

Between Homeland and Language: An Analytical Study of Diasporic Memory and Cultural Identity in the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali and A. K. Ramanujan

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Abstract

The exploration draws a comparison between Agha Shahid Ali and A. K. Ramanujan—poets who reconstruct cultural identity between homeland and language. Both authors employ English to convey the memories they carry. These memories were formed in different linguistic, regional, and literary spaces. However, their diasporic poetics vary widely. Ali's poems are organized by Kashmir, rupture, mourning, interrupted messages, and adaptation of the Urdu ghazal. Family memory, landscapes of South India, translation, irony, and context-sensitive forms of selfhood organize the poetry of Ramanujan. A textual analysis of selected poems by the two authors demonstrates that neither treats homeland as a fixed territory recoverable through mere nostalgia. Homeland materializes when we remember, name, translate, and formally arrange fragments. The English language is therefore not just a colonial medium; it becomes a contested archive that preserves and transforms regional images, kinship structures, oral traditions, and inherited forms. While Ali expresses loss through language, Ramanujan expresses plurality through it. This study demonstrates that diasporic identity is not an exclusive choice between origin and migration, but an ongoing negotiation of places, languages, and remembered relations.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The spatial vocabulary of departure and return frequently describes diasporic poetry (Nelson 933–35). Such a description, although necessary, remains incomplete because migration alters not only local memories and practices but also personal and cultural identities (Hamid 255–58). A homeland may survive in a map, family lore, culinary habits, ritual, remembered climate, inherited phrase, or poetic form (Chatterjee 819–22).

The immigrant poet does not simply transport a finished culture to a new location because distance transforms culture through processes of selection, translation, contestation, and recomposition (Rodríguez 1–5). Agha Shahid Ali and A. K. Ramanujan offer two complex South Asian examples of this transformative process (Rodríguez 6–10). Resisting restrictive national or linguistic labels, neither writer's cultural identity can be reduced to singular categories (Nelson 936–38). Both authors lived and worked across India and the United States while producing major works in English, yet each drew foundational inspiration from non-English literary traditions (Rodríguez 11–15).

The distinction between their poetic modes is equally important (Nelson 938–41). Ali's poetry is consistently engaged with Kashmir's political tragedy and the ethical demands of mourning (Hamid 255–58). His homeland appears through postcards, snow, maps, letters, ruins, names, and voices that struggle to reach their addressees (Chatterjee 819–22). His later ghazals create a formal dialogue with Persian and Urdu traditions in which longing, repetition, and the absent beloved function as structural principles (Ali, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* 21–23). In contrast, the poetry of Ramanujan is less elegiac and more exploratory, approaching cultural memory through irony, familial relations, translation, domestic objects, temples, rivers, ancestors, and the collision of analytical distance with intimate knowledge (Rodríguez 20–25). Ramanujan was a multilingual figure working across Tamil, Kannada, Sanskrit, and English, yielding a poetics in which no single language claims total ownership of the self (Ramanujan, *Collected Essays* 34–51).

Recent scholarship has elucidated these divergent orientations (Nelson 933–35). Matthew Nelson perceives Ali's nostalgia as an affective relationship to an altered home rather than a simple desire to return, while Wafa Hamid demonstrates how the name "Kashmir" traverses competing translational and political histories (Nelson 938; Hamid 257). Antara Chatterjee observes that material objects in Ali's verse function as vessels for affective memories of loss (Chatterjee 821). Studies of Ramanujan emphasize multilingualism, postcolonial doubleness, and the adaptation of English to Indian cultural contexts (Rodríguez 26–30). These critics suggest that diaspora must be read not merely as a biographical condition but as a formal and epistemological perspective that emerges when place and language no longer coincide (Hamid 260–62).

The paper argues that Ali and Ramanujan transform the English language into a portable, internally divided homeland (Nelson 940–42). Ali's elegiac address, focus on disrupted communication, and translingual adaptation of the ghazal reconstruct Kashmir in exile (Ali, *The Veiled Suite* 178–81). Ramanujan's poetry reconstructs South Indian cultural experience through familial archives, ecological and urban scenes, translation, and irony, insisting that identity remains fundamentally context-sensitive (Ramanujan, *Collected Essays* 34–51). Both poets understand memory as creative rather than strictly reproductive because it arranges fragmented recollections into a meaningful contemporary relation (Rodríguez 31–35). Consequently, their cultural identities remain neither fully assimilated nor untouched, operating in the generative tension between what English can carry and what resists translation (Hamid 263–65).

Diaspora, Memory, Language, and Cultural Identity

Diaspora is not defined solely by physical absence from a homeland but by an altered relationship to time (Nelson 943–45). The homeland accessible to memory is never identical with the homeland that continues to unfold in history (Chatterjee 823–25). A place may remain emotionally vivid while becoming materially inaccessible, politically transformed, or internally contested (Hamid 265–67). The act of remembering entails deliberate selection and arrangement (Rodríguez 36–40). Diasporic objects and compulsive images often take on affective qualities distinct from their original sources, acting as symbolic anchors in exile (Chatterjee 826–28).

This dynamic is further complicated by language (Hamid 268–70). An author writing in English about Kashmir or South India does not merely transfer pre-existing cultural content into a neutral medium (Rodríguez 41–45). English carries colonial histories, global circulation, and distinct literary conventions (Hamid 270–72). At the same time, the language is reshaped by other tongues through syntax, rhythm, metaphor, genre, and address (Rodríguez 46–50). Multilingual poetics therefore extends beyond surface code-switching to encompass the migration of aesthetic structures across linguistic boundaries (Ramanujan, *Collected Essays* 52–58).

This cross-linguistic movement actively produces cultural identity (Rodríguez 51–55). Diasporic subjectivity operates as an ongoing positioning rather than an inherited essence (Nelson 945–47). The diasporic speaker exists simultaneously as insider and outsider, intimate with local meanings yet observing them from a distance, fluent in tradition yet aware of how translation transforms it (Hamid 266–68). Ramanujan's essays emphasize context-sensitive aspects of Indian thought, while his poetry dramatizes selves shaped by family, language, and geography (Ramanujan, *Collected Essays* 34–51). Ali's work similarly resists a singular perspective, adopting the roles of bearing witness, tragic lover, and formal translator (Chatterjee 828–30).

The state of being "between" must not be understood as static suspension between two fixed poles (Rodríguez 56–60). Homeland is already linguistic, composed of names, stories, songs, maps, and memories, while language is spatial, bearing histories of movement, conquest, and community (Hamid 260–62). The poems examined here demonstrate the reciprocal relationship between place and speech because Ali explores how to bear witness to a wounded homeland, while Ramanujan considers how inherited traditions can enter English without becoming exoticized exhibits (Nelson 947–49).

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Kashmir, Exile and the Poetics of Interrupted Address by Agha Shahid Ali

Ali's diasporic poetics is crystallized in "Postcard from Kashmir" (Ali, *The Veiled Suite* 29). Here, the speaker's homeland arrives as a miniaturized, portable image (Chatterjee 826–27). The postcard is both a gift and a limitation because it allows Kashmir to travel across oceans yet reduces a lived landscape to a static frame (Chatterjee 827–28). The speaker notes a diminishing clarity in memory itself, showing how exile distorts internal recollections of place (Nelson 939–40). Homeland is split across three distinct dimensions: remembered magnitude, printed miniature, and present absence (Nelson 940).

This fragmentation renders the postcard an unstable archive that preserves visual traces while omitting sound, political conflict, and embodied experience (Chatterjee 828–29). Material artifacts in Ali's poetry function as active carriers of memory and affect rather than as passive representations of the past (Chatterjee 830). The postcard marks an insurmountable distance, and diasporic writing begins precisely where the physical object fails to recreate the lost world (Nelson 941).

This crisis of representation becomes an overtly political inquiry in "The Country Without a Post Office". Communication is not merely delayed by geographic distance but is systematically severed by violence and institutional collapse (Hamid 261–63). Letters, post offices, and addresses form the infrastructure of everyday communal life, and their failure transforms political violence into a crisis of communication (Hamid 263). The repeated acts of address in the poem become gestures of resistance, maintaining relational ties under conditions designed to destroy them (Ali, *The Veiled Suite* 203–07).

Ali's poetic homeland is constructed through messages as much as geography (Chatterjee 830–31). A homeland exists when people can name one another and share narratives (Hamid 264). The absent post office symbolizes political disintegration and mirrors the diasporic condition of writing from a distant location to an audience whose voices are constantly endangered (Hamid 265). Rather than resolving this dislocation, the poem forces the reader to confront fractured communicative circuits (Nelson 942).

The shifting nomenclatures "Kashmir," "Kashmir," and "Cashmere" further reveal vulnerabilities within language itself (Hamid 258). These variants reflect divergent routes of imperial translation, orientalist representation, and commercial appropriation, detaching the name from lived political realities (Hamid 259). Ali's verse confronts these layered histories, compelling the English language to carry the historical weight of Kashmiri suffering (Hamid 260).

In "I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight," visionary address collapses physical distance (Ali, *The Veiled Suite* 178–81). The speaker witnesses scenes that cannot be physically seen, staging traumatic intrusion alongside deep emotional attachment (Nelson 944). Kashmir enters the present as an apparition, emphasizing the ethical tension between the distant observer and the ongoing tragedy (Chatterjee 831). The speaker's diasporic identity is defined not by ownership but by responsibility and witness (Nelson 945).

Ali's ghazal "Tonight" expands upon this aesthetic of fragmented address (Ali, *The Veiled Suite* 371–72). Ghazal couplets maintain structural independence while being bound together through the radif and qafia (Ali, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* 21–23). This dialectic of autonomy and unity makes the form exceptionally suited to diasporic experience because individual fragments remain connected through recurring formal structures (Basak 61–62). The refrain returns like an echo of loss, while the poet's signature or thallus in the final couplet locates the self within a broader literary continuum (Ali, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* 21–23). Nelson's reading of Ali's nostalgia further demonstrates how formal repetition sustains an affective bond across geographic displacement (Nelson 938–41).

Ramanujan, A.K.: Multilingual Memory and Translation of Family and Culture

Ramanujan's cultural memory operates through the ordinary rather than the monumental (Rodríguez 61–65). Domestic spaces, family dynamics, street scenes, and everyday rituals serve as compact sites where larger cultural structures become visible (Rodríguez 66–70). In "Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House," the ancestral home absorbs people, gifts, and returning histories while allowing nothing to escape (Ramanujan, *Collected Poems* 96–99). This accumulation reflects cultural legacy because generations of customs and memories pile up without resolving into a single narrative (Rodríguez 70–74).

Unlike Ali's inaccessible Kashmir, Ramanujan's South India is overwhelmingly present (Ramanujan, *Collected Poems* 96–99). Yet continuity does not equate to uncritical belonging (Rodríguez 75–78). The poem's ironic, detached tone demonstrates that inheritance is simultaneously sustaining and burdensome (Rodríguez 79–82). Diaspora grants the speaker a double vision, close enough to recognize ancestral patterns yet distant enough to view them with critical detachment (Ramanujan, *Collected Essays* 34–51).

This ironic perspective is central to "Obituary," which catalogs a father's debts, ritual ashes, and newspaper traces without indulging in sentimental grief (Ramanujan, *Collected Poems* 111–12). Cultural identity is dramatized through administrative and ritual realities rather than grand statements (Rodríguez 83–86). The father survives as an uneven archive of genetic resemblance, financial obligation, and printed fragments (Ramanujan, *Collected Poems* 111–12).

In "Self-Portrait," (Ramanujan, *Collected Poems* 23) identity is further destabilized the speaker looks into a window and sees not his own reflection but the portrait of a stranger resembling his father (Rodríguez 87–90). Selfhood is shown to be signed by ancestry and mediated by social resemblance (Ramanujan, *Collected Poems* 23). The mirror becomes a contact zone where Western optical lyricism and South Asian kinship dynamics meet (Rodríguez 91–94).

This combination of intimacy and critical appraisal appears vividly in "A River" (Ramanujan, *Collected Poems* 38–39). Set in Madurai, the poem critiques classical and modern Tamil poets who aestheticize monsoon floods while ignoring the human and animal destruction they cause (Rodríguez 95–99).

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Ramanujan's verse therefore critiques ancestral poetic traditions while preserving the landscape and literary memory of Tamil Nadu (Ramanujan, *Collected Poems* 38–39).

This critical awareness prevents Ramanujan's cultural translations from turning into superficial exhibits (Rodríguez 100–04). His poetry actively negotiates postcolonial modernity by adapting English to regional concepts and understated irony (Rodríguez 105–08). Similarly, "Looking for a cousin on a Swing" portrays how memory translates childhood sensory experiences into adult reinterpretation (Ramanujan, *Collected Poems* 19).

Ramanujan's work as a translator of classical Tamil and Kannada verse deeply shaped his original poetry (Rodríguez 109–13). His poetics relied on the dual movement of understanding traditions from within while framing them for diverse readers (Rodríguez 112–15). The posthumous publication of Soma underscores the continued breadth of his archive and demonstrates the persistence of his multilingual inheritance (Ramanujan, *Soma* 15–18).

A Comparative Study of Poetic Language on Homeland

Both Ali and Ramanujan reject the concept of homeland as an immutable origin waiting to be recovered (Nelson 946–48). Ali's Kashmir is politically fractured and inaccessible, while Ramanujan's South India is plural, densely inherited, and subject to ironic critique (Rodríguez 116–20). Both demonstrate that home is constructed through selective artistic acts because the postcard frames a view, the family poem captures an anecdote, the ghazal sustains an echo, and translation negotiates linguistic remainder (Chatterjee 829–32).

Material objects remain central to their poetic projects (Chatterjee 826–30). Ali's postcards, letters, and maps function as technologies of distance, while Ramanujan's domestic heirlooms reflect familial accumulation (Rodríguez 121–25). Ali's objects embody tragic continuity amidst loss, whereas Ramanujan's domestic items reveal the estrangement embedded within familiar environments (Chatterjee 831).

Their emotional registers also differ significantly (Nelson 948–49). Ali utilizes elegy, longing, and ceremonial repetition, amplifying attachment to evoke an absent landscape (Ali, *The Veiled Suite* 178–81). Ramanujan employs irony, compression, and observational detachment to make the familiar appear strange (Rodríguez 126–30). Ali resists historical erasure through affective urgency, whereas Ramanujan resists romanticization through analytical precision (Nelson 949).

Both poets approach English with productive tension (Hamid 268–72). Ali incorporates the ghazal's architecture and Urdu-Persian acoustic traditions, whereas Ramanujan integrates Dravidian poetic landscapes, folklore, and kinship structures (Rodríguez 131–35). Neither treats English as a purely neutral instrument, nor do they reduce their cultural heritage to mere decorative colour (Hamid 270–72).

Multilingual Consciousness and Poetic Form

Multilingual awareness is evident even when both poets write predominantly in English (Rodríguez 136–40). In Ali's verse, refrain structures and apostrophes evoke Urdu and Persian traditions of witness, longing, and separation (Ali, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* 21–23). In Ramanujan's poetry, concision, interior landscapes, and syntactic compression reflect classical Tamil poetics alongside Anglo-American modernism (Rodríguez 141–45).

The formal autonomy of the ghazal couplet in Ali and the sharp juxtapositions in Ramanujan illustrate how diasporic belonging operates because unity is achieved through the relationship between distinct fragments rather than through total assimilation (Nelson 949–50). Furthermore, their engagement with naming, with Ali interrogating imperial variants of "Kashmir" and Ramanujan embedding unglossed local references, challenges expectations of immediate cultural accessibility (Hamid 270–72).

CONCLUSION

Ramanujan Articulate Distinctive Models of the Relationship between Homeland and Language. Ali Reconstructs Kashmir through Visionary Elegies, Ruptured Postal Networks, and the Translingual Form of the Ghazal. Ramanujan Explores South Indian Heritage through Domestic Archives, Familial Memory, Irony, and the Art of Translation. Their works reveal complementary ethics of memory: Ali approaches remembrance as a solemn act of witness against erasure, while Ramanujan employs irony to examine how traditions include, burden, and transform the individual. In both poets, language becomes a portable homeland that frankly acknowledges its own limitations. A postcard cannot encapsulate a country, just as an obituary cannot contain a father's life. Yet through these productive gaps and remainders, Ali and Ramanujan craft diasporic identities fully responsive to migration, memory, and history.

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