberg. Challenging the assumption that memories of historical trauma compete for recognition, Rothberg argues that memories interact productively across cultures and histories. In literary criticism, this approach encourages reading texts dialogically, tracing how colonial histories, genocides, migrations, and diasporic experiences intersect rather than exclude one another. Memory becomes relational rather than hierarchical.

In Anglophone poetry, multidirectional memory is particularly generative because the language itself functions as a transnational medium shaped by colonialism, diaspora, and global circulation. Contemporary poets writing in English often situate personal recollection within intersecting geographies—linking imperial histories, wars, racial violence, and displacement across continents. The lyric voice becomes a site where memories of different temporal and spatial origins converge, creating layered constellations rather than isolated narratives. Formal strategies such as intertextual citation, multilingual phrasing, refrains, and fractured temporality enact this comparative model at the level of structure. Poetry thus resists linear historiography; it stages memory as relational, where the recollection of one catastrophe reverberates through another, and

where cultural inheritance is shaped by dialogue across borders rather than confined within national frameworks.

This multidirectional dynamic is especially evident in the works of Agha Shahid Ali, whose mnemonic devices interweave homeland, Exile, and global histories of violence. In Ali's poetry, Kashmir is never remembered in isolation; it resonates with other histories of loss—Palestine, Bosnia, the Holocaust—producing a network of comparative mourning that situates regional trauma within a broader human condition. His adaptation of the ghazal form further intensifies this effect, as its autonomous yet thematically linked couplets mirror the fragmented but dialogic structure of multidirectional memory. For both poets, English becomes a medium of negotiation: a language marked by imperial history yet reconfigured to articulate diasporic belonging. His works exemplify how Anglophone poetry can transform Remembrance into a comparative, ethical, and aesthetically complex encounter between multiple pasts.

Michael Rothberg's articulation of multidirectional memory implies the juxtaposition of two or more disturbing memories that work dialogically to bring together different histories of suffering. It is based on an "ethics of comparison that can distinguish politically productive forms of memory from those that lead to competition, appropriation and trivialization" (Pérez Zapata, 2015,p.529). In his influential book *Multidirectional Memory : Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009) Michael Rothberg illustrates how various cultural memories interact, influence, and shape one another in a dynamic and reciprocal process. Rather than being static or exclusive, this idea challenges the conventional understanding of collective memory as a single, homogeneous entity and emphasizes the rich and varied nature of cultural memory as a dynamic and dialogical process where memories are continuously reshaped through borrowing, cross-referencing, and negotiation. examining both postcolonial studies and the Holocaust under the same heading in his book, Rothberg states "I suggest that we consider memory as multidirectional: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative". (Rothberg,2009,p.3). Rather than functioning in a competitive manner, where the memory of one group negates that of another, multidirectional memory promotes mutual enrichment and understanding. It is employed and connected to the issue with the subjectivity of the group identification and system of representation.

Rothberg (2009) refutes the claim that collective memory is competitive as put forth by Muhammad and Walter Benn Michaels; they argue that remembering a terrible past, such as the Holocaust, invariably obscures other histories, such as slavery or colonialism. Michael Walter

Benn poses the critical question of why there is no comparable national remembrance of slavery, but a sole Holocaust Museum located in Washington. This is also tackled by Khalid Muhammad's divisive rhetoric which holds that if Holocaust memory is given visibility, slavery memory must inevitably be left out. Michael Rothberg refers to this understanding as a model of competitive memory, in which remembering follows a zero-sum logic and acknowledging one history only comes at the expense of another.

Rothberg underscores that memory is dynamic and permeable, with what appears to be the memory of one group frequently incorporating or resonating with the experiences of other groups. As such, memories are neither merely a reflection of inflexible boundaries of identity nor are they "owned" by groups. Instead, they intersect, change, and evolve in ways that subvert exclusivist reasoning and create opportunities for mutual acknowledgment. According to this perspective, various suffering histories, including the Holocaust, slavery, colonialism, and more recent genocides, interact in ways that are frequently beneficial and enlightening for both parties rather than erasing or diminishing one another. The emergence of the Holocaust consciousness did not prevent the Remembrance of slavery or colonialism, as Michaels and Muhammad argue. Instead, its prominence has often given other traumatic pasts a platform to be expressed. According to Rothberg, this is an example of the generative and intercultural dynamic known as multidirectional memory: a framework in which different suffering histories come together, resonate, and enrich one another without losing their individuality.

Additionally, according to Al-Doory (2024) Michael Rothberg, in his *Multidirectional Memory*, "encourages us to think of the public sphere as a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually come into being through their dialogical interactions with others; both the subjects and spaces of the public are open to continual reconstruction". According to this context, multidirectional memory involves reevaluating the interconnectedness among the historical experiences of many social groups that have been subjected to trauma.(p.241).

Depending on Richard Terdiman's (as cited in Rothberg ,2009) expression " the past made present". (p.3) Rothberg contends that memory is not a static archive but rather a type of labor and social action that entails representation, intervention, and cultural struggle. The notion that the past makes the present is composed of two essential elements: First, memory occurs in the present even though it focuses on the past, and second, that memory is a type of labor, action, or working through by which one can heal his traumatic wounds. As Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche state,

"Memory is 'a symbolic representation of the past embedded in social action.' It is "'a set of practices and interventions'" (p.4).

The interplay of cultural memories of various historical occurrences illustrates how Remembrance is multifaceted. Due to their temporal and experiential overlap, many of their contemporaries believed that World War II and the Dutch-Indonesian war of decolonization were two sides of a single, ongoing conflict. For instance, thousands of military personnel, resistance fighters, and civilians were sent to the Netherlands following its liberation, bringing with them a narrative of continuous conflict. As van Ooijen and Raaijmakers (2012) "To many contemporaries, World War II and the Dutch–Indonesian war of decolonization—the years between 1942 and 1949—blended into one grim period of violence. Hence, World War II took place both in the motherland and the colony, but in the latter, it became part of a longer period of violent struggle".(p. 464). This blending of experiences shaped postcolonial Dutch cultural memory, demonstrating the way people remembered disparate but related events. In this context, metropolitan memories of World War II frequently eclipsed Asian war memories of 1942–1949. However, the prevailing discourse of Remembrance also gave veterans of the Indies the opportunity to speak up and present their sacrifices as a component of the heroic national narrative. Their history was incorporated into the larger memory culture by mobilizing the symbolic capital of World War II remembrance, demonstrating the mutual reinforcement of victimization and heroization memories. This reflects Rothberg's multidirectional approach, which emphasizes how different histories can support one another rather than viewing memory as a zero-sum game.

The Moluccans' situation serves as another illustration of this multidirectionality. They helped to preserve the memory of places like Camp Vught during the war by settling in former camps and later incorporating their experiences into national remembrance sites. The juxtaposition of Holocaust remembrance and Moluccan memory also led to complex negotiations of meaning. Interactions between Jewish survivors and Moluccan residents revealed both similarities and differences: responses affirmed the uniqueness of the Holocaust, while comparisons underscored shared trauma. These dynamic supports Rothberg's contention that claims of uniqueness paradoxically encourage additional analogical appropriations.

These instances demonstrate the intertwined nature of postwar and postcolonial memory in the Netherlands—a matter that defies simple erasure or competition. Rather, these interwoven and overlapping stories of trauma, victimization, and heroization represent the complicated character

of memory itself, in which various histories of struggle and violence influence, support, and occasionally contradict one another.

Michael Rothberg's article "From Gaza to Warsaw: Mapping Multidirectional Memory" (2011) offers an alternative to the logic of competitive memory, emphasizing that histories of violence do not erase each other but instead intersect and enrich one another. As he explains, "the result of memory conflict is not less memory, but more—even of subordinated memory traditions".(p. 523). Drawing on examples such as W. E. B. Du Bois's reflections on the Warsaw Ghetto as a lens for understanding racism in the United States, or Marguerite Duras's comparison of Jewish and Algerian experiences, Rothberg demonstrates how memory circulates across cultures to generate new forms of solidarity. In the case of Gaza, however, he critiques the rhetoric that equates it directly with the Warsaw Ghetto, since such analogies:

They thus suggest the likelihood that the forms of recognition they promote will also entail a failure of recognition—in this case, a failure to recognize the specificities of both the Palestinian plight and that of Holocaust victims".(Rothberg,2011,p.533).Ultimately, Rothberg calls for a form of differentiated solidarity grounded in critical comparison and mutual recognition rather than in competition or simplistic equivalence.

It is necessary to consider Rothberg's multidirectional memory in light of his notion of *noeuds de mémoire*, which was shaped by Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*. "Beyond the framework of the imagined community of the nation-state's." (Rothberg 2010,p. 7), Rothberg reiterates with this idea the importance of taking into account acts of "Rhizomatic networks of temporality and culture reference the exceeded attempts at territorialization... and identitarian reduction," states Deleuze in reference to Remembrance. As a consequence , "It was coined as a way of conceptualizing what happens when different histories of extreme violence confront each other in the public sphere. While acknowledging the struggles and contestations that accompany public articulations of memory, the theory of multidirectional memory seeks an explanation of the dynamics of Remembrance that does not simply reproduce the terms of partisan groups involved in those struggles". (Rothberg, 2014).

Undoubtedly, "Memory is not merely an individual, psychological process that takes place in our 'heads' but always already mediated by culturally and socially shaped memorial forms"(Laanes & Meretoja, 2021, p. 3). They argue, memory is never a purely individual process but is always mediated through cultural forms that shape how individuals and communities articulate and

transmit their experiences. Moreover, Astrid Erll (2011) identifies literature, and particularly poetry as an independent symbolic form of cultural memory. Pointing out its structural similarities to the processes involved in remembering, as she states " literature manifested in all genres and media technologies, both popular and 'trivial' literature as well as canonized and 'high' literature have served- and continue to serve- as media of memory. They fulfill a multitude of mnemonic functions, such as the imaginative creation of past life worlds, the transmission of images of history, the negotiation of competing memories, and the reflection about processes and problems".(p.144).

Specifically, poetry has deeply entwined itself with memory from its earliest forms, even in its most primitive forms. Poetry was an oral archive of myth, history, and shared experience prior to the popularity of mass literacy and historical writing. The mnemonic devices of poetry's rhythmic and metaphorical structures preserve and pass down human experience through generations. Poetry is increasingly recognized in the context of contemporary memory studies as a cultural memorial form that transcends Time and location to reflect, reconstruct, and reimagine memory, both individual and collective ,beyond the confines of Time and space. She explains "In German, the term Gedicht (poem) even maintains a linguistic connection to Verdichtung (condensation). One of the major effects of literary forms, such as metaphor, allegory, symbolism, and intertextuality, is the bringing together and superimposition of various semantic fields in a very small space" (pp. 145–146). This ability to compress and layer meanings makes it a powerful mnemonic device that can powerfully convey cultural experiences and memories . In this way, poetry bridges the individual and collective dimensions of memory by reshaping and reimagining the past in addition to preserving it.

Literature illustrates how it can act as a space for the intersection and interaction of multiple memories in the context of modern memory studies. In an article published by DDGC Collective (n.d), reflects on Jason Groves's rereading of Paul Celan's 1959 poetry collection Sprachgitter ("Language Mesh"), a work deeply engaged with the ruptures of the Shoah (the Holocaust). Through this act of "reading otherwise," and by paying attention to pauses and accents differently, Groves finds that Celan's poems evoke broader concerns such as breath, memory, and the present's urgent condition. In particular, he cites the poem "Low Tide" ("Niedrigwasser"), which depicts elements of nearshore and offshore life, barnacles, limpets, crabs, and notably "wind-markings in the grey silt," as a site where memory is materially sedimented. Groves situates this poetic imagery within Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory, which he defines as the

way collective memories emerge in dialogue with each other and with the conditions of the present. The poem's environmental images thus become spaces where multiple histories, such as the Shoah and ecological or colonial violences, can resonate and intersect, creating new possibilities for remembering across temporal and disciplinary boundaries.

Moreover, the scholarly article "Decolonizing Trauma: A Study of Multidirectional Memory in Zadie Smith's *The Embassy of Cambodia*" illustrates how Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memory is reflected in Smith's story. As explained by Pérez Zapata (2015), "I will rely on Michael Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memory to illustrate how the history of the genocide in Cambodia and the story's protagonist's history, which is effectively one of slavery, conflate in Smith's text to bring to the fore silenced histories in a more ethical manner that seeks to put an end to competition and hierarchies within traumatic histories and trauma theory" (p. 523). Most significantly, this interweaving of memories demonstrates the political and ethical productivity of multidirectional memory by generating "new forms of solidarity and visions of justice," while also emphasizing the danger of competitive frameworks of Remembrance. Smith's short story transcends the competitive logic of memory in this way, placing traumatic histories within a relational discourse that aligns with Ella Shohat's relationality concept, which emphasizes how histories are interconnected across identities and geographies. Smith's text illustrates how literature, whether prose or poetry, can serve as a dialogic and ethical space that not only remembers but also reconfigures past traumas in ways that promote justice and solidarity by fusing Shohat's relationality with Rothberg's multidirectionality.

Furthermore, Colette Wilson in her article "Multidirectional memory and Exile in Jacques Hassoun's polyphonic novel *Alexandries*" illustrates how Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memory is reflected in Hassoun's novel. As argued by Wilson (2013), Jacques Hassoun's *Alexandries* (1985) is not merely a sentimental recall of a lost homeland; rather, it is a complex act of "memory work" that deals with multidirectional memory and Exile. The novel resists the "common assumption that, to quote Michael Rothberg (2009: 4–5), there is a straight line running 'from memory to identity and that the only kinds of memories and identities that are therefore possible are ones that exclude elements of alterity and forms of commonality with others'." (p.95). Rothberg's concept of multidirectionality, where "memories are mobile; histories are implicated in each other" (p.111), is enacted in the novel by juxtaposing the experiences of Jewish Egyptian exiles with those of other displaced peoples, including Native Americans, Palestinians, and Armenians, through its fragmented and polyphonic structure. In this sense, *Alexandries* not only

honors a gone community but also shows how cultural memories transcend religious, ethnic, and geographic boundaries.

Moreover, the word "mnemonics" is derived from the μνημονικός (mnēmonikos), meaning "of memory", or "relating to memory" and is connected with Mnemosyne – the Greek titan, goddess of memory that represented memory ("remembrance") in Greek mythology. (Jurowski1, Jurowska2, & Krzeczowska, 2015, p.4) The "Mn" at the beginning of the word comes originally from the Greek word "Mnemosyne" that means the Goddess of Memory, while the "monic" part of the word comes from the same derivation as "harmonica" or "harmonic" or "harmony", having to do with music or sounds. Mnemonic devices were first used in oral cultures, where memory served as the main preservation tool for myth, law, and history. Prior to literacy, societies mainly relied on patterned oral forms, including formulaic expressions, rhyme, rhythm, and repetition, to guarantee accurate knowledge transfer between generations for example, the formulaic repetition and rhythmic cadence of Homer's oral epics allowed the poet to recall lengthy stories, As Ong (1982,2012),explains that the "The poet had a massive vocabulary of hexameterized phrases. With his hexameterized vocabulary, he could fabricate correct metrical lines without end, so long as he was dealing with traditional materials"(p.58).This illustrates how formulaic and rhythmic structures functioned as mnemonic frameworks, enabling oral poets to faithfully remember and recite long stories. Meanwhile, A. M. Hocart regards mnemonic devices as universal aspect of human cognition. He states, "One need not have studied experimental psychology to know what a strain it is to remember any disconnected matter: nonsense-syllables, figures, words strung together without rhyme or reason: everyone has some time or other tried to remember such strings of words by weaving them into a story or embedding them in mnemonic verses. It is a constant tendency of man, therefore, to invest with meaning the meaningless if for some reason or other it has to be remembered." (as cited in Dundes,1961,p. 139). With their roots in oral tradition, mnemonic devices serve as essential instruments for knowledge transmission and preservation in societies that rely more on memory than written documentation. According to Hocart's observation, these tools originate not only from cultural customs but also from the human mind's innate cognitive propensity to organize disjointed or abstract information into coherent structures for memory and recall.

Moreover, mnemonic devices are formal schemes for remembering, and their use goes back to classical times. *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Cicero's *De Oratore*, and Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* are three Latin texts that trace the beginnings of the classical art of memory. In order to remember

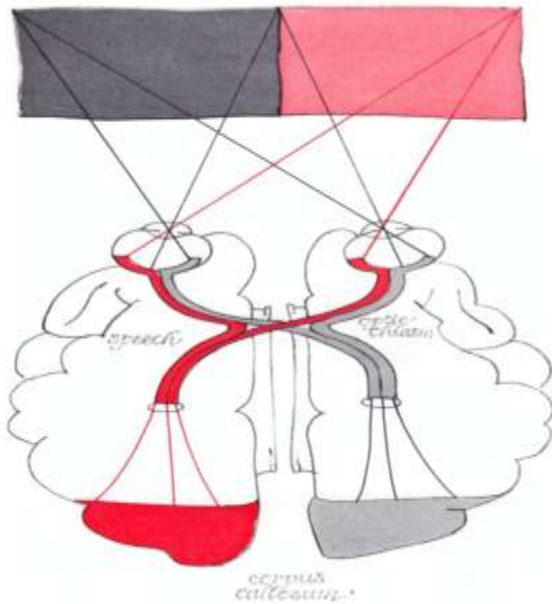
and retain information, these works lay the groundwork for the fundamental method of linking structured locations (*loci*) with vivid images (*imagines*). As stated by Yates, "the images must be striking, effective, and strange to shock the memory and make it hold"(Yates,1966,p.11). According to Yates, memory is not mechanical; rather, it is an imaginative discipline based on mental imagery and rhetoric. The idea of *anamnesis*, or the recall of timeless truths the soul knew prior to incarnation, was closely linked to memory, which was considered a faculty of the soul. As stated by Yates that, "For Plato, memory was closely bound up with the idea of recollection as the essence of the process of knowledge" (p.28). Memory served as a means of gaining metaphysical understanding as well as a rhetorical device. "Ad Herennium" claims that we employ two different kinds of memories: artificial and natural, upon which we have constructed the "*Loci*." It was enhanced with pictures of both beauty and ugliness, pictures of agony, scenes of pornography, or even pictures with a humorous effect so that everything could be easily recalled. Agents, notes, and signals were given an additional image of "the anchor" and "the weapon," which were likely taken from the army or navy domains, as part of Quintilian's mnemonic technique. In order to aid in the retention of comprehensive or particular information, the anchor and weapon function as a second layer of imagery and are positioned strategically throughout the itinerary for visiting the locations associated with "the building" images in "*Loci*."

Also, Gordon H. Bower in his 1970 study "Analysis of a Mnemonic Device," focuses on the relationship between verbal thinking and imagery as he examines the cognitive processes that underlie the efficacy of mnemonic devices. Bower contends that the verbal system, which processes linguistic and abstract information, and the imagery system, which encodes sensory and spatial information, are the two complementary modes of representation that underpin the human memory system. "The imagery system is relatively more attuned to the task of representing and operating on concrete information, whereas the verbal system appears better suited for processing abstract information." (p.507). as Bower observes the dual coding theory, put forth by Allan Paivio in 1969, contends that information encoded in both verbal and visual forms is easier to remember and retrieve than information encoded in just one mode. This dual structure of memory supports this theory.

In addition to that ,Bower's (1970) analysis is supported by neurological evidence from Michael Gazzaniga and Roger Sperry's split-brain research. According to his explanation, these studies show that "speech is interpreted, organized, and generated chiefly in the left hemisphere of the brain, whereas the right hemisphere tends to be more involved in performances utilizing nonverbal

imagery" (p. 508). It is clear from this hemisphere specialization that verbal and visual processes depend on different but complementary neural systems. Bower's article's accompanying illustrations (Figures 1) visually represent this division and demonstrate how visual input to each hemisphere produces distinct linguistic or spatial responses, thereby bolstering the dual cognitive processing theory.

Figure 1 "The Split Brain in Man". (as cited in Bower's, 1970, p. 508)



Although mnemonic devices have been defined in a variety of ways, they commonly share the dual purpose of helping with retention and influencing the structure of what is remembered. Bellezza (1981) asserted that mnemonic devices "are learning strategies which can often enhance the learning and later recall of information" (p. 24). Therefore, mnemonic devices can be defined as learning various strategies or tricks in order to enhance the learning process, to help improve the ability to remember any kind of information by associating the information,

"that we want to remember with a visual image, sentence, or a word.

In other words, the mnemonic systems are special techniques, or strategies consciously used to improve memory, by helping the brain better encode and recall important information. This tool works by tapping into how the brain naturally stores data. They help employ information already stored in long-term memory in order to make memorization an easier task. Therefore, one of the most significant approaches and strategies in education is the employment of mnemonic devices. Finding a link between a new piece of information and the one that students currently have stored in long-term memory is the fundamental notion behind mnemonic methods. The notion of mnemonics is used to create more effective methods of absorbing (encoding) information, making it much simpler to recall (retrieve). Mnemonic devices should therefore be viewed as instructional techniques that frequently improve knowledge acquisition and, subsequently, remembering.

(Jurowski, Jurowska, & Krzeczowska, 2015).

As Crowley (2018), explains that three categories of memory are often recognized: working memory, usually referred to as short-term memory, sensory memory, and long-term memory.

Sensory memory is primarily divided into two categories: echoic (auditory) and iconic (visual). Consequently, mnemonic devices are structured cognitive techniques that use association, imagery, and organization to improve memory retention.

Mnemonic devices can be broadly divided into two classes, according to Bellezza (1981): encoding mnemonics and organizational mnemonics. By forming a logical cognitive structure that connects disparate informational units into meaningful wholes, organizational mnemonics, like the loci method, peg-word, and story mnemonics, work. Conversely, encoding mnemonics work by employing phonetic or semantic associations, visual imagery, or symbolic representation to turn abstract or low-imagery information into more memorable forms. These gadgets use "cognitive cuing structures," (Bellezza, 1981, p.252) which use self-cuing and association to help with recall.

Similarly, Congos (2011) provides nine useful categories of mnemonic devices that demonstrate their wide range of applications, in addition to Bellezza's theoretical classification: music, name, expression/word, model, ode/rhyme, note organization, image, connection, and spelling mnemonics. For example, image mnemonics use visualization to encode abstract information into vivid mental scenes, while rhyme and music mnemonics use rhythm and melody to strengthen auditory memory. Model mnemonics convert information into spatial or diagrammatic forms that mimic cognitive mapping processes, while connection mnemonics rely on associating new information with previously learned concepts.

A few essential features that facilitate successful encoding and retrieval determine how effective mnemonic devices are. Invertibility (the capacity to decode the cue back into the original information), discriminability (the uniqueness of each cue), associability (the strength of cognitive links between cues and target information), and constructibility (the ease with which mnemonic cues can be generated) are the four fundamental characteristics listed by Bellezza (1981). Together, these characteristics guarantee that mnemonic structures serve as symbolic systems for organizing experience as well as memory aids.

These mnemonic principles are artistically expressed in the literary world, particularly in poetry, through rhythm, repetition, and imagery elements that not only make texts more memorable but also help to preserve cultural and emotional knowledge for future generations. Because verse is patterned, it reflects the structural logic of mnemonic devices, making poetry a cultural memory archive as well as a cognitive mechanism.

Fusion of Personal Grief with Larger Historical Loss in Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry

Agha Shahid Ali, a Kashmiri-American poet, was born in India, specifically in New Delhi, on February 4, 1949, and grew up in a respectable Shiite Muslim Kashmiri family with his mother, Sufia Noumani, and father, Agha Ashraf Ali. He was brought up in a well-educated family, where everyone loved poetry and Persian literature, Urdu, and English. (Mahmood, 2023). He received his education at the University of Delhi, Srinagar, Kashmir. Shahid arrived in America in his early twenties and earned his Ph.D. in 1984 from Pennsylvania State University and an M.F.A. in poetry from the University of Arizona in 1985. (Ali, 2003). As a famous translator he translated numerous well-known Urdu poems into English. As a case in point, he translated *The Rebel's Silhouette*[†] (1992) by Faiz Ahmed Faiz and made repeated references to the poet's impact on his own poetry. (Abidi, n.d.).

Agha Shahid Ali's poetic collections, all of which are marked by his sense of alienation, loss, and Exile, comprise *Bone-Sculpture* (1972), *In Memory of Begum Akhtar & Other Poems* (1979), *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987), *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* (1987), *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991), *The Beloved Witness: Selected Poems* (1992), *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997), and *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001).

In "A Map of Longings: The Life and Works of Agha Shahid Ali" (2021), Kapoor confirms that Ali's poetry is recited in four languages: Urdu, Persian, English, and Kashmiri. This in fact is related to the way he was influenced by three different cultures, namely Western, Muslim, and Hindu that are reflected in his poetry, even though he wrote in English. The influence of different cultures can be justified by the upbringing he received from his family:

When I was a kid, I remembered telling my parents that I wanted to build a little Hindu temple in my room, and they said sure. And then once I said I wanted to build a catholic chapel with pictures of Jesus, and they said sure, they brought me status of Jesus, they brought me statues of Krishna, they said go ahead, build your temple. It was a wonderful atmosphere full of possibilities of self-expression. (quoted in Christine Benvenuto, 262, 2002)

His father, Agha Ashraf Ali, enriched and broadened his knowledge and intellectual horizons with many of and through numerous philosophical and political ideas discussed by Mahatma

* A poetic work by Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911-1984) who is considered the leading poet on the South Asian subcontinent and the winner of the 1962 Lenin Peace Prize. Further, he was an outspoken opponent of the Pakistani government.

Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Martin Buber. This came hand in hand with reciting Urdu and Persian poetry, including that one of Faiz Ahmad Faiz. His father, as a matter of fact, instilled in him his love of Faiz, Mirza Ghalib, Saigal, and other ghazal singers. In addition to his father, Begum Zafar, his grandmother, recited poetry reception: "completely South Asian and completely cosmopolitan at the same time,[a poet] mapped all the languages, cultures, and worlds that [he] believed [he] belonged to" (p. 8). For him, the act of writing poetry was akin to stitching together fragmented geographies of belonging.

Agha Shahid Ali contributed to modern poetry. He revived and naturalized the ghazal in English without making it lose its formal beauty including autonomous couplets, refrain, rhyme. This marked him one of the most outstanding poets in legitimizing the English ghazal as a serious poetic form. Originally ghazal poetry is an Arabic verse form, it deals with loss and romantic love. Medieval Persian poets embraced the ghazal and eventually made it their own. This verse form consists of syntactically and grammatically complete couplets with intricate rhyme scheme. Each couplet ends on the same word or phrase (the *radif*) and is preceded by the couplet's rhyming word (the *qafia*, which appears twice in the first couplet). The last couplet entails a proper name, often that of the poet. In the Persian tradition, each couplet was of the same meter and length, and the subject matter included both erotic longing and religious belief or mysticism. English-language poets who have composed in the form include Adrienne Rich, John Hollander, and Agha Shahid Ali.

Although English literature had its pioneers of ghazal poetry, they are initially enslaved by the issue of form's regulations. Ali observes:

The opening couplet (called *matla*) sets up a scheme (of rhyme—called *qafia*—and refrain—called *radif*) by having it occur in both lines—the rhyme IMMEDIATELY preceding the refrain—and then this scheme occurs only in the second line of each succeeding couplet. That is, once a poet establishes the scheme—with total freedom, I might add—she or he becomes its slave (Ali, 2017, p. 72).

Ali presents form as both liberation and constraint. The ghazal begins in freedom, but it continues through submission. This paradox reflects a larger modern poetic tension. In this sense, the "slave" metaphor suggests that poetic mastery is born from negotiating resistance within form. A deeper reading shows that Ali insists on strict formal repetition to reclaim an Indo-Persian-Urdu aesthetic tradition in which discipline is not restrictive but generative.

In his ghazal poem entitled "Arabic", Ali loosens the strict Persian-Urdu ghazal strict rule, namely strict phonetic rhyme by means of developing a conceptual qafia, where every phrase leading to "Arabic enlarges its symbolic range:

The only language of loss left in the world is Arabic—

These words were said to me in a language not Arabic.

Ancestors, you've left me a plot in the family graveyard—

Why must I look, in your eyes, for prayers in Arabic?

Majnoon, his clothes ripped, still weeps for Laila.

O, this is the madness of the desert, his crazy Arabic. (Ali,1997, lines 1-6)

From exile, Mahmoud Darwish writes to the world:

You'll all pass between the fleeting words of Arabic. (Ali,1996, lines 9-10)

In this poem, Ali adopts the classical form of ghazal and appropriates all its themes, such as the unattainable beloved, into the context of postcolonial political ghazal. Thus, the beloved in this ghazal is not a person with blood and flesh, but rather a civilizational memory carried by the Arabic language. Arabic is not a mere refrain, it is a site where religion, empire, war, exile, and poetic tradition intersect. This is confirmed by Malcolm Woodland in his essay "Memory's Homeland: Agha Shahid Ali and the Hybrid Gazal" (2005), he states that the couplets is

strongly marked by an elegiac and nostalgic stance, turning thematically toward lost historical and cultural origins in order to name, remember, and preserve. They would be graphed as a quite closely grouped set of points on a continuum scale of hybridities and could be conceived of as articulating a desire to return to the refrain of "Arabic" with the lowest degree of semantic variation attainable in a ghazal. (260)

The couplet in the ghazal form exhibits an ecstatic connection to the structure of the entire poem; individual couplets may be rearranged, added, or removed without altering the poem's overall integrity. "Indeed, Ali likens the autonomous couplet to a string that holds the beads of a necklace together; the couplet stands alone like a precious stone, lustrous in its own right. Thus, one should at any time be able to pluck a couplet like a stone from a necklace, and it should continue to shine

in its vivid isolation, though it would have a different luster among and with the other stones" (Khalifa, 2017, p. 382).

Amitav Ghosh, a writer and critic, asserts:

The formalization of the ghazal may well prove to be Shahid's most important scholarly contribution to the canon of English poetry. His own summation of the project was this: "If one writes in free verse—and one should—to subvert Western civilization, surely one should write in forms to save oneself from Western civilization?" (Ghosh 8).

Ali's capacity to integrate and elevate the ghazal form within English literature has transformed contemporary English-language poetry's cultural markers and values. His distinctive perspective on colonialism, postcolonialism, and the post-independence era has enabled him to fundamentally transform the values of a colonial language by articulating from an intermediary standpoint. His poetry, therefore, serves as a canvas depicting an imagined portrayal of his homeland, which, although wounded and under siege, retains its enchanting culture and becomes an alter ego for him.

His poetry is full of a persistent sense of lamentation and loss, as well as a political undertone of protest. He bemoans the passing of a paradise that is now lost in the "blood-dimmed tide," particularly in the wake of the historic 1990 elections that stoked separatist fervor and signaled the start of a new insurgency phase in Kashmir's history. As Bruce King observed, Ali's poetry addresses themes of insecurity and "obsessions with... death, history, family ancestry, dreams, Hindu ceremonies, friendships, nostalgia for a past he never experienced, and a keen self-awareness of his identity as a poet" (as cited in Kaur, 2026, p. 197). Through this dynamic interaction of emotions and memory, poetry transcends mere aesthetic value and serves as a cognitive and emotional realm where recollection is revitalized, redefined, and emotionally re-experienced, not only through its semantic content but also through the sensory and rhythmic qualities of its language, the way the readers often connect poetic language and imagery to their own experiences.

Through *Remembrance*, his poetry works as a medium of recalling memory. As a case in point, the title of *Rooms Are never finished*, a poetic collection, serves as a primary metaphor that embodies his poetic exploration of memory and Exile. The word "rooms" means more than just physical spaces; it may also refer to the internal mnemonic spaces where people store memories in their brains. These rooms can be seen as symbolic places of Remembrance, holding memories of

childhood, home, and loss, especially his beloved motherland Kashmir, a site of unfinished trauma. The phrase "never finished" may indicate the process of Remembrance how it is marked by a dynamic process of being and becoming. This interpretation is very similar to the method of locations, which is a classical mnemonic technique that the Greek poet Simonides of Ceos invented in which he imagined a room with every detail and then positioned different objects in specific areas of the room. He would mentally concentrate on a specific spot in the room to help him remember these things. (Kozmus1 and Kozmus2,2023).Therefore, Ali's poetic rooms act as mnemonic spaces.

The poems of this collection illustrate his longing for his Kashmiri cultural identity as if he escapes the whole universe into his own imagination, where he recalls a series of unfinished memory rooms. *Rooms Are never finished* is divided into four sections, each of which contains a group of poems that combine personal and political tragedy as well as different historical traumas such as the tragedy of Karbala, the Palestinian struggle, and the Kashmiri crisis. Ali goes beyond the idea of these experiences as a single, competitive event. Instead, he creates a harmonious intersection between his personal suffering and the stories of suffering around the world.

In his poem "Rooms Are Never Finished", memory does not follow a chronological order concerning its movement from the past to the present. Instead, Time moves in a circular way across civilizations, objects, empires, trade routes, religion, art, and grief—a matter that exactly seeps into what Michael Rothberg significantly discusses about the core aspects of multidirectional memory. The most powerful mnemonic device in the poem is the "house", an interior space that symbolically stands for the active structure of personal and collective memory production. Ali opens the poem with an allusive epigraph by the interior designer Mario Buatta: "*Many of my favorite things are broken*". This allusion is intentional as it connects the context of the poem to a mnemonic architecture where design, space, and memory intersect altogether, reflecting the dynamic nature of postcolonial displacement. Ali writes :

In here, it's deliberately dark, one may sigh in
peace. Please come in. How long has it been?
Upstairs—climb slowly—the touch is more certain.
You've been, they say, everywhere. What city's left?
I've brought the world indoors. One wants certainty. (Ali,2001,lines 1-5).

The words "darkness" and "sigh" suggest a space structured for peaceful containment and arrangement of experience. The phrase "I've brought the world indoors" is crucial as it indicates that the house is not confined to personal memory, it is rather a global archive compressed into interior space. This takes the house towards the theoretical orientation of mnemonic devices, in particular loci system that anchors memory to a familiar and visualized location such as a house. Through describing its rooms, surfaces, and objects, the house operates like a memory architecture.

About being part of the dynamic nature of collective historical forces, Ali considers himself lucky to be imbued with what he called permutation of Hindu, Muslim, and Western cultures. (Benvenuto, 267, 2002) In relation to this context, he opens the poem with lines inviting the addressee to enter the house and climb slowly, as if he portrays remembering as a slow movement through space rather than a temporal act of recollection.

In *The Poetics of Space* (1964) Gaston Bachelard states: "the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, and the house allows one to dream in peace" (6). Align with this context, Ali refers to rooms where memory expands beyond a mere private domestic space into a global history of suffering:

This screen in stitches silk-routes a river
down Asia, past laughing Buddhas, China
a lantern burning burning burning " (Ali,2001,lines 13-15)

In these lines, memory and history are weaved together and thus the poet connects his own memory to a larger context through his use of verbal mnemonics, particularly "Silk Road", it is a historic trade route that connected East and West and allowed people, cultures, ideas, and products to travel freely between different world regions. (Kong, 2022). "Silk Road" serves as a spatial mnemonic for the convergence of diverse civilizations. Through these particular lines Ali practices negotiating the duality of West and East in his identity.

His Kashmiri heritage is linked to a broader global history by the "stitches" on the screen, which are more than merely decorative elements. This imagined "route" enhances memory's ability to cross boundaries by suggesting that the poet's identity is an "embroidered tapestry" in which different cultures coexist peacefully. In their article "Memory, Nation, and Identity in Postcolonial Pakistani Experimental poetry: The Case of analysis of Hima Raza"(2023) Awan and

Numan illustrate that memory functions as a dynamic process that facilitates identity formation through multilingual expression, fragmentation, and nonlinear poetic structures. The rhythmic repetition of the word "burning" serves as a verbal mnemonic device to emphasize the persistent internal fire, which turns the Asian lantern from an object into a symbol of memory, longing, and spiritual awakening. Consequently, the poet intentionally situates words from Islam and/or Christianity within images of Chinese lanterns and Buddhas, in order to show how spiritual faith and multicultural beauty coexist peacefully.

Don't touch that vase! Long ago

its waist, abandoned by scrolling foliage,

was banded by hands, banded quick with omens:

a galloping flood, hooves iron by the river's edge.(Ali,2001,lines 22-25)

Also in these lines Ali , uses the "vase" as a memory aid (visual mnemonic), which serves not only as an aesthetic object but also as a haptic mnemonic devices that symbolize what may be described as "archaeological memory" as its surface layers bear the accumulated remnants of history and culture. The decorative layer of civilization is represented by the "scrolling foliage" but when these layers are abandoned, a harsher historical reality is revealed beneath them. The "hands" that originally banded the vase represent the subaltern's ancestral labor, serving as a reminder to the displaced poet that his identity is the result of ancestral labor, and life experiences rather than an abstract inheritance. In addition, the "omens" of the "iron hooves" and the "galloping flood" act as a symbolic reminder of traumatic experiences in the past. These pictures evoke the violent histories of Kashmir and Central Asia. By incorporating these omens into the vase's "waist", Ali suggest that trauma is an essential part of hybrid identity. As Homi K. Bhabha argues, "hybridity disrupts fixed notions of identity and challenges binary oppositions by embracing the liminal spaces in-between. These hybrid spaces offer possibilities for cultural adaptation, resistance, and the creation of new forms of expression and identity"(Mohammed,2024,p.1729).Accordingly, the vase serves as a hybrid location that embodies what Bhabha refers to as spaces where experiences, beauty, and ancestral labor coexist. The poet further adds:

My world would be

mere mirrors cut to multiply, then multiply

in. But for small hands. Invisible. Quick (Ali,2001,lines 46-47)

In these lines, Ali uses the metaphor of mirrors that "cut to multiply" to represent a series of fractured, endlessly reproduced selves. The word "multiply" symbolically suggests the idea that personal memory is not remembered in isolation but rather spread across different histories. This is confirmed by Michael Rothberg who states "I reject the notion that identities and memories are pure and authentic—that there is a 'we' and a 'you' that would definitively differentiate, say, black and Jewish identities and black and Jewish relations to the past" (Rothberg, 2009, p.4) Similar to this, Ali's multiplying mirrors reject the notion of differentiation according to superiority or inferiority, instead he tackles memories as relational and shaped by the interaction of multiple histories.

The collective "we" marks the act of Remembrance in Agha Shahid Ali's poetry. This collective we, implicit or explicit, enhances the idea that memories are different but equal. In his poem "Memory", Ali compresses private bereavement, collective suffering, and mnemonic return into a brief lyric movement where memory itself becomes an active historical force:

Memory's placed its hand so on Time's face, touched it
so caressingly that although it's still our
parting's morning, it's as if night's come, bringing
you to my bare arms. (Ali,2001,lines 9-12)

The most striking mnemonic device her personification. Memory is given a human hand, an intimate tactile force capable of touching and reshaping "Time". The past returns not through narrative explanation but through tactile sensation. The adverb "caressingly" transforms Remembrance into an agent of affective touch-memory.

Memory in this poem is non-chronological and relational. The line: "although it's still our parting's morning, it's as if night's come" shows how memory folds multiple temporalities into one knot. Morning (the Time of separation) and night (the Time of imagined return of intimacy) echoes Rothberg's discussion of multidirectional memory in a sense that memory does not move linearly from then to now, but emerges through overlapping of different times at the same moment: the past of parting, the present of recollection, and the desired future of reunion. "our parting" and its suffering becomes collective because the whole scene encodes the broader human conditions of separation from homeland, loved people, and lost histories.

The lines further suggest the physical absence of the lover. This is represented in the final image: "Bringing you to my bare arms". This image transforms "the arms" into an archive of absence; the arms are "bare" because they symbolically stand for lack, vulnerability, and longing. There will be no more "bare" if they are reinscribed by memory. To sum up the above analyzed lines as a critical synthesis, one can say that these lines represent collective suffering through the transformation of intimate separation into shared temporal grief, while personification, tactile imagery, and bodily symbolism function as mnemonic devices that enable multidirectional memory to move across past parting, present longing, and imagined reunion. By allowing memory to touch Time, Ali converts romantic intimacy into a transpersonal structure of Remembrance in which private mourning opens onto collective histories of loss.

Conclusion

It can be concluded from the above discussion that the poet deeply captures the personal grief and universal themes of anxiety and homelessness. Ali's use of mnemonic devices plays a vital role, as memory is constructed symbolically rather than chronologically, allowing different histories of loss, Kashmir, Exile, and other global sites of trauma to intersect. Also, his use of the ghazal form plays an important role in expressing this multidirectionality, as it reveals his attempt to bridge his American life with his Kashmiri heritage. The ghazal becomes his metaphorical home where the poet can express his displacement. In *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, Ali writes "My memory keeps getting in the way of your history"(p.15). This indicates that through his use of the ghazal form in his poetry, Shahid Ali shed light on the tension between belonging and Exile by contrasting individual memory with collective history. The ghazal serves as a metaphorical realm for the poet to express his sense of displacement and navigate multiple identities at once.

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