TRACING CONTESTED TERRITORIES IN PROTEST POETRY: A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF SELECTED PROTEST POETS

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

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Candidate of **Master of Philosophy** at the National University of Modern Languages does hereby declare that the thesis **Tracing Contested Territories in Protest Poetry: A Cultural Analysis of Selected Protest Poets** submitted by me in partial fulfillment of my MPhil degree, is my original work, and has not been submitted or published earlier. I also solemnly declare that it shall not, in the future, be submitted by me for obtaining any other degree from this or any other university or institution.

I also understand that if evidence of plagiarism is found in my thesis/dissertation at any stage, even after the award of a degree, the work may be canceled and the degree revoked.

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Abstract

Title: Tracing Contested Territories in Protest Poetry: A Cultural Analysis of Selected Protest Poets.

This dissertation examines protest poetry as a transformative medium of resistance and cultural preservation in contested territories, focusing on the works of Esther Belin (Diné/Navajo), Agha Shahid Ali (Kashmiri), and Mohammed El Kurd (Palestinian). Through a cultural analysis framework integrating concepts of urban palimpsests, decoloniality, and the aesthetic regime of politics, the study looks at how protest poetry transcends literary boundaries to reclaim spatial, historical, and cultural sovereignty in the face of colonial erasure. By analyzing Belin's *Of Cartography* (2017), Ali's *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997), and El Kurd's *Rifqa* (2021), the research reveals how these poets deploy Indigenous cosmologies, intertextuality, and digital activism to subvert oppressive narratives. Belin's typographical experimentation with Navajo landscape and Dine Bizaad (Navajo language) challenges settler-colonial infrastructures, while Ali's cultural mapping of Srinagar's palimpsestic history counters Indian occupation. El Kurd's fusion of social media documentation with verse disrupts Zionist erasure of Palestinian memory, positioning poetry as both witness and weapon. The study bridges gaps in protest/resistance literature scholarship, which often overlooks Indigenous urbanity, poetics, and cross-regional solidarity. It demonstrates how protest poetry from contested regions redefines literary genres by merging oral traditions, spatial critique, and cultural memory, offering a counter-archive against state violence and cultural amnesia. By centering marginalized epistemologies, this research challenges Eurocentric literary traditions, affirming protest poetry as a vital, interdisciplinary force in global decolonial struggles.

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I would like to begin with name of Allah, the Beneficent and the Most Merciful. I thank the Almighty for providing me with the gift of knowledge. This is the only part of this research where I can be personal. This was not an easy journey. If I could, I would insert that specific frog meme which goes as “Gentleman, it is with great pleasure to announce that I have finished my thesis with ADHD”.

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Last not but not the least, I present a toast to my friends who have been a constant source of encouragement. To Marium who started this journey with me and hopefully we’ll finish together as well. To Maria who we met halfway, I hope your journey is easier. To Tehreem who is willing to not take that journey yet, well I hope you choose what makes you happy. To Umra who began this journey somewhere else but is connected through similar hardships. Last but not least to Rida across an entire continent, thank you for being my friends

DEDICATION

I dedicate this research to my parents, who have always encouraged me to follow my passion and pursue my dreams. I would also like to dedicate it to my late grandfather, who was always there for my every step and endeavor in life. May Allah grant him the highest ranks in Jannah.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines protest poets from disputed regions who utilize their art form to amplify their voices against the oppressive forces occupying their homelands. They deploy their poetry as a tool to preserve the memory of their homelands, which exist under an uncertain status, i.e., areas usually referred to as disputed territories, reservations, or de facto nations. These terminologies define a wider parameter of the colonial matrix that classifies Indigenous homelands not under the definition of nation-states, as 'disputed' as if equal powerheads are disputing over a piece of land. It is a struggle between the center and the marginalized with a clear power imbalance. The colonial matrix of power is a concept that defines structures of domination established during European colonialism using various economic, political and social practices such as slavery, indentured labor and hierarchical governance practices. It is an interlocking framework of power that shows that colonialism was not just historic period but it is a pervasive system which still operates under the guise of democracy and modernity. It is argued that modern-day capitalism is just an evolved form of slavery that still sustains economic hierarchy. To expand on my previous point, when an Indigenous land is classified as a "disputed" region, it also challenges that legitimacy of Indigenous claim over the land. Modern colonial powers will argue that Indigenous governing bodies are not equipped with modern political ideology which makes them unfit to rule their own land. Thus colonial intervention is required to better manage the resources of the said disputed region. There is an idea of modern utility that directly clashes with Indigenous sentiment and tradition associated with that land. As such, Indigenous groups will continue using cultural practices to defend and resist against these perverse colonial systems

Recent atrocities committed against Indigenous people in Sudan, the Congo, Papua New Guinea, and Gaza in Israeli occupied Palestine are clear examples of resistance from an Indigenous oppressed group against an oppressive nation-state. Literature, art, and especially poetry are used to spread the narratives of their plight worldwide. The poem "If I must die" (2024) by the late Palestinian poet Rafaat Alareer resonated with millions in the background of the ongoing genocide in the Gaza Strip by the Israeli regime. Alareer's viral poetry transcended the literary space. It was transformed into different mediums of

art, because of social media, crossing into the urban space through graffiti, posters, and printed clothing. Figure 1 displays one such example of Alareer's poem printed on a Hoodie worn by an individual at a 'Free Palestine' protest in New York. This poem is a singular example of protest poetry resisting an oppressive regime. In my observation, protest poetry is not only an act of resistance but also traces the remnants of Indigenous geographies that are facing memoricide[1] and ecocide[2]. In "I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight," Agha Shahid Ali traces pathways to Srinagar from the point of view of a shadow that is being chased by Indian authorities as it tries to search for its body. "On the edge of the Cantonment, where Gupkar Road ends,/ it shrinks almost into nothing, is/ nothing by Interrogation gates/ so it can slip, unseen, into the cells: Dripping from a suspended burning tire/ are falling on the back of a prisoner,/ the naked boy screaming, 'I know nothing.'" (Ali). In these lines, Ali shows his familiarity with important Kashmiri landmarks but also presents the grim reality of forced abductions and torture of Kashmiris by the Indian regime which is always bypassed by the mainstream narrative of occupied Kashmir. Thus my chosen protest poets are not only using poetry as a tool of resistance but also to trace their homelands facing erasure/ oppression at the hands of colonial powers. In this context, my study also examines protest poetry as a means to read the urban palimpsest[3] of the selected poets who are facing active erasure. This study thus aims to minimize the gap in the existing research regarding the representation of protest poets from disputed

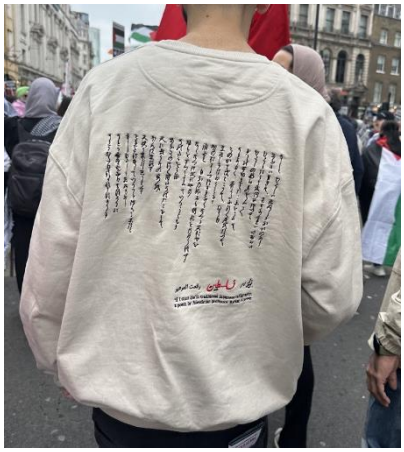


Fig. 1. Wooding Pauline, A hoodie with Japanese calligraphy of Alareer's poem, 2024

[1] Memoricide is the deliberate destruction of historical monuments, archives, manuscripts and heritage during war.

[2] Ecocide is deliberate harm to an ecosystem through human agency which results in incarceration of a group of people dependent on that ecosystem.

[3] A palimpsest manucript can be reused but the old markings of the previously erased content is still visible on it. As such, urban cities are are also palimpsests with multiple layers of history, culture and traditions.

regions. I will be deploying the concepts of decoloniality, critical cultural memory, the aesthetic regime of politics, and ideas of resistance poetry to conduct a cultural analysis of the protest poets Esther Belin, Agha Shahid Ali, and Muhammad El Kurd, and interrogate the idea of protest poetry through their works where they trace their disputed homelands.

1.1 Defining Protest Poetry

Poetry remains the oldest form of the three literary genres due to its resonance with human sentiment. It originated as an oral tradition that prevailed over temporal and spatial boundaries. Some of the most memorable poetry in my subconscious is of Allama Muhammad Iqbal, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, and Habib Jalib, all calling for resistance against existing colonial/oppressive power systems. Thus, poetry naturally assumes its status as an agent of resistance. Ghassan Kanafani is credited with coining "Resistance Literature" in *Adab al-muqawama fi Filastin al-muhtalla (Resistance Literature in Occupied Palestine).* For Kanafani, poetry's strength to travel through oral tradition and without publication is why it can be considered "the first harbinger of resistance call" (Kanafani 4). Kanafani asserts that protest poetry rejects the traditional poetic form in favor of modern techniques. It uses poetic expressions such as love, satire, defiance, and challenge. In this way, poets are engaged in acts of resistance against oppressive power structures. Kanafani's idea of protest/resistance poetry extends to the poets who are the main protagonists in this study. As citizens of disputed regions, they naturally resist an oppressive colonial regime, and their poetry becomes agents of decoloniality in the process.

Poetry's prowess as a historical narrative cannot be undermined. As Kanafani explains, even when Palestinian poets were arrested or exiled, their poetry continued to spread by being sung at ordinary occasions such as weddings, celebrations, and even funerals. If we look at this from Pakistan's historical perspective, Faiz Ahmad Faiz's nominal Ghazal "Hum Dekhenge" became a symbol of resistance after Iqbal Bano's performance in Lahore as a direct protest to Zia ul Haq's oppressive policies in the 1980s. Globally, literature has always been a part of prominent social movements against oppressive powers. "La Marseillaise" the current French National anthem was composed during the first French Revolution against the Austrio-Prussia invasion of the region. Its lyrics dub these invaders as 'tyrants', and 'traitors' and call upon its citizens to form their battalions against these forces. The modern era saw the civil rights movement in the United

States where voices like James Baldwin, and Maya Angelou spoke out against the systemic racism and inequality plaguing American society. Here we see individuals, part of the common people directly challenging state hegemonies.

Poetry is language and language has always been a tool used by those in power to shift the narrative in their favor. Language can be used to colonize but it can also be used to decolonize and therein lies the significance of protest poetry. When poetry is circulated through various mediums, especially social media, it presents the narrative of the oppressed and informs the reader of the other side of the story. It not only informs but also empowers groups that are a part of resistance movements to take action against oppressive powers.

1.2 Reading Landscapes and the Urban Palimpsest in Protest Poetry

The death of one nation gives to the rise of another and thus the fallen ones are only memorabilia left in rubble and ruins. However, a nation's "autobiography cannot be written evangelically" (Anderson 205) and birth begets death. Benedict Anderson's idea of imagined communities sees the concept of the nation state as too large of an entity for all of its residents to relate to it. In such a case nation states are constructed with a unique national myth that brings its communities under one flag. However, this process also involves the deliberate remembrance of key historical events that shape the nation's ideology and the intentional forgetting of others that challenge the foundational myth of the said nation. It can be argued that most nation-states of today are an extension of the colonial project. This is especially relevant to nation-states that are founded on settler colonialism such as the United States of America. In their foundational myth, the Native Americans are erased, projecting the North American continent as a 'virgin', primitive land that only saw its hidden potential through the settlers' effort. This national project involved the use of religion, the print media, and literature to assert this national consciousness. National Monuments were built on Indigenous Lands to envision the triumph of the colonial settler over the barbaric native groups that opposed progress. One such monument is Mount Rushmore in South Dakota where the effigies of influential US presidents are carved upon the granite hills of *Thŭŋkášila Šákpe*, or Six Grandfathers. This area originally belonged to the Sioux Nation and was illegally occupied by the US government. While the state ironically calls the carving the 'Shrine of Democracy', the Natives dub it the 'Shrine of Hypocrisy'. History is built upon sediments of Native memories. Only if you look past the

top layer can you excavate the history that is buried deep beneath. Like the underlying text in a palimpsest, the past can peak through.

Literature and by extension poetry are palimpsests. The act of writing is conceived upon layers of context, and experience with "traces of the past, erasures, losses, and heterotopias" (Huyssen 7). Memories invade space and vice-versa which allows the poet to write that space in verses, essentially archiving the present and past of his perceived space. Protest poetry holds potential when it comes to its discourse as a "media of cultural memory," as proposed by Andreas Huyssen in his work *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and Politics of Memory (2003).* Huyssen asserts that memory "was a topic for the poets" where they converse about the tales of a "restless past." (Huyssen 17). Memory is seen as unreliable compared to history, which is documented and recorded. Memory media, however, cannot be underestimated as it is seen as a representation "of the present, while its referent is the past and thus the absent" (Huyssen 4). In this regard, the protest poets discussed in this dissertation, Mohammed El Kurd, Agha Shahid Ali, and Esther Belin, have used their memory of present conflicts in their homelands and negotiate it with their urban past. The global politics that led to the rampant amnesia of their history is not fully represented due to state-controlled media, and their history does not fit in the broader process of cultural globalization. Their poetry magnifies their disputed homelands with limited visibility on the world map. Their heritage is at risk of erasure due to various external and internal forces such as apartheid regimes, regional conflicts, genocide, and racism. Here, we find a struggle between marginalized individuals indigenous to their respective homelands and nation-states such as The USA, Israel and India that controls their status and mobility in their homelands. Thus, this research must recognize the role of these poets as protest poets.

1.3 Background Study of the Poets

Mohammed El Kurd is a relatively new activist and poet projecting a counter-hegemonic discourse in his poetry and online documentation. He is documenting the erasure of his homeland, Palestine from global consciousness through his poetry and social media presence. His social media presence is integral to his activism as it directly challenges the hierarchy of trauma created by international media, where specific traumatic memories have been amplified to the point of commodification, where they have turned

into a representation of the oppressed. Huyssen gives the example of the Holocaust in "keeping the memory discourse alive" (Huyssen 13). It can be argued that the Holocaust discourse has been globalized to an extent where "genocidal politics" in regions like Rwanda, Kosovo, and Bosnia are used to fuel this discourse, thus overwriting their trauma and their memory. An interesting thing to note here is that when Huyssen talks about genocidal politics in other vulnerable regions, he fails to mention conflicted areas from the Middle East, the Levant, South Asia, or South East Asia. He mentions that "the Holocaust may rhetorically energize some discourses of traumatic memory; it may also serve as a screen memory or simply block insight into specific local histories." (Huyssen 14)

The nation-state of Israel was formed under the pretense of a sovereign Jewish state where the Jews of Europe who were displaced at the hands of the Third Reich would settle and find refuge. Huyssen asserts that the globalization of Holocaust memory was, in a way, a reparation for Western powers who failed to provide proper humanitarian aid when the Holocaust was taking place. (Huyssen 13) The establishment of the state of Israel means the erasure of Indigenous Palestinian culture, and I argue that the erasure of Palestinian trauma from the global landscape is a deliberate attempt from the very same Western powers responsible for the establishment of Israel as a recompense for the Holocaust. "While the comparison with the Holocaust may rhetorically energize some discourses of traumatic memory, it may also serve as a screen memory or simply block insight into specific local histories." (Huyssen 14) This places El Kurd's position in a meaningful direction, where he lives in a local history that is actively overshadowed and compared with the Holocaust cipher. A misconstrued argument is projected that supporting Palestinian autonomy and rejecting the state of Israel is Anti-Semitic as it overlooks Jewish suffering during the Holocaust. Voices like those of El Kurd are necessary to counter this false construct where an active erasure of Palestinian territory and history occurs under apartheid and imperialist regimes channeled by Zionism. In a eulogy of his poetry collection, *Rifqa (2021),* titled "Farewell, Palestine's Jasmine," El Kurd relives his grandmother's memory of the 1948 Nakba, where she was forced to flee her home in Haifa. El Kurd recalls his memory of being chased out by Israeli settlers accompanied by Mossad forces (El Kurd 47). Foregrounding the memory of three generations of a Palestinian family, starting from his grandmother to him, is an active resistance against the oppressive Zionist state.

Similarly, the Kashmir issue has been largely ignored since it is not only a global concern, but the peace conflict between Pakistan and India is also a concern. With both nations claiming the area, Kashmir's sovereign identity is lost, erasing the region's autonomy to dictate its political and geographical position. Agha Shahid Ali's poetry explores the departure of the diaspora from the region in search of peace and security. However, the said exodus of the diaspora is resulting in the decline of Kashmir's independent voices as they are muddled by Indian state censorship. In August 2019, the government of India, led by the Bharatiya Janta Party stripped Jammu and Kashmir of its autonomy by revoking Article 370 of the Indian Constitution. The article allowed the region to make its laws, constitution, and permanent residency laws. The aftermath of this revocation gave non-Kashmiris the legitimacy to buy property in Kashmir. This is resulting in an urban genocide where non-Kashmiri, Indian citizens are buying and occupying Kashmiri lands freely while the Kashmiri populace faces restrictions on mobility within their territory. The Kashmiris are denied access to their geography.

Agha Shahid Ali, who bore little personal memory regarding his homeland, created an urban imaginary of the region. His poetry, deeply rooted in his Kashmiriness, merges his personal and collective history. Where the private meets the public and maps out a Kashmir that exists as a collective entity despite its disputed status. Ali reads through the literary and cultural palimpsests of Kashmir, such as the tale of Hubba Khatun and the Dalit temples now left empty, and creates a collective imaginary[4], that exists independently in the wake of its conflict.

The rationale behind choosing Esther Belin as the third poet in this research is that her Indigenous urbanity has seen an almost complete erasure. Palestine and Kashmir are involved in an active conflict that utilizes violent tactics. In Belin's case, while there is no active conflict, her struggle aims to preserve the Indigenous presence left in America.

[4] A collective imaginary refers to a set of shared cultural practices, symbols and beliefs within a society and how it shapes a social identity. It has been widely discussed by Gerard Bouchard in *Social Myths Collective Imaginaries (2017).*

However, we find parallels between Native Americans, Palestinians, and Kashmiris and their "historical experiences of dispossession and colonization" (White). Edward Raffery in the article "Confronting the Erasure of Native Americans in Early American Towns and Cities," explains that Indigenous groups are not seen as a part of the urban space in the USA thus, they require no monuments or urban markers. They are associated with "wild places or rural places or small places" (Raffery), which are prone to erosion, just like the Indigenous population, which had to be dealt with to make room for the more "productive and industrial" European colonizers to utilize that wild space better. Reservation is a term used for the remaining areas under autonomous Native governance. However, I view these words as hegemonic as they create a limited space for the Natives, encapsulating them within boundaries created by an imperial system. Colonial monuments of European navigators such as Christopher Columbus are erected to deny Native land ownership. American soil is presented as an area that existed to be colonized. Navajo Nation's history lies in oral traditions and Belin's poetry collection *Of Cartography (2012)* gives a physical form to those oral traditions while simultaneously protesting against the erasure and occupation of their native land in favor of urban development.

Mohammad El Kurd, Agha Shahid Ali, and Esther Belin belong to different geographical regions with vastly different histories, cultures, and ethnic backgrounds. The rationale behind choosing resistance poets from different regions pertains to the varying statuses of the selected disputed regions. Nation states 'quarantine' specific regional spaces due to political or capital interest. Maps drawn this way risk the erasure of Indigenous routes in favor of commercial routes. As a result, the Navajo Nation's land, which is already under the status of a reserve, is at risk of extinction. In April of 2022, the Navajo Nation community protested against helium extraction along the same reservoirs as it went against their community values. Similarly, Palestine and Kashmir are facing genocide in all aspects. Their lands are currently illegally occupied by the Israeli and Indian states whilst the Indigenous populations are facing restrictions in their own homes. Although these regions exist on different continents, they face similar degrees of state oppression. I assert that the culture or religious affiliations of the selected poets do not matter in the face of their activism as individuals with viable aesthetic practices against the nation-state.

1.4 Thesis Statement

Protest poetry creates a literary space, which allows Esther Belin, Agha Shahid Ali, and Mohammed El Kurd to envision their roles as activists against internal and external hegemonic and oppressive forces that are responsible for the erasure of their local geographies and heritage. The selected protest poets make the traces of their disputed homelands visible in their poetry in the face of this erasure.

1.5 Research Questions

1. In what ways do the selected poets create an 'equalization' between their poetry and visual activism in urban and virtual spaces?
2. How do the selected poets transform the material/urban space into a literary space that can be discerned as a palimpsest?
3. As a medium of critical cultural memory, how do the selected protest poets foreground their works against the active spatial erasure enacted by ultra-nationalist and oppressive regimes?

1.6 Significance of this Study

Protest poetry centers on nuanced subject matters which critiques oppressive power systems and social ills. Although research has been conducted on protest/resistance literature, there is a gap when it comes to protest poets with cultural and ethnic identities in geographically disputed regions. This research is significant as it minimizes the gap for research in protest literature as minimal cultural analysis has been conducted regarding the selected poets. Agha Shahid Ali has mainly been researched in relation to postcolonial and diasporic literature. The present research will allow a comparative study between Agha Shahid Ali, Esther Belin, and Muhammad El Kurd.

There is minimum research conducted on Esther Belin's work outside of Native American context and anthologies. Native American representation in the context of cityscape and landscape is integral to the representation of their identities as original people of the Americas. Therefore this research adds to that discourse. The three poets are connected through their shared experience of a disputed spatiality. The research is

important in terms of Mohammad El Kurd's poetic endeavors as no significant research has taken place regarding his literary works in prominent journals. The current research will open a space for discourse regarding his attributes as a protest poet and his presence as an activist.

1.7 Delimitations

This research is conducted through cultural analysis with poets as the central figures of my study. This allows me to take on multiple pieces of evidence used in the analysis that may pertain to anthropological or ethnographic analysis. Concerning textual evidence, the research will be delimited to *Rifqa (2021)* by Mohammed El Kurd, *The Country Without a Post Office (1997)* by Agha Shahid Ali, and *Of Cartography (2012)* by Esther Belin. The poetry chosen from these collections focuses on specific themes relevant to the research questions. From Esther Belin's poetry collection *Of Cartography (2012)* poems regarding themes of cultural identity, land and space, colonization, memory, and storytelling are selected. In *The Country Without a Post Office (1997),* poetry regarding themes of loss, exile, mourning, memory, and resistance is the focus of the study. Poetry from *Rifqa (2021)* represented through themes of identity, history, trauma, land, memory, and history are selected for this study. Images are also a part of this study as listed in the table of figures.

The following poems have been chosen from the selected poetry collections. From *Of Cartography (2012)* poetic evidence has been acquired from the following poems "Bundles are Bundling", "I keep my language in my back pocket like a handkerchief that I only display when I want to show my manners in a respectful way", "Before We Ever Begin", "Study on the Road to Los Angeles", "Into the West", Atmospheric Correction" and "Assignment 44". From *The Country Without a Post Office (1997)* "The Blessed Word: A Prologue", "I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight", "The Country Without a Post Office", "The Floating Post Office", "Dear Shahid", "A History of Paisley", "The Last Saffron" are selected for the purpose of the study. From *Rifqa (2021)* the following poems have been used as evidence for the research: "Who Lives in Sheikh Jarrah", "Born on Nakba Day", "This is Why We Dance", "Bulldozers Undoing God", "Rifqa", "Three Women", "Sheikh Jarrah is Burning".

CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Although research has been conducted on protest/resistance literature, there is a gap when it comes to protest poets with cultural and ethnic identities in geographically disputed regions. This research is significant as it minimizes the gap for research in protest literature as minimal cultural analysis has been conducted regarding the selected poets. This study focuses on the chosen poets as activists and looks at protest/resistance poetry as a cultural movement and as a literary movement. Thus, it is necessary to examine existing academic work on protest literature and poetry. As three poets from different backgrounds are the focus of this study, it is pertinent to examine the research conducted on their works within the realm of protest/resistance literature. This literature review is divided into four sections. The first section reviews research conducted on generic protest/resistance poetry. The remaining three sections examine the scholarly work available on the selected poets.

2.1 Reviewing the Concept of Protest/Resistance Poetry

Naliyah Kaya in her research "Pen-full Resistance: Poetry, Power, and Persona" looks at poetic art forms as tools of resistance for individuals with disadvantaged identities or those who are underrepresented in the larger areas of society. Due to their marginalized positionalities, they are able to utilize poetry to address these social issue and their causes. Her research is conducted through a Marxist lens of class as she looks at the classification of the American society through their means of production. This places the white, heterosexual male at the top of the American food chain (Kaya 1). She compare these oppressed groups to other disenfranchised groups around the world such as the Dalits of India and the Roma population of Europe. She explores how dominant groups silence marginalized and indigenous groups through systems like slavery and forced assimilation as in the case of Native Americans. This excludes these groups from their national narrative, "thus promoting a false narrative, based totally, or in part, on myths and distortions." (Kaya 2). There have been multiple attempts of silencing these groups but that is not completely possible as they embraced arts as a form of resistance. She provides examples of Native American oral literature, the use of capoeira by Afro-Brazilians plantation slaves and spoken word poetry by African American students on university campuses as they protested

against low graduation rates of African-American students. The main focus of her research examines the spoken word performance culture in America which saw a rise in the 1960's alongside Black dominant music genres such as jazz and blues. As her research is based in Sociology, her dissertation employs the concepts of 'symbolic interactionism' by Max Weber and George Herbert Mead. She analyzes various spoken word clubs and performances and formulates that themes of Reformer/Activist emerged primarily within spoken word poetry of resistance (Kaya 153).

Barbara Harlow's *Resistance Literature (1987)* is a seminal work with reference to politically charged literature and its relation to liberation movements around the world. Her book sheds a light on literature that is sidelined by Western academia in accord that it directly challenges the Western institution of colonialism, neo-liberalism and Western democracy. This book looks at poetry, narratives, and memoirs situated in political struggle and resistance movements in various regions such as South Africa, Nicaragua, Kashmir, Palestine, and Creole literature. She advocates for a separate literary category when it comes to literature produced during moments of great national struggle in areas that faced colonization. She criticizes comparative literature "which tends to restrict itself to the more northern parts of the globe when seeking material for comparison" (Harlow xvi). She discusses the ideological affinities of "deconstruction" and "decolonization" in the further development of resistance literature as a genre. She relates her findings to resistance literature produced in Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. She endorses Ghassan Kanafani's contribution to resistance literature which will be expanded on later. She argues that resistance literature is an

> "access to history for those peoples who have been historically denied an active role in the arena of world politics; the problem of contested terrain, whether cultural, geographical, or political; and the social and political transformation from a genealogy of "filiation" based on ties of kinship, ethnicity, race, or religion to an "affiliative" secular order." (Harlow 22)

Her work on resistance literation is crucial to the significance of this dissertation as it testifies to the role of protest poets in their political struggle to preserve their contested homeland in the wake of the colonial matrix of power.

Majority of the prominent literature regarding protest/resistance literature is conducted in regards to Palestinian literature due to the contributions of Ghassan Kanafani and Mahmoud Darwish. As explained in the Introduction of this research, Ghassan Kanafani is credited with the term 'resistance literature'. In *Adab al-muqawama fi Filastin al-muhtalla (Resistance Literature in Occupied Palestine)* Kanafani writes in the backdrop of the first Nakba that saw the massive forced exodus of Palestinians to make space for Israeli settlers. He classifies Palestinian resistance poets into poets of refuge and poets of exile. The refugee poets channeled their "bitter feelings of loneliness and deprivation" and "with the passage of time to change into a feeling of defiance" (Kanafani 6). Whilst the poet of exile exhibited a more revolutionary fervor which took shape of resistance poetry. "The poetry of resistance emerged with an astonishing revolutionary spirit completely free from the sad and tearful trend… Resistance poetry did not only witness a change in purport and poetic effect but also in form and technique. It rejected the traditional poetic forms 'and adopted modern techniques without losing force." (Kanafani 7). Although Kanafani talks specifically about the Palestinian struggle in his work, I believe his definition is significant and needs to be expanded upon based on the modern resistance movements around the world and the role of poetry in shaping these movements.

2.2 Agha Shahid Ali as a Protest Poet

Agha Shahid Ali holds a prominent position in the corpus of South Asian Literature, Postcolonial literature, and Diasporic literature. He is perhaps most renowned as a hyphenated poet whose poetry encompasses his private memory, loss, and yearning for a homeland stuck in a never-ending political embroil. Nishat Zaidi in "Center/Margin Dialectics and the Poetic Form: The Ghazals of Agha Shahid Ali" asserts that Ali did not "succumb" to his hyphenated identity but instead used his positionality to become a cultural ambassador for Kashmir. (Zaidi 55). Zaidi explores Ali's introduction of the Ghazal form in English poetry, creating a new poetic idiom encapsulating his hyphenated identity. This allowed for a diasporic exchange between the poet's native and adopted culture. The Ghazal form allowed Ali to challenge the status of the sonnet as the oldest form of poetry, which led to his intention of "disorienting Eurocentric epistemology by orienting it back to the East."(Zaidi 60). In my opinion, Ali's marriage of Eastern and Western poetic traditions creates a literary palimpsest where Eastern literary traditions overshadowed by colonial practices are allowed to appear on the surface. It is as Zaidi expresses that Ali "situated his

diasporic identity on the site of the *ghazal* form where the twin identities could negotiate without any appropriation of one by the other." (Zaidi 65)

Aatina N. Malik in "Negotiating Everyday via the Act of Reading Resistance Poetry: A Study Based on the Analysis of Readership of Poetry by Agha Shahid Ali on Kashmir" looks at alternative means of resistance through the production and reading of poetry. Indian militancy in occupied Kashmir restricts the movement of Kashmiri people due to fear of violent censorship. Reading poetry as an act of protest is a safe option since it can be done behind the eyes of surveillance. Agha Shahid Ali is chosen as the representative poet by Malik in her research due to his international reputation and Malik's lack of knowledge of the Kashmiri language. Again Ali's hyphenated identity connects him with different groups of people. Ali's poetry collection *A Country without a Post Office* portrays Indian censorship of Kashmiri media to hide the dire effects of its military actions. Malik's study elucidates the role of literature as an essential tool of resistance. However, Malik is focused on the reader's response and interest regarding poetry and how the everyday man is utilizing poetry in their protests. The research is conducted through interviews and questionnaires over a period of two months, from December 2013 to February 2014, in Kashmir and New Delhi. Malik has not specified the qualifications of her chosen sample, but her conclusions discern that an educated group of people was chosen for the study as most of the responses on resistance through education and peaceful protest. Several responses allude to Agha Shahid Ali's poetry as an inspiration for and a beacon of solidarity (Malik 412) Malik's conclusion reveals that Agha Shahid is known by readers and non-readers alike through shared experiences of exile and deprivation. I believe this solidifies Agha Shahid Ali's position as a protest poet for this study. It also opens the potential to study Ali's poetry in close quarters with cultural analysis to unpack the rationale behind his role as an ambassador of Kashmiri culture and identity.

Peer Mohd Ashraf refers to Agha Shahid Ali's poetry as "Poetry of Witness" in his article "Agha Shahid Ali and the Poetry of Witness". Ashraf uses Carolyn Forche's concept of the poetry of witness as an "alternative history recounted by the poets as the victims of cruelty, or at least the witness of it; a manifestation of the sufferings of the people, subjected to very „serious situations" in periods of war or conflict by the state agencies." (Ashraf 221). Ashraf provides evidence of mini-narratives in Ali's poetry that are not recorded in "chronicles of time," events that exist beyond the temporal space of history. Again Indian

censorship was brought forth, which veiled the communication between Kashmir and the outside world. Ali presents the memory of towns that have been massacred and "obliterated from the maps of the world without signs of direction;..."(Ashraf 222). Ashraf's research is concerned mostly with the unrecorded memory of violence, which allows the current research to fill the gap of spatial and geographical trace in Ali's poetry that is slowly facing erasure from the same oppressive forces.

2.3 Esther Belin as a Protest Poet

Esther Belin's poetry brings together Native American experience into the mainstream American culture. Her poetry creates a connection between oral history and writing. Belin elaborates on this point in an interview for *Studies in American Indian Literatures,* where she defines herself as an interpreter of predecessors' history, which deals with racism and colonial institutes like boarding schools. She considers her poetry to be her activism and that writers are scouts as they have the privilege of knowing how to write. As a Dine, she has to write for her people. She uses untranslated Dine in her writings as an act of reclaiming her lost culture. Native Americans are always associated with tribality, and Belin owns her tribality because it allows her to continue her activism and challenge the colonial stereotypes pushed against her people.

Mishuana Goeman, in "(Re)Mapping Indigenous Presence on the Land in Native Women's Literature," explores Esther Belin's poetry in the light of Native Feminism. Native Feminism serves as a fertile ground for identity politics and creates a Native space that defies the boundaries of space that "defies the boxed geographies and bodies" determined through a Cartesian model of imperial subjectivity. (Goeman 295). According to Goeman, Belin dismantles this Cartesian subjectivity through her poetic deconstruction of the Federal Indian Policy of Termination and Relocation. Colonial spatialization of Native lands creates a nationalist discourse which Goeman argues is a way of territorializing the native landscape and laying claim to it. (Goeman 296). Native women's literature can counter these colonial imaginings by creating a space that connects the past with the present. Native women's literature is able to create a separate literary space where their intersectional experiences of race and gender come together to remap the difference created between Native lands, bodies, and identity.

Goeman alludes that engendering native men and women in the image of an imperial binary was a cunning step in the reordering of Native spaces. Thus Native women who mimicked imperial femininity could never be embraced as a complete woman due to their racial difference. Belin, in this regard, navigates her "crossblood" Mixed Indian identity by exploring her matrilineal connection with her clan. Goeman concluded that colonial policies have disrupted tribal spiritualities and that Native spaces can be reclaimed by promoting spatial memories in tribal history and stories. Symbolic, aesthetic practices like poetry are an ideal tool for creating these literary spatialities, which I agree with.

In "Restoring The Self in the Language of Beauty and Balance: Esther Belin's *Of Cartography*," Ewelin Banka explores Belin's poetry collection *Of Cartography* and the poet's negotiation of private and urban spaces with Navajo traditions. Banka infers that Belin seeks to heal her Navajo identity by grounding the Navajo philosophy of Beauty and Balance in her spiritual practices. Banka conducts a purely textual analysis of Belin's work where they look over the performative language used by Belin in the form of typographies and linguistic images.

2.4 Mohammed El Kurd as a Protest Poet

Mohammed El Kurd is a relatively young voice compared to the previously selected poets who are experienced in their fields and have an experienced corpus under their belt. El Kurd's activism started with social media, which garnered attention following the Israeli siege of Palestinian neighborhoods such as Shiekh Jarrah, where El Kurd belongs. *Rifqa* is his debut poetry collection, published in 2021. It is a young work with great potential for literary research from an academic point of view. Summer Farah, in her review for the *Los Angeles Review of Books* "I Write an Attempt": On Mohammed El-Kurd's "Rifqa," describes his poetry as "reverberations of Palestinian visionaries"(Farah), especially to Suheir Hammad. Farah compares Hammad's poet "post Zionism" to El Kurd's poem "Rifqa," where both poets assert the existence of Palestinian heritage and inhabitants as preceding the state of Israel. Farrah reviews that El Kurd unveils the reality shared with his grandmother, who witnessed the first Nakba in 1948 as she was forced to flee her house in 1948 and El Kurd was born on the day of the second Nakba in 1998. Farrah writes that "this recursiveness is apt, perhaps the most appropriate form in order to capture the Nakba." (Farrah). Farrah draws a parallel between El Kurd's poem "Born on Nakba Day" and "My

Nakba Birthday" from Mohammad El Kurd's spoken word album *Bellydancing on Wounds.* Unlike "My Nakba Birthday," which is accompanied by music, Farrah believes "Born on Nakba Day" diverts stronger attention to language in the absence of sound. About the poems "Autobiography" and "Anti-Biography," Farrah appreciates Mohammad El Kurd's anti-romanticization of a poet as if he is self-aware of him as a commodity under a perpetual literary institution. The poem "Laugh," according to Farrah, coincided with El Kurd's viral interviews with American news channels such as CNN, where he was asked about supporting violent protests from Palestinians, to which he responded, "Do you support the violent dispossession of me and my family?". "Laugh" is a poem that expresses El Kurd's experience in Atlanta, which supports the possession of arms. Farrah completes her review by concluding that El Kurd's poetry tells us the "value of telling" with his clean language that will get the message across so that his intent to protest is received by the readers.

Claudia Saba, in "Mainstreaming Anti-colonial Discourse on Palestine: Mohammed El-Kurd's Discursive Interventions," argues that the lived experiences of Palestinian activists are silenced by hegemonic forces. The recent Palestinian eviction from historical neighborhoods by Israeli forces gave visibility to the counter-hegemonic discourse that was amplified by online documentation through various social media platforms. Saba uses Mohammed El Kurd's online anti-hegemonic discourse against the action of the state of Israel, which he frames as settler-colonialism. Saba highlights Mohammad El Kurd's resistance against settler encroachments alongside his twin sister Muna El Kurd. Their activism has garnered millions of followers on platforms such as Twitter and Instagram. Muna El Kurd mostly posts in Arabic, while Mohammad El Kurd uses English to reach a border international audience. Saba data analysis looks past Mohammad El Kurd's tweets from 11-21 May 2021, calling it an "articulary moment" (Saba 52) when the discourse surrounding the annexation of Shiekh Jarrah was gaining traction. Saba utilizes critical discourse analysis for her study as El Kurd's voice is laced with a definite ideology, and his choice of language reflects a certain social reality. (Saba 53). In her analysis, Saba discovers that prominent US newspapers from 1967 to 2017 used Israeli sources 250% more than Palestinian sources. The majority of reporting on the region took place during armed conflicts between Israel and Palestine. Words related to the Zionist occupation were rarely used, and the Palestinian losses remained understated. An obvious imbalance could be seen when reporting for both sides took place. Saba uses multiple

tweets of Mohammad El Kurd as evidence for calling out the hypocrisy of Western media and racism as a strong factor in "obstructing the Palestinian narrative"(Saba 55). The tweets that Saba has chosen Mohammad El Kurd use words such as ethnic cleansing, apartheid, and Nakba to generate a counter-hegemonic narrative. Saba emirates that this anti-colonial discourse regarding Israeli apartheid is breaking now due to the digital proficiency of youths like El Kurd. These activists document Israeli aggression and also call out complicit parties. Saba concludes that journalism should not ignore young actors such as Mohammad El Kurd as they contribute to creating a level-headed field for digital activists. I intend to reclaim the necessity of Mohammed El Kurd's voice in the present study as he holds the potential to be a prolific voice in the future literary space that uses the digital space simultaneously with the literary space.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Theoretical Framework

This chapter outlines my theoretical framework and methodology which adopts the concept of aesthetic regime of politics, medium of critical culture memory, urban palimpsest, decoloniality and cultural analysis. I unpack how these concepts are synthesized to position protest poetry as an archive that challenges hegemonic narratives through aesthetic resistance.

3.1.1 Aesthetic Regime of Politics and Distribution of the Sensible

Jacques Rancière, in *The Politics of Aesthetics (2006),* expresses his idea of equality as a struggle between unseen members of society with the larger established political order. The tool that the voiceless member of society is equipped with is aesthetics and art. Rancier considers art to be an egalitarian entity. According to Rancière, politics, when rightfully understood, works as an inherently disruptive attempt by the oppressed groups excluded by an inegalitarian social order. Henceforth these groups establish an equal ground to challenge the one in power directly. Rancière talks about the "aesthetic regime of politics" as an analogy for political action against the hierarchies established in a global society. Politics cannot be separated from aesthetics since it concerns the "distribution of the sensible." (Rancière 4) Aesthetics are political because they are historically essential concepts regarding the nature of art. The artist's role determines the distribution of the sensible in the public domain.

Rancière defines the distribution of the sensible as a "system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it" (Rancière 12). The social order which Ranciere dubs as the 'Police Order' (Ranciere 3) determines what is exposed and hidden from the society. What kind of information is visible for the common man to see? Such a social order is anti-democratic as it implies restriction to information.

In a broader sense this restriction can be extended to movement, speech, libraries and schools. Ultimately, art, language and information becomes fodder for propaganda towards a state approved narrative. In the context of this study, hegemonic nation states determines the information regarding the territories they are occupying. The word distribution itself implies categorization. Which information is visible and which isn't. Those with the talent and capacity to create art for a political must assume their role to disseminate that knowledge through their respective "aesthetic practices," which in the case of the current research is poetry. According to Rancière, the politicization of aesthetics is concerned with "establishing a correspondence between aesthetic virtue and political virtue." (Rancier 60), thus giving artists a choice to choose the means for the political awareness of their creation. Just as how the 'police order' is able to use aesthetics for the distribution of the sensible, artists and poets are able to redistribute the sensible through their aesthetic practices. Once again, I would like to reiterate that poetry has the tendency to transcend spatial and temporal boundaries due its rhythmic qualities. It the light of this research, protest poetry is a part of a larger cultural movement of resistance which redistributes the sensible through the marginalized or unrepresented groups of society. I argue that protest poetry creates a regime of aesthetics that can challenge the regime of the hegemon.

3.1.2 Protest Poetry as Palimpsest and Media of Critical Cultural Memory

Andreas Huyssen, in *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and The Politics of Memory (2003)*, introduces the idea of the "Media of Critical Cultural Memory," which pertains to artwork, urban phenomena, and literary texts that function as cultural signifiers. Memory is an unstable phenomenon stabilized through fixed spaces such as cities, monuments, architecture, and sculptures which creates an urban palimpsest. These urban spaces can be read as palimpsests as "we have come to read cities and buildings as palimpsests of space, monuments as transformable and transitory, and sculpture as subject to the vicissitudes of time." (Huyssen, 7)

Huyssen explains that the idea of palimpsests is inherently literary and that literary techniques used to navigate a text can be used to configure urban spaces as well. Urban spaces are palimpsests in nature due to changes in spatial boundaries by temporal change. The current research will utilize this idea of reading through an urban space to trace the

contested geographies in the selected poems and the urban imaginary. I read my chosen poetry as a palimpsest as its layers the history, culture, tradition and geography of the concerned contested territories. It gives these territories its identity as tangible entities. In the process of reading these poems as palimpsests, there is a sense of humanization towards these territories and the poets. They are not just another headline or another victim waiting to be politicize. Rather these poets have their grand and ordinary memories associated with their homelands.

This research is premised on decoloniality as I find protest poetry to be deeply decolonial in its context as it challenges the status quo set by modern, democratic, neocolonial power structures. Protest poetry enables the struggle of the marginalized against Nation-states that are oppressing their lands and culture. To support this idea, I am appropriating Walter Mignolo's idea of decolonization as discussed in his work "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, The Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality". Mignolo creates a binary between modernization and tradition. He argues that neo-liberalism is sponsored by modern media and sold to the masses in a neat package with democracy (Mignolo 450). This creates a colonial matrix of power. For Mignolo, colonialism was not just a historic event but a system of power where European economic, epistemic, political and cultural domains work together to sustain hierarchies of race, religion and knowledge. As such, western epistemology is held above Indigenous modes of knowledge and this divide is seen in every other socio-economic aspect that sustains the colonial matrix of power. It is this matrix that rewrites history in a way where it supports colonial interests till this day. Those who are complicit in sustaining this matrix are offered security whilst those who oppose it are subjected to "all kinds of direct and indirect violence" (Mignolo 450). There is a perverse logic in the economic structure of modernity and democracy and to understand that, one must 'decolonize the mind'. He creates a binary between 'tradition' and 'modernity' that to decolonize the mind, one must work towards a vision of society that does not depend upon the idea set by modernity/coloniality or in other words, the colonial matrix of power. (Mignolo 459). Mignolo provides examples of the colonization of the Caribbean where the onset of modernity required the onset of coloniality. The Caribbean is associated with tourism due to its beaches but the majority of the resorts in the area are owned by Western companies. Similarly, the modernity of Western powers like England, France, and The USA was a result of "slavery, exploitation,

and appropriation of land" in areas of Asia and Africa. This is visible with the removal of several Native American landmarks in search of natural resources to fuel modernity. The same can be said for Indian occupied Kashmir where Kashmiri land is sold to big Indian corporations like the Ambanis to build resorts and fuel 'Indian tourism' in the Himalayas. The colonization of Palestine by Israel is lauded as bringing democracy to the Middle-East. Mignolo states that "creative work on knowledge and subjectivity comes from the political society, from the institutionally and economically des-enfranchised." (Mignolo 492) which I recognize my selected poets as being a part of.

As the current study is looking at protest poetry as an alternative narrative, it strives to underscore how it is decolonial in its impact. The concept of decoloniality is rooted in the critique of modernity which requires active delinking from hierarchies established by colonial powers, especially in the context of Western knowledge. Knowledge is a broad term but here I postulate political and cultural history of the contested territories at the center of this research. The protest poets are attempting to take control of the narrative through an aesthetic practice that defies logic and rationality, concepts that act as prerequisites of modernity. Simply looking at the history of only English literature reveals that epic poetry and oral histories have transcended temporal boundaries. This methodology positions protest poets as decolonial agents as they challenge history perpetuated by nation-states which erases their cultural and geographical identity. I analyze how protest poetry delinks Indigenous history and memory from colonial narrative of history.

3.2 Research Methodology

The research strategy chosen for this study is cultural studies/analysis. Grossberg et al. defines cultural studies as "an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and sometimes counter-disciplinary field" (Grossberg et al. 4), which takes a humanistic approach to research while embracing anthropological and ethnographic modes of methodology. Cultural analysis looks at cultural production concerning cultural practices and social and historical structures (Grossberg et al. 4). Cultural studies recognize culture as a highly contextualized, mobile set of practices that acts as a platform for "struggle and contestation rather than of fixed values" (Hebert 84).

I am deploying Mieke Bal's model of cultural analysis as proposed in her work *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities (2002).* Bal perceives cultural texts through a multidisciplinary lens with the engagement of narrative and semiotics. This is evident through the title of her work where concepts are not fixed but 'travel' between disciplines, contexts, and cultures. Bal defines culture analysis as an approach that engages with the complexity of cultural practices and products. It "is both an elaboration and a defense, is extremely simple: namely, interdisciplinarity in the humanities, necessary, exciting, serious, must seek its heuristic and methodological basis in concepts, rather than methods." (Bal *Travelling Concepts in Humanities* 5). Bal interjects that cultural objects such as literature, art, music and so on require a dynamic approach, free from disciplinary boundaries that dictate the separation of genres. In true Bal fashion, I will be adapting her model of culture analysis as evident in her other work, *Double Exposures.*

Bal proposes that acts of exposure are essential when it comes to studying cultural artifacts, whether in the form of paintings, music, posters, or literature. Bal suggests that there are certain limitations when it comes to research in the Humanities, as works involving aesthetics are often separated from real-world issues. In short, aesthetics are generally deemed apolitical or art for art's sake. Bal contests this notion of research which sees aesthetics as a separate entity from social issues. Bal proposes that concepts such as metaphors, myths, and narrative 'travel' between different disciplines. Concepts are not enclosed in a fixed space rather concepts develop during artistic exchange. Thus Bal chose the Museum as her object of study as the Museum acts as a space of integration. An interdisciplinary analysis is possible in Museums due to their multimedia output. Museums "show" or "expose" the viewer to a discourse. The "object" on display, whether it be a painting, sculpture, or historical artifact, "exposes" the subject, the viewer, to a certain "statement"

"In expositions, the 'first person,' the exposer tells a "second person" the viewer about a 'third person' the object on display" (Bal, *Double Exposures* 4). What Bal refers to in this statement is that the expository agent is a figure of cultural authority, who in the case of this study will be the selected poets, will expose the object of the study, the selected protest poems, to the viewer of this research. The question may arise as to why it is necessary to establish such a relationship between the poets and the viewer. According to

Bal, exposition is a narrative process since exposure requires displaying the object's past, its making, and its function. Protest poetry has a political function, written with deliberate attempts to raise awareness regarding an oppressive issue. With cultural analysis that integrates ethnographic and anthropological studies, it is important to study the surrounding media regarding the poetry and poets, which may not necessarily be text-based evidence. Unlike textual analysis, which only pertains to the text itself, cultural analysis will allow the researcher more freedom in analyzing multiple media evidence related to the poets.

This study combines interdisciplinary frameworks to construct an analytical lens that looks at protest poetry's role in resisting spatial and cultural erasure. I integrate the concept of aesthetic regime of politics which places art or in the context of this research, poetry as an artifact that resists hegemonic hierarchies created by colonial powers. It utilizes the concept of urban palimpsests in poetry as an archive that bridges the spatial and political dimensions of protest poetry. I am employing a decolonial lens to look into poet's rejection of European modernity and reclamation of their indigenous past. This framework utilizes cultural analysis which allows me to view poetry as a cultural artifact embedded in a complex sociopolitical context. Through the adoption of these theoretical concepts, this framework looks at how protest poetry works as an archive that counters colonial narratives and challenges it through poetic resistance. As main subject of this research is poetry, close-reading of the poetry is imperative as cultural memory is constituted in the use of metaphors, motifs, poetic structure and language. I also supplement this study through urban and visual media such as photographs and art that are associated with the themes of resistance and cultural memory interpreted in the selected poetry.

My research methodology looks at protest poetry as a cultural artifact that operates under a greater political resistance movement against oppressive regimes. I use the idea of 'travelling concepts' which opts for an interdisciplinary approach that allows me to look at protest poetry as cultural objects as it interacts with visual, narrative and political processes. In this context the protest poets that I have selected serve as figures of cultural authority from an oppressed group as they present an alternative narrative in opposition to state-sponsored metanarratives responsible for the erasure of their cultural and geographical history. I have appointed the selected poets as denunciators who contextualize their protest poetry (cultural artifact) to the audience (reader/academic) within their historical and

sociopolitical struggles. I interpret their political-aesthetic discourse. I have provided a reading of how the poets "expose" the political function of their poetry through myths, metaphors, cultural memory, and narrative structure alongside contextualized media such as pictures, interviews and other multimedia resources. The poems are situated within their cultural production which allows me to evaluate their political and aesthetic function as protest poetry. Thus I view poetry as an egalitarian cultural production that operates on the level of the poets' lived memories in regions that are facing geographical and cultural erasure. As this research traces contested territories (Navajo Region, Kashmir and Palestine) in protest poetry, I position the selected poets as disrupters who are reconfiguring the public narrative against their localities through their aesthetic practices (poetry), by creating a new space for political participation that links the poetic form to political intent.

I am also looking at the selected poetry as a textual palimpsest that maps the contested territories revealing their historical, spatial and cultural complexities. The concept of urban palimpsests supports this framework as it views poetry as textual counterparts to layered geographies that are facing spatial and cultural erasure. Poems are analyzed as sites where historical and spatial contestation, such as colonial erasure in Kashmir or Palestinian dispossession are inscribed, mirroring Andreas Huyssen's assertion that urban spaces stabilize unstable memories into collective narratives. Looking at cities as palimpsests also reveals their colonial erasure from modern history, which is exposed by the selected protest poetry.

CHAPTER 4

CARTOGRAPHIES OF RESISTANCE AND RESTORATION IN ESTHER BELIN'S POETRY AND ART

Esther Belin is a Navajo poet and multimedia artist. Her poetry expresses her Navajo experience as she grew up in a reservation and later in a city. Her family experienced relocation from the American Southwest due to the 1956 Indian Relocation Act. The Indian Relocation Act intended to assimilate the Native Americans into Urban Communities. On the surface this act provided Native Americans with skills to work in a modern American socio-economic system. However, this act allowed the American state to dissolve many Native American cultures and traditions that went against Christian doctrine. This act also terminated the tribal status of many Native groups which granted them protection and government subsidies. This relocation also prompted the American state to take over Native lands and decrease Native land ownership. Such policies operates under the American colonial matrix of power as it controls the sociological and economic movement of Native American groups in favor of the growing American capitalist economy which relied on the occupation of Native American lands to build highways and housing societies. These acts also supports the 'white- savior' mentality where Native groups can never achieve modern enlightenment without the intervention of their colonizer. Growing up with such a background, Belin struggles to assimilate her Native identity with her urban identity in Los Angeles. Belin always saw herself as an activist with poetry and deems artists and writers as privileged, with responsibility to guide their community (Berglund and Belin 64) which aligns with the concept of aesthetic regime of politics. Belin regularly uses the Dine Bizzad language in her poetry without providing translation; a political act of defiance against traditional English poetic traditions. For her, this act of defiance keeps her endangered language in circulation and preserves her culture (Berglund and Belin 66).

Of Cartography (2017) is Belin's second poetry collection. The collection takes the reader on a journey as Belin establishes her identity through a ritual where she embodies her tribe's cosmology and worldview. Central to her poetry is the Navajo concept of *hozho,* a philosophy on Beauty and Balance. She creates a blend of her tribe's oral tradition with the written poetic form that gives it a chant-like quality. She also incorporates typographical elements in her poems to mimic Native healing arts like sand painting (Banka 8). As this

collection progresses, Belin restores her Native identity and maps out her Indigenous homeland that was overtaken due to colonial practices. She dismantles colonial spatial narratives that has sectioned American land into different economic and domestic zones. At the same time, she maps out her urban experience and we find her feeling conflicted about her Native and urban self. Belin is also a multimedia artist and jewelry maker and her art is available on her personal website. Her art also portrays similar themes as found in her poetry. Belin's art will be discussed alongside her poetic analysis.

4.1 Navigating Dine Identity in Esther Belin's Poetry

"Bundles are Bundling" is the introductory poem of *Of Cartography (2017)*. It is an ambitious poem that marks the restoration of Belin's Dine identity. The title "Bundles are Bundling" evoke Navajo belief of the beginning of the universe. The idea of bundles travel through the rest of poem connecting the beginning to the end like a bundle of wood tied by a leather cord.

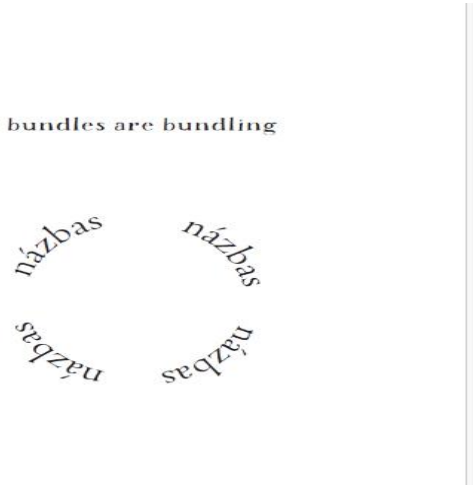


Figure 2 Esther Belin, Bundles are Bundling, Page 3

As shown in figure 2, the first part of poem displays the Dine word *nazbas* in a circular arrangement. *Nazbas* translates to "to be placed in a circle" alluding to the circle of life. This word is used four times in this arrangement which alludes to the four cardinal directions and the four elements of creation that Belin mentions in her later poems. It also creates a sense of balance, reflective of *hozho.* The circular imagery also represents a prayer circle where Dine people connect themselves to the beauty and balance of their inner world,

restoring themselves in the process. As Ewelin Banka explains “Written down like a sand-painting on the ground that accompanies every sacred ritual, the poem becomes imprinted on the landscape of the page that constitutes the geography of Belin’s envisioned world.” (Banka 11). From here onwards, the prayer to restore oneself begins.

> “my tongue is a fire
> today I am the water
> yesterday I was wood” (Belin 4)

Navajo mythology sees fire, water, wood and wind as the catalyst for all creations. Belin is in a process to restore herself in the Navajo universe. These elements are found in nature and as the circle of life dictates, once one’s life is over, these element will return to nature creating a balance. As Belin declares in this poem “I give my body to flames” (Belin 4) and she surrenders her body to the wind spirit that will blow over her tomb.

At the end of this section of the poem, she declares that she wrote this poem with the end in mind so that the circle of life may continue and balance is achieved. The last line of this section, “I begin this poem with fire” (Belin 4) shows her determination. Fire is also the first element she mentions in this poem. Many cultures view fire as a symbol of life and death. Zoroastrian temple keeps a mantle of never-ending flame as a representation of the soul that never perishes after death. Similarly in Hinduism and Buddhism, fire is seen as pure and cleanses the soul of its previous karmic debt so it continues in the cycle of rebirth. It creates a ceremony in verse as she embodies elements of life to combat the colonial erasure of her indigeneity and restores her identity, as if building a house from the ground up using nature as your only resource. The ceremonial use of fire constitutes a palimpsestic gesture, layering historical and cultural significances to underscore the poem’s role in synthesizing diverse aesthetic traditions. This symbolism further highlights fire’s transhistorical and cross-cultural universality, revered across myriad belief systems. For instance, its sacred role in Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism; foundational religions of antiquity that shaped civilizations; reinforces fire’s enduring archetypal resonance. Centering these pre-colonial mythologies and rituals functions as a decolonial practice, enabling the poet to anchor her identity within ancestral narratives predating the colonial subjugation of the Americas.

The next part of the poem connects Belin's femininity to the moon. This alludes to the Navajo Mythology of the deity Changing Woman, who is associated with the moon and was responsible for the creation of the first Navajo heroes, Monster Slayer and Born for Water. This associated her with regeneration, fertility and balance as she is in direct opposition to the Sun. The Changing Woman is named so because she relives her life without dying, experiencing all four seasons in a cyclical manner. In a way, she is Mother Nature herself. Navajo culture used to follow the matrilineal system but changing times and taking the colonial system into perspective, it changed into a patriarchal one.

"thinning into female mist

the spiral from my skull is tangled in the moon's belly" (Belin 5)

From fire, Belin takes the form of a female mist. Her hair whorl which she refers to as the spiral of her skull is connected to the moon's belly, or the Changing Woman's belly like an umbilical cord. These lines not only asserts her identity as a woman but it deepens her connection to the Navajo Cosmology, directly challenging the rational and Euro-centric institutions of patriarchy and genesis. The rest of this section is disjointed and written in the form of lists. The numbered list: "1. Lightness 2. Air-Spaces 3. "Dry Land & Separation" creates multiple spaces. Lightness is abstract and may refer to the cosmos or the soul. Air-Spaces may refer to the sky and the atmosphere. Dry Land & Separation is an obvious nod to the Earthly terrain. Words are spread across under these headings in sections which when read horizontally may be read as a phrase. The line "Navajos are People Arroyos/ Much more than fighting us…" alludes to the humanity of the Dine people. They are like arroyos, creeks formed on dry land by running water. Arroyos are not a fixed geographical phenomenon but are temporarily filled with water after torrential rain. The Navajo are able to adapt to any environment because the balance of nature matters to them. We see an ecocentric approach by the Dine people. A group of people Indigenous to a land will always be sensitive about its conservation because it's woven into their way of life. There is a direct juxtaposition to the industrial ethos of the American state, which values industrial and urban development over natural conservation. In their association with Arroyos, there is a sense of flexibility which contrast modern industrial uniformity in the shape of suburban societies and class division. The colonial matrix of power is able to function because of this uniformity. It creates a social order that controls movement between races, gender and class. This is done through soft power; how media is used to

other the Native Americans through stereotyping. Politicization of aesthetic is a doubled edged sword. Just as how Belin has been using an aesthetic practice of her choice to counter the mainstream narrative about Native Americans, the state has been weaponizing it since the very beginning as a part of their colonial matrix of power.

Unlike the free flowing arroyos, the world is condition to view them differently. They are constantly vilified and objectified. “a speaker stand and a microphone / hollow out the air / like cracking a can of pop” (Belin 7). A microphone is used to amplify one’s voice, but here it is shown as object distorting the Navajo voice. It flattens Indigenous voices into a consumable form like a can of soda, easily found in vending machines and super markets. This is reminiscent of how dream catchers have been commercialized and stripped of its indigenous roots. During the Hippie movement of the 70’s and 80’s, dream catchers were sold as ‘Indian Craft Items’. Ojibwe culture traditionally used dream catchers as a protective charm for their infants. They were made out of willow hoops and sinew. Yet they are now a commodity made of cheap materials like plastic and grouped as an article of ‘Spiritual’ or ‘Bohemian’ aesthetic. “Navajos Rotating/like warehouse collection” (Belin 7) Native artefacts are collected and become part of someone’s museum collection. For Belin, this commodification is comparable to a striptease to which the viewers only clap with a blank stare, maybe not understanding the cultural context behind Navajo practices.

4.1.1 Decolonial Praxis in Form and La nguage

Belin does not shy away from breaking down the English poetic form. It reflects her inner turmoil as she carries a fragmented sense of self. Her identity as a Dine may seem incomplete as her family was forced to assimilate with white American values. She is too Native for the people of Los Angeles and Calgary and too White for her Native people. On the main page of Esther Belin’s personal website, she write “My expression is a liberation functioning as a contrived reality boxed into Indian”. Belin’s poetic and artistic expressions are a tool to liberate herself from the trauma caused by colonialism, assimilation and stereotyping. Yet there is a paradox as she is seeking liberation in a system that is actively suppressing her voice. Calling herself an ‘Indian’ is a nod to the stereotyping used against her. She expresses this contrived reality through the fragmented linguistic structure of her poetry. She is delinking her poetry from the colonial matrix of power that has created a canon for English poetry that is centered on white poets. Using Dine Bizaad alongside

English, without providing translation is an active act of resistance and reclamation of her language. Assimilationist boarding schools dissuaded the use of Indigenous languages in their quest of 'civilizing' the brute 'Indian Savages'

In the poem "I keep my language in my back pocket like a special handkerchief that I only display when I want to show my manners in a respectful way", Belin expressed how her language allows her to keep her hozho. Dine Bizaad has a cadence when expressing difference emotions, and she can recognize it right away.

> "It is always so nice
> to hear my language, even if
> I don't fully understand it
> I know when
> someone is telling
> someone else off
> I know when
> someone is telling
> a joke, especially if it's about me" (Belin 47)

Here we can see the fragmentation of her identity. She is not fluent in her language but at the same time it feels like home to her. "I know when/I am being reprimanded/"Yádiláh!"/"Doo ja'nií da!""(Belin 47). There is lack of open online resources that can translate Dine Bizaad phrases to English, so instances like these leaves the reader curios. Many indigenous groups that have faced discrimination and active erasure of their culture or language tend to close off their languages to outsiders. For instance, the Romani people do not reveal their language in public as it was once used against them. This gatekeeping attitude is a form of resistance in itself. Belin is not fluent but she knows when she is scolded or praised because her language might have been used to by people close to her, like her parents. We know the tones of our parent's voice because we grow up with it. Especially when they reprimand us. Belin is a polyglot and can speak multiple languages in public. This gives her power over her own public perception because it creates an air of mystery around her persona. Stereotypes are created to assert a perception against a group of people and it aids in racial profiling. Belin keeps the public guessing about her identity because of her multilingualism.

"I walk on
mumbling some Spanish, Japanese, Lakota or Crow
leaving them in thought about my origin" (Belin 48)

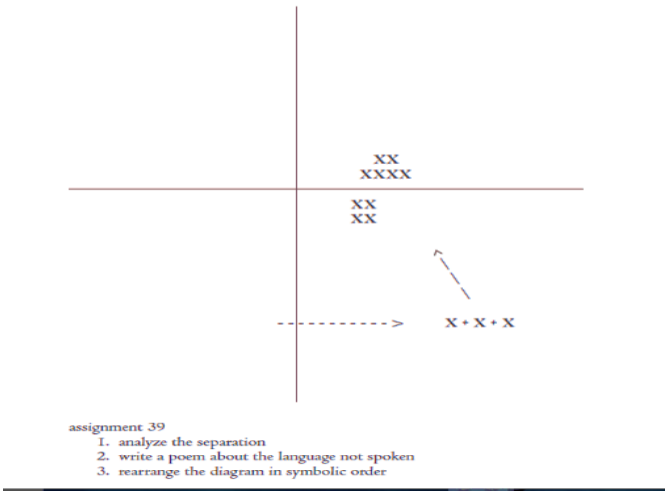


Fig. 3. Esther Belin, assignment 39

As mentioned before, Belin also experiments with the structure of poems, using typology to mirror Dine practices and to mark coordinates as done in cartography. We have analyzed her use of typology in "Bundles are Bundling" where the word nazbas was arranged in a circular manner. In a section of this poem on page 10 of her collection, Belin provides a set of coordinates "milepost 54 / hwy 491 / dirt road 192 / 1¼ miles west" referring to a house with a "red metal roof" house where she got her Navajo education. The red metal roof house is infact a car that is driving along highway 192. The assignments given to her were in the form of "I Spy" game, which her parents may have played with her, but her now she is playing the same game with her children. The car is compared to a *hooghan*, a traditional Navajo dwelling. The highway represents an intersection between her Urban and Native identity. The car, a modern commercial mode of transport is utilized as a space where traditional Navajo teachings are relayed. The car is also suffocating, alluded to as a "holding tank" as it restricts freedom of movement, much like what Native children might have experienced in assimilation boarding schools. Belin provides two assignments at the end of this section that analyzes the coordinates on a plane as seen in figure 3.

Assignment 38 instructs us to diagram the separation which may be represented by the x axis on the plan that seem to separate two groups of variables. Just like how the highway separates Belin's urbanity and native self. Assignment 39 instructs to analyze this separation and to write a poem about the language not spoken which is Dine Bizaad in this context. Here Belin utilizes typology to emulate colonial teaching methods in boarding schools, but this assignment is used to analyze her positionality and to situate herself and her people on a plane, like a math problem. This may refer to how the Indian Relocation Act of 1956 displaced Native Americans from their homes without considering the cultural sensitivity behind the landmarks they left behind. Their sacred grounds were razed to build highways and to create industries. Western commercial interest were prioritized in opposition to the welfare and conservation of sensitive cultural groups. The diagram of separation visually maps colonial infrastructures. But Belin also opposes these colonial infrastructures by drawing Dine landmarks in the form of typology. This is present in "Before We Ever Begin". Belin says that the "code was prepared" and "formula measured" (Belin 17) almost like a response to assignment 39. She has measured the axis of her separation and rearranging the lines in a symbolic order. The rearranged lines form the Chuska Mountains as seen in Figure 4.

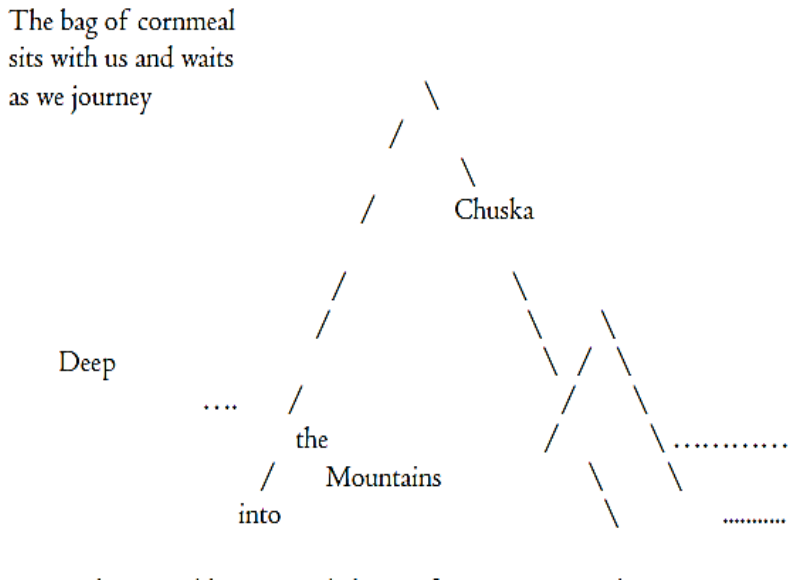


Fig.4. Esther Belin, Typography of Chuska Mountains in "Before We Ever Begin"

The Chuska mountain range is situated in the Colorado Plateau and it is an integral part of "Navajo Pastoralism" (Weisiger 253). Navajo Shepherds took their herd alongside the mountains in summers for grazing. This practice had been held for centuries and this is

where Navajo families “mapped a pattern that they would trace again and again for generations.” (Weisiger 269). In “Origins of Navajo Pastoralism” Dr. Marsha Weisiger explains that the Navajo were not a nomadic group but he mountains acted as summer homestead for them. It was a part of “Dine transhumance” (Weisiger 269) as it fits into their philosophy of *hozho*. They would graze during the summer time and retreat back to their settled homes in winter. Belin portrays this experience in “Before We Ever Begin”. In the poem she describes how her husband chuks dried corn and stores them in a ziplock back so they could begin their journey to the Chuska Mountains. As seen in figure 4, Belin writes “Deep into the Chuska Mountains” in different elevations, as if tracing the mountains with her words. She compares the pine trees growing on the mountains her a part of her spine, “among the pines (their concealed roots forming our spine)/ and the aspens (their conscious stare grasping my seedlings)” (Belin 18) and the aspen trees grasping at her children whom she calls her seedlings. This is not just a journey for her but more of a pilgrimage as she is “to retrace/the footprints of our past”, she is following the path that her ancestors treaded before her. She is keeping the tradition alive although she has no sheep to graze. It is the practice that matter because it is a part of her Dine transhumance. This gives a new to meaning to her personal *hozho* where she is creating a balance between her native past and her urban present that is laced with modernity. This creates a Palimpsest as the soil of the Chuska Mountains has witnessed thousands of Navajo footsteps upon its terrains. The mountains have become a living witness to Navajo existence, despite the fact their native dwellings were destroyed due the relocation program.

4.1.2 Tracing Navajo Geography and Relocation

In the analysis above, Esther Belin talks about her red roof house (car) is responsible for her Navajo education. She shows herself driving along the highway that lead to Los Angeles as it possesses the largest group of relocated Dine people. In “Study on the Road to Los Angeles”, Belin calls this road the “infamous highway triple 6” (Belin 36). The highway triple 6 (666) can also be called the ‘Devil’s Highway’ due to its misnomer. This highway refers to US route 491 alongside the Four Corners region which covers the Navajo Nation. The highway is notorious for paranormal sightings and poor road safety. However, there is a history behind the highway that is not mentioned often, that it was built upon Dine land after their relocation. Belin traces the features of this highway as certain geographical characteristics of it are integral to her indigenous history. The highway is

greeted by the “great mesa”, home to Navajo Flat Trails. It is also a ceremonial site for Ute Natives who used to live there. The Ute Natives deem this area as a ‘Land of Departed Spirits’ as they suspended their dead on Aspen trees, believing that the wind would take their spirits away and they would once again return to nature. This belief is shared with Navajo cosmology which views wind as a spiritual entity.

> “*Dootł’izh* is all around us:
> the summer sagebrush
> rectangular mile markers
> hazy sky
> the dark silhouette of the cool Chuska Mountains” (Belin 36)

Dootli’zh is turquois in Dine Bizaad but it used interchangeably for Blue and Green. She is referring to the sagebush (green), mil markers (blue) and the sky (blue) as Dootli’zh. This shows her unique perception of color as a Dine where she classifies blue and green objects as Turquois. This may be due the fact that Turquois is used in Navajo jewelry. It is also a part of the Navajo Cosmology as they believe that the first man and woman on Earth created the sun from a disk with a Turquois embedded in it. Once again, we see Chuska Mountains coming into view, magnifying the historical sedimentation of this highway. Besides her there are also other people on the road, driving SUVs and minivan, probably out for camping. Belin is used to the summer heat on this highway that connects to the Colorado dessert and the Grand Canyon. She comes across a board that signals the construction of a housing society in the area, “the HUD housing marks the turnoff to the paved road/ that divides the Chuskas.” (Belin 37). The HUD housing signage creates a transition from a paved road to a dirt road. The signage seems to divide the Chuskas into half, alluding to colonial encroachment of a once Navajo area. Afterall the American colonial system saw a savage land that was ready to be civilized with its concrete and symmetrical urban planning. It is creating a settlement where middleclass American families will settle, who will follow American value. Who is to say that they will the Navajo

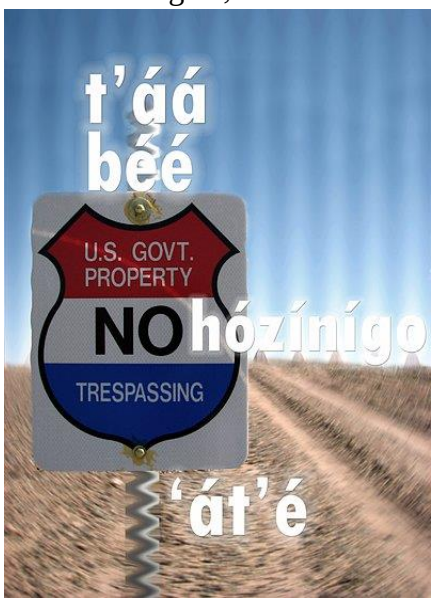


Fig.5. Esther Belin, Signage showing restricted area by US government

to settle in this housing society? Belin also shows this encroachment in her art, as seen in figure 5, there is a sign placed along a dirt road that read “US. GOVT PROPERTY” and “NO TRESPASSING” in bold letters. There is a radio blur all around the sign, creating a sense a dissonance. Because Belin is aware that the US government got this land through Navajo Displacement. Upon seeing the signage, Belin refers to a quote by Leonard Crowdog from his work *Crowdog’s Paradise: Song of the Sioux,* “We’ve got to civilize the white man /because they have gone crazy!” to highlight the absurdity of the situation. She witnesses the campers along the highway trying to cool themselves off with their car air conditioners, the Arizona heat too much for the white man to bear. Yet they are building a housing society here to house these same people. They ought to be civilized by the Natives who have learned to survive in this heat.

But the displacement does not end here. With displacement also comes the need of white savior complex, to ease the white man’s guilty conscious after they had stripped the Natives from their sovereignty. In “Into the West” which is a poetic prose Belin recalls an anecdote with her sister who introduces her to a friend who is dubbed as “Hollywood Indian”, (Belin 43). The actor played minor role in Steven Spielberg miniseries, “Into the West: Journey to the Heart of the American Dream.”. He plays a Native warrior with, “His long thick hair neatly woven into braids rests on his honey-colored chest. A stripe of red *chííh* across each cheekbone, maybe some on his horse.” (Belin 43). He is shown to be sitting on his horse which screaming a war cry. This plays into the stereotype of the tribal warrior. Belin views this a “nightmare cry” because it contains the anguish of the Natives as they are stripped of their cultural identity. She compares the cry to “Walking a mountain footpath full of pine cones and having each one a bloodline that no longer runs through veins.” The cry is a palimpsest of pain, each cry representing the genocide of Native bloodlines. This prose poem also explains the representation of Native American characters in Hollywood. They are treated as a trope, of a savage group of people that needs saving.

> “We eat popcorn and wince at the narrator, whose skin is pale like goose flesh, telling a Photoshop version of how our land was stolen. The narrator is Hollywood also, trying to be objective about the style in which Congress passed the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the Trail of Tears in 1838, the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851. The narrator reveals thin attempts to resolve his conscience

> later in the episode for assisting a runaway slave and marrying a widowed Lakota woman he rescued from the auction block." (Belin 43)

The Disney animated film *Pocahontas (1995)* is a well-known example of the white savior complex in Hollywood films. John Smith and his crew invade Powhatan's land to establish Jamestown. John Smith himself is portrayed as a reasonable person, who wishes to befriend the Powhatan's chief. John Smith is shown as a knight in a shining armor for Pocahontas who is forced to marry a warrior from her tribe. John Smith seems to resolve the dispute between the settlers and the Powhatans by taking a bullet for the chief, showing how he saved the tribe. As Belin mentions, the narrator in Hollywood is trying to be objective about the atrocities in regards to its colonial history and laws. Here we see Hollywood as a state actor as it distributes the 'savage Indian' and 'civilized white man' stereotype. It is an industry complicit in upholding the colonial matrix of power as it warps our general perception of Native Americans. The regime uses aesthetics as an arsenal to create a primitive image for the Natives. This creates a perception that they are a people of the past, the 'has beens'. This erases their presence from the public domain which makes it easier for the regime to overlook their rights and sovereignty. This erasure also ensures that the Regime in power is able to manipulate Native history. When modernity, politics and arts works together, it blurs the boundaries between "history and fiction", which results in propaganda (Rancier 39). Thus the Native American is left as a "Hollywood Indian" in our consciousness.

However, Belin shows even if Hollywood tries to sanitize American history, there is plenty of evidence that portrays otherwise. "Atmospheric Correction" is an ode to a of picture 19 Hopi men in Alcatraz Island, who were punished for refusing to send their children to boarding schools. As Belin clarifies in the epigraph of this poem, these men were mistaken as Apache by the US federal government. The photo was labeled as "Moqui Indians" as seen in figure 6. The picture is featured in San Jacinto which was also a ground for Battle of San Jacinto in 1836 between American Settlers and the Mexican army. Belin mentions how she sees an overlay of Urban Indians on top of the Moqui Indian photograph. "Prisoners they shall stay until they have/ learned to appreciate the advantages of education." (Belin 66). Native American children were forcefully separated from their

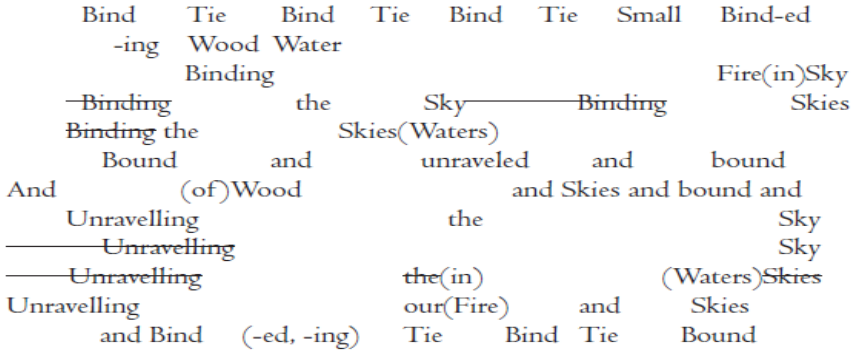
families to be placed in boarding schools. Their hair would be cut off and they were forced to wear western clothing. The boy donned military uniforms whilst girls wore Victorian dresses. In 1887, the US government established the Keams Canyon School to enroll Hopi children for reeducation. The school was crowded with insufficient resources for the students. Disease was rampant and if a death occurred because of the disease, it was brushed

Fig.6. Hopi Prisoners at Alcatraz, January 1895. Back Row (left to right): unidentified; Polingyawma; Heevi'ima; Masatiwa; unidentified. Middle Row: Qötsventiwa; Piphongva; unidentified; Lomahongewma; unidentified; Lomayestiwa; Yukiwma. Front Row: Tuvehoyiwma; unidentified; Patupha; Qötsyawma; unidentified

under the covers. The Hopi kept resisting government persuasion of sending their kids to these boarding school. Eventually government agents were ordered to arrest the Chief who were resisting the schooling program, which led to the imprisonment of the Hopi chief as seen the picture above. The prisoners were treated harshly in prison, many succumbing to disease. Belin honors these Hopi chiefs by calling out their names, as they left their fingerprints upon the rock wall of their prison.

> "Masatiwa,
> Sikyakeptiwa, Lomayestiwa. 19 Indians with inkstained
> fingers. Their prints pressed into the
> rock walls. Their heritage into my blueprints,
> stamped Bureau of Indian Affairs. Called Department of
> War. Sherman Institute. Riverside, California." (Belin 66).

Esther Belin concludes her poetry collection with a final assignment. “Assignment 44” continues Belin’s tradition of playing with poetic form. It shows a process of binding



Assignment 44

Analyze the above conversation. Read it aloud. Read it loudly. Weave a thread through it. Bind your bundle of sayings, be mindful of loose strands. Smooth down frayed edges. Smudge with fire or water.

Extra Credit: Take the relocated points from the previous diagram and use them as an entryway.

Fig.7. Esther Belin Assignment 44

and unravelling. The assignment instructs the reader to weave through the scattered words on the page to relocate themselves in their cultural cartography. She goes back to Navajo cosmology as she attempts to bind the elements together to close off this work. She refers back to her previous diagrams where she coordinates her identity along the Navajo plateau and Chuska Mountains. Belin delinks herself from colonial matrix of power to navigate her Native land, overtaken by urban development. She unravels the threads of history to expose the atrocities and displacement faced by her people. She reads through the highways built atop of her ancestral lands. These highways enabled the development of the modern American state, connecting the 50 states; but also disconnecting the Natives from its history as they struggle to survive from beyond the mountains.

CHAPTER 5

"THE WORLD IS FULL OF PAPER" AND IT IS A PALIMPSEST OF AGHA SHAHID ALI'S POETRY

Agha Shahid Ali is a Kashmiri American poet and penned nine poetry books throughout his life. His poetry carries a "musical quality" as described by Kazim Ali; laced with his personal narrative and mythology, evoking his Kasmiriness. He is credited with the adaptation of the ghazal in the English poetic form. His poetry takes influence from the works of Faiz Ahmad Faiz, another resistance poet like himself. Ali carries the cities that influenced his being in his poetry such as New Delhi, Amherst, and most importantly Sri Nagar, Kashmir. Born in 1949, mere two years after the Partition of the sub-continent into the modern states of Pakistan and India. Kashmir stays a point of contention between the two states to this day. The western part of Kashmir with Muzaffarabad at its center was recognized as Azad (Free) Jammu and Kashmir, and it is a self-governing region administered by Pakistan. The Indian occupied Kashmir with Sri Nagar as its capital continues to foresee heavy censorship and human rights violations by the Hindutva backed Indian state.

Growing up in Sri Nagar until 1979, Ali witnessed the atrocities committed by the Indian state on his land and people. Owing to his name Shahid, meaning 'witness' in Arabic, Ali witnessed his homeland's tragedy and carved out them out in his poetry. There is a layer of a nostalgia, grief and longing for his country which was facing erasure from the inside. Often called a Paradise on Earth, Ali does not only portray Kashmir through its tragedies, but also shows why it is called a Paradise by celebrating its history, arts and culture. Happiness in the face of violence is resistance, so is remembering in the face of erasure. Ali remembers his loved ones and often communicates with his country by invoking his friends like Shahid, Irfan and Rizwan. *The Country Without a Post Office (1997)* is arguably his most prolific work and also a personal favorite of mine. It is written in the backdrop of the 1990 Kashmiri uprising against the Indian occupation. To curb the uprising, the Indian state imposed heavy censorship and barred communication with outwards channels. This led to a seven month long communication ban with no news leaving or entering the region. The title of this collection is an elegy to the closed post offices in Kashmir during that time. Ali's depicts Kashmir through burnt post-offices and undelivered letters that signals complete communication breakdown in the region. This

collection creates an urban palimpsest of Kashmir with its narrative quality that captures Kashmir's history and its geography through Ali's memory.

5.1 Defining Kashmir

Agha Shahid Ali identified himself as a Kashmiri Muslim and it is evident with the quotation of a verse from Surah Al Qamar in the opening of the collection. "The Hour draws near and the moon is rent asunder" (The Quran, Al Qamar. 54.1) which describes the splitting of the moon at the hour of resurrection and the day of Judgement. It alludes to when the universe will experience a disruption and all life will cease to exist. It gives a picture of finality and the mortality of this world. Perhaps this verse describes Ali's perception of Kashmir at the time, which was split apart into two like the moon and was facing its day of judgment. He may also allude to Kashmir's resurrection after an experience nothing short of an Armageddon. The verse exudes fear of the impending day of judgement but also a hope as it will be a time of reunion. Perhaps Ali is waiting for that Hour so that he may be reunited with the loved ones he had lost in violence. Perhaps, it may also present a hope for when justice will be laid bare and the perpetrators of the violence earn their sentence.

As Ali sets the tone with that Quranic verse, he begins to define Kashmir in "The Blessed Word: A Prologue." The poem begins with an epigraph from Osip Mandlestam's untitled poem, "We shall meet again in Petersburg". Ali makes the same promise with his friend Irfan. But as he mentions, this is a fragile promise, as the situation in Kashmir defeated any hope of reunion. These dire straits are evident by the lines "'When you leave home in the morning, you never know if you'll return.'" (Ali Line 7). Along with heavy censorship, Kashmir is still facing a missing person's issue. Kashmiris endure curfews and if they bypassed the curfew, they will be kidnapped by the Indian forces. They would face torture and interrogation with no hope of returning home alive. Ali wishes to reunite with Irfan in Sri Nagar, but Irfan like many other Kashmiris may have fallen victim to these forced interrogations. With desperation he called out Kashmir in multiple renditions as if to carve its name into Mandelstam's dark velvet void. Perhaps it may become an echo and guide the wandering souls of dead Kashmiris back home.

> "Let me cry out in that void, say it as I can. I write on that void:
> Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir, Cashmir, Cashmire,

> Kashmere, Cachemire, Cushmeer, Cachmiere, Cašmir. Or
> Cauchemar in a sea of stories? Or: Kacmir, Kaschemir, Kasmere,
> Kachmire, Kasmir. Kerseymere?" (Lines 11-15)

Ali compares himself to Mandelstam, that as he wishes to reinvent Petersburg, he also wishes to reinvent Sri Nagar and in the process immortalize it, so that he may never leave. He wishes for time to stand still in this 'imaginary homeland' which leads him to call out the word 'Kashmir' in various stylistic renditions. This may also be Ali's method of evading censorship. In today's world of social media, algorithm rules. Searches and mentions that challenges the status quo are 'soft-blocked' and they do not garner widespread attention. This was seen with the recent Gaza genocide where posts containing the words 'Palestine' or 'Gaza' were not favored by the social media algorithm. To bypass the algorithm, activists used the watermelon emoji to represent Palestine as it mimics the colors of the Palestinian flag. Similarly, if the word 'Kashmir' falls in the algorithmic space, it can be substituted for any of the other words Ali has mention in the above verse. This is a play with semiotics. It begs to question as to why one has to tiptoe around discussions of injustices and oppression whilst the oppressive regimes are allowed to flaunt their propaganda towards an oppressed group of people. The answer is in plain sight, it always comes down to power. The colonizer over the colonized. "The colonized do not have epistemic privileges, of course: the only epistemic privilege is in the side of the colonizer." (Mignolo 459). The hegemonic regime of India has the power to distribute their narrative to claim their legitimacy over Jammu and Kashmir. This distribution ranges from censorship to curfews and ultimately to human existence in the region. Any dissenter (the poet in this case) in their eyes is a threat to their control over the region.

Ali establishes several metaphors for Kashmir in this poem that resonates with the title of 'The Blessed Word' as he proves that Kashmir is a palimpsest of various stories. He compares the martyrs of Kashmir to Ishmael's sacrifice by Abraham. Once again his Muslim identity comes into play. "It was Id-uz-Zuha: a record of God's inability, for even He must/melt sometimes, to let Ishmael be executed by the hand of his/ father." (Lines 26-28). Abraham willing to sacrifice Ishmael to prove his sincerity towards God's command is venerable enough to be celebrated by Muslims around the world. Although eventually Ishmael was spared as a ram took his place, there are not enough lambs to be spared for the Ishmaels of Kashmir. Ali wants to convey that the unwilling sacrifice of Kashmiri youth

deserves the same veneration as Ishmael's sacrifice. Yet their sacrifice goes unnoticed because Kashmir is under a siege where only the only stars visible at night are the sparks from gunfire.

Ali alludes to the Kashmir's conflicted history with the story of Habba Khatun. Habba Khatun, also known as the "Nightingale of Kashmir" was the Empress consort of Emperor of independent state of Kashmir, Yusuf Shah Chak in the late 16th century. Through her poetry, she has become a figurehead of Kashmiri folktales and literary traditions. In Ali's imagined Kashmir, Habba Khatun's songs play a central role in establishing Kashmiri identity, as her songs are sung by the common people doing mundane tasks like rubbing chinar leaves and ashes together to create fuel during the winter.

> "And will the blesséd women rub the ashes together? Each fall they gather chinar leaves, singing what the hills have reechoed for four hundred years, the songs of Habba Khatun, the peasant girl who became the queen." (Lines 31-34)

Kashmir acts as a gateway that connects South Asia to the rest of Central Asia. It is a geographically important area as major rivers like Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab pass through here. It was an entry point for outsiders, thus it also bore the brunt of those outsiders. The Mughal Empire entered its Golden age when Akbar took the throne. Kashmir was also a target of his conquest which he achieved in 1586. This ended Yusuf Shah Chak's weak control over his thrown. But this also meant that Habba Khatun was to be exiled. Ali laments Habba Khatun's displacement as it strips Kashmir of its freedom to date. Habba Khatun's exile is a broader metaphor for the thousands of poets and intellectuals who were either exiled from the region or have gone missing due to Indian Militia. This is an apartheid project which strips Kashmir of elements that makes up its identity. He calls Kashmir a Paradise but its rivers are filled with dead bodies, probably of the many Ishmael's sacrificed.

5.1.1 Geography of Longing: Kashmir as a Wounded Paradise

As mentioned above, Kashmir is vastly considered a Paradise on Earth due to its geographical and cultural beauty. Ali draws on this comparison in multiple poems to highlight the tragedy of the region due its annexation. It highlights the dissonance between its beautiful landscape and the violent realities of the region which is marred with forced

evictions, limited mobility for the indigenous population and the overall political erasure of the area. Framing Kashmir as a Paradise owing to its beauty and its tragedy- Ali refuses to let the region be represented as a mere casualty of its conflict. Rather, he transforms his grief into an act of resistance through documentation of the violence inflicted on Kashmir and to archive Kashmir's geographical and cultural memory. This dissonance is strongly projected in the poem "A Pastoral". Pastoral poetry is known to romanticize the country life and ignite man's connection to nature- a nostalgia for the good old days when life was simpler. But this poem presents the complexity of Kashmir's conflict in the direct contrast to its beauty. There is a lingering hope when he says:

> "We shall meet again, in Srinagar,
> by the gates of the Villa of Peace,
> our hands blossoming into fists
> till the soldiers return the keys
> and disappear." (Ali Lines 1-5)

Ali's personal memory of Sri Nagar bleeds through in the poem. He creates a landscape of pomegranate trees, ivy and rose bushes, poplar trees, cedar trees and birds like larks and magpies. He imagines himself running through this landscape in a boy like manner which exudes a sense of Nostalgia. This gives the poem a sensory quality. The reader can imagine the scents and sounds of Kashmir through such description which grounds it into reality and there is a realization that such simple and beautiful moments are marred with conflict. This juxtaposition is presented through the mention of cemetery which houses unnamed graves, probably built in a hurry to honor the dead

> "Will we follow the horned lark, pry
> open the back gate into the poplar groves,
> go past the search post into the cemetery,
> the dust still uneasy on hurried graves
> with no names, like all new ones in the city?" (Lines 20-24)

While this is a part of Ali's memory, history unfortunately does not honor it. Throughout the poem, Ali presents his wish to go back, to take his home's keys and play by the white verandah of his house again. But he is a lone man and his city is overtaken by the Indian Militia. He questions "Is history deaf there, across the oceans?'" (Line 43). The plight of

the Kashmiris falls deaf on the ears of the world that spares no glance on a Paradise burning amongst them.

Alongside comparison of Kashmir as a Paradise, Ali frequently uses Rizwan as a motif that exacerbates the image of a Paradise lost. In Islam, Rizwan is an angel that guards the gates of heaven. He a door-keeper of Paradise. Ali invokes Rizwan as a lost soul in "I See Kashmir From New Delhi at Midnight". This lost soul travels from Zero bridge to the end of Cantonment, where Gupkar Road end. From there Ali can hear Rizwan's cried from the interrogation room where he is tied naked.

> "Drippings from a suspended burning tire
> are falling on the back of a prisoner,
> the naked boy screaming, 'I know nothing.'" (Ali Lines 13-15)

This is Rizwan who used to guard the gates of Paradise on Earth. But here he has fallen and his wings are clipped. Rizwan's suffering is a projection of Kashmir's suffering. Once again Ali is highlighting the consequences of forced interrogation and missing people. This Paradise has no guardian to protect it anymore, thus its residents are forced to navigate safer grounds. The poem shows a glimpse to the exodus of Kashmiri Pundits, the native Hindu population of the region. Rizwan's soul wanders Kashmir, unable to find its body as it was probably dumped in the Jhelum River like many bodies of tortured individuals. Rizwan's fragmented self represents Kashmir's fragmentation.

The poem also portrays Ali's intense longing for his country. He wishes the Himalayas would grow transparent so he could spare a glance at Kashmir. "One must wear jeweled ice in dry plains/ to will the distant mountains to glass." (Lines 1-2). Rizwan's soul beckons him to remember Kashmir in his dreams. This quality of poetry shows how serious Ali takes his role as a protest poet, as remembering is resisting. He puts these memories in his poetry making it a medium of critical cultural memory. He synthesizes his poetry with intertextuality which proves that resistance movements around the worlds against colonial power carry the same sentiments. In "I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight", Ali uses verses from W.B Yeat's poem "Easter 1916" in the epigraph. Yeats looks at the daily lives of Irish rebels, who used to work as schoolteachers or office jobs and how they are stripped of their humanity when they are labeled as rebels. They are rebelling because they love their Irish identity which the Bristish colonists wanted to erase. Ali draws a comparison

between Irish struggle and Kashmiri struggle. Both regions are divided based on ideology and geographical interest. But the Irish were able to grasp their sovereignty in the form of Republic of Ireland, Kashmir is still fragmented. The poem ends with a promise by Ali that he would return to Kashmir.

> "I've tied a knot
> with green thread at Shah Hamdan, to be
> untied only when the atrocities
> are stunned by your jeweled return," (Lines 52-55)

There is a legend that if a pilgrim ties a green thread at the shrine of Shah Hamdan in Sri Nagar, they are bound to come back. Ali is placing his luck on the green thread he tied at Shah Hamdan, so that may be able to visit Kashmir, after the violence is over. Ali is five hundred miles away from Kashmir in Delhi where he hears no news of Rizwan. The snowcapped Himalayas presents a chilly reality that Kashmir has been isolated from the rest of the world. It is isolated in its struggle. It is truly a country with no one left to answer or receive his letter.

5.1.2 The Post Office as a Symbol of Isolation

Touting Kashmir as Paradise gives it a sense of sacredness. It houses shrines and temples and carries the history of some of the oldest religions in the world. Ali contrasts this sacred image with that of isolation by using the post office as a metaphor in this collection. 'Paradise on Earth' is a juxtaposition in itself as it mixes a perfect realm with an imperfect entity like the Earth. To be a paradise on Earth means to be out of reach. Although for Kashmir, that also means to be isolated by the rest of the world. It objectifies Kashmir and it is not seen as a tangible entity. For a global power like India, it twist the narrative that Indian Occupied Kashmir is beautiful tourist destination that capture the Himalayas in its background. Paranjoy Guha Thakurta in "Kashmir is on lockdown, but Modi touts its investment potential", reports Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's intention to invest in Jammu and Kashmir after the revocation of Article 370 as it will provide access to non-Kashmiri corporations. However, this means that Kashmiris will lose access to their indigenous lands as they still face regular lockdown and curfews. The Indian occupation controls the narrative for Kashmir. Ali uses the humble Post office and its lack of presence in *The Country Without a Post Office (1997)* as a metaphor for this censorship. "Apparently

postal delivery did stop during the conflict, making the title literally true, though it also refers to Kashmir's lack of national institutions, such as its own postage" (Burt 110). A lack of social institution means that Kashmir has no authority over its own decisions. Ali's poetry becomes a way to connect Kashmir with the rest of the world.

In the titular poem "The Country Without a Post Office" shed light on Kashmir political violence and culture erasure. The poem presents Kashmir as a desolate wasteland, "where a minaret has been entombed" (Ali Line 2). The muezzin of the mosque is also dead, with no one to call for prayer again. A postman looks through letter undelivered within the rubble of the post office.

"His fingerprints cancel blank stamps

in that archive for letters with doomed

addresses, each house buried or empty." (Lines 6-8)

The houses the letters were addressed to are destroyed or its residents have left to save themselves from this violence. Refugees are scattered around the cold Himalayas. Like Ali in "I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight" they too wish for the mountains to turn into glass so that world can witness their dead. This Paradise with no gatekeeper has turned into a hell. Ali wrote this poetry in the 90's but this reality continues till the present days as seen in Figure 8 which depicts one of the many houses burnt during a gunfire clash in Sri Nagar between Kashmiri rebels and the Indian forces. Afroza, a resident of Nawa Kadal neighborhood where the instigation took place laments her lost house and belongings. She mentions that all of her clothes and official documents perished in the fire. She had become a refugee in her own land.

Fig.8. Khan Farooq, A Kashmiri house burnt during a gun battle

"They'll see
us through them−see us frantically bury
houses to save them from fire that, like a wall,
caves in. The soldiers light it, hone the flames,
burn our world to sudden papier-mâché" (Lines 13-17).

Many like Afroza still see their houses burned like papier-mache. The fights between soldiers always soils the lives of innocent civilians. When others see burnt houses, they empty theirs to save their own lives. Empty lands, it is every occupier's dream to take land left by its resident. However, they were forced to leave their homes because houses can be built again but lives cannot be returned. Memory is a burden and a weapon. The "mad guide" who climbs the minaret to "read messages scratched on planets." embodies the contradiction of preserving history in a place where everything has been destroyed. The minaret is a religious and cultural icon and an archive where fingerprints "cancel blank stamps." Even erased identities leave a trace. The fire motif is destructive and illuminating. It is a metaphor for memory's dual role.

"I've brought cash, a currency of paisleys
to buy the new stamps, rare already, blank,
no nation named on them" (Lines 37-39)

Ali uses cultural motifs that represent Kashmir because the geographical marker, neighborhoods, roads and houses are getting destroyed. Paisley are traditional Kashmiri

motifs and they are a cultural identity persisting despite erasure. Ali embeds these patterns into “parchment” and memory becomes subversive act, stitching together pieces of heritage into the poem. He uses Paisleys as a currency because Kashmir has no currency of its own. It is a design commonly used in Kashmiri shawls.

Ali becomes the bookkeeper of the post office and the muezzin of the minaret. He once again takes it upon himself to remember Kashmir. Just like Esther Belin’s poetry, there is a connection between body and memory. Ali calls the fallen post office an archive, where he found a “map of longings with no limit” There are unlimited unsent letters and he reads them etch their words in his memory. Amongst them he finds a prisoner’s letter to his lover.

> “One begins: ‘These words may never reach you.’
> Another ends: ‘The skin dissolves in dew
> without your touch.’ And I want to answer:
> I want to live forever. What else can I say?
> It rains as I write this. Mad heart, be brave.” (Lines 94-98)

In “The Floating Post Office” Ali find the Postman with bags of “smudged black-ink letter” (Ali Line 10) while rowing dense fog. There is an imagery similar to River Styx in Greek mythology which flows between life and death. The postman seems to be rowing on a Stygian river, faithful to his job as he clutches the letters given to him. Upon a closer analysis the letters are stained with blood. The postman prays for rain so that it may cleanse his blood stained letters and maybe a blood stained Kashmir as well.

> “O Rain, abandon all pretense,
> now drown the world, give us your word,
> ring, sweet assassin of the road,
> the temple bell!” (Lines 27-30).

“Dear Shahid” shows an alternative view of the post office. This poem is a letter in itself that Ali addresses to his friend from Amherst. He is unsure of his friend’s status. Due to the conflict, everyone carries an address book so that their dead bodies maybe delivered upon identification. Whilst Ali writes an address on his letter to be send to the post office, Kashmiris write their address on their bodies in case they fail to live. Kashmiris leave their

house, not knowing if they will see another day. Which is a plausible choice as they face violence daily.

> "Men are forced to stand barefoot in
> snow waters all night. The women are alone inside. Soldiers smash
> radios and televisions. With bare hands they tear our houses to
> pieces" (Ali Lines 5-7)

Ali informs Shahid of Rizwan's death, how he was kidnapped from Hideout Café and tortured by the Indian occupation. He sends his letters through his brother. In the post office, he finds unsent letters to Shahid. Because of the lockdown, canvas bag full of letter addressed to Kashmir lay unnoticed in the Post-office. Ali continues to send letter in hope that by the next time he sees Blossoms of Spring, a letter will reach Shahid.

5.1.3 Kashmir's Cultural Memory

Ali presents Kashmir's cultural memory a part of its 'Historical Palimpsest'. He uses cultural symbols and the country's cultural past as he navigates the active erasure imposed by Indian colonial forces. He situates Kashmir as a site where cultural production overlaps Mughal rule, colonial interventions and it current political instability. As analyzed above with "A Blessed Word: A Prologue", Kashmir's poetic history centers around Habba Khatun. Her exile as the Mughal's took over marked a beginning to Kashmir's current status as a contested territory.

He uses cultural symbols indigenous to Kashmir as a testament to its palimpsestic identity. In "A History of Paisley", he talks about the Hindu legend of the designed which carved onto the Jhelum River by Shiva upon his reunion with Parvati. This is an acknowledgement of the Hindu past and the Kashmiri Pundits who lived Kashmir valley for generations before. He finds fossils of paisleys deep in the Zabarvan hills that encircle Sri Nagar, proving that Kashmir's heritage runs deep into its geography. The design was appropriated by the Mughals and it was used in their headdresses and diadems, "the first teardrop, gem/that was enticed for a Moghul diadem/into design." (Ali Lines 23-25). Shawls adorning the designs await near ports, ready to be shipped to Egypt. But the traders are not aware that shawls laden with paisleys comes from a country that is enveloped in fire.

"They don't see it. O Trader,
what news will you bring to your ancient market?
I saw her. A city was razed. In its debris
her bells echoed. I turned. They didn't see me
turn to see her—on the peaks—in rapid flight forever." (Lines 51-55)

Another significant Kashmiri cultural symbol is the Saffron flower. Saffron is the most expensive spice in the world and the best saffron are known to be cultivated in Kashmir. In "The Last Saffron", Ali laments the destruction of saffron fields amidst war. This destruction symbolizes the uprooting of Kashmir's domestic industries which leads to weakened economies. "The Last Saffron" not only talks about Kashmir's cultural memory, but also how Ali views himself as a poet from Kashmir. Ali talks about his own imminent death in the poem. He is aware about his influence in the western literary world. He know that his death with lead to widespread coverage and it will attempt to celebrate his legacy. He knows that "men will be nailing tabloids" around the city. He hopes that his death would bring attention to the boys killed in April floods. He compares these boys to Saffron stamens, which when crushed bleeds a deep red color. "stamens−How many thousands?−/crushed to red varnish in my hands" (Ali Lines 25-26). The significance of Saffron is reflected with the name of Kashmir's biggest news publication "Saffron Sun" which Ali knows will cover the news of his death.

Spatial metaphor is where Kashmir's palimpsestic identity really comes alive. Rivers, lakes and ruins are where past and present meet. In "Farewell," Dal Lake is where "the arms of temples and mosques / are locked in each other's reflections" (Ali 14) and coexistence becomes viable even in the midst of violence. But Ali doesn't romanticize this layering; he confronts the erasure caused by occupation. In "Muharram in Srinagar, 1992," Death to the bureaucrat, sipping champagne while planning "Doomsday" (Ali 74) is the embodiment of the state's disconnection from Kashmir's lived trauma. Military infrastructure – bunkers, checkpoints and curfews – overwrite sacred geographies, and what Ali calls "a desolation they call peace" (Ali 14).

Agha Shahid Ali's poetry turns Kashmir into a text and culture palimpsest where history, memory and trauma are rewritten and never erased. Through the symbols of paisley, saffron and Sufi saints he resists the homogenizing violence and asserts Kashmir's syncretic identity against erasure. His work shows how cultural memory persists even in

fragmentation, as seen in the undelivered letters of “The Country Without a Post Office” or the “burned fields of Pampore” (Ali 22) which haunt the landscape as ghostly marks of loss and survival. By intertwining personal loss with collective mourning as in “Farewell”—where “memory is again in the way of your history” (Ali 14. He underscores the importance of keeping the marginalized voices in the face of state sponsored silence. Ultimately his poetry does not just document Kashmir’s layered past but reconstructs it, creates a counter archive where the region’s pluralistic heritage survives as a proof of existence even as its surfaces are scarred by occupation. In doing so he makes sure Kashmir remains “a shrine of words” (Ali 45) where every erased layer leaves behind an indelible mark of resistance.

CHAPTER 6

UNBIRDLED RESISTANCE: MOHAMMAD EL KURD' POETRY AND ACTIVISM.

Mohammed El Kurd is a Palestinian poet from East Jerusalem. He is a writer and a journalist who has been documenting illegal occupation by the apartheid state of Israel in West Bank and the Gaza strip. Along with his twin sister, Muna El Kurd, he started a grass root campaign #SaveShiekhJarrah. In 2021. This was in response to the Israeli court order of vacating multiple Palestinian neighborhoods, including Shiekh Jarrah which El Kurd was living at the time. Families from the neighborhood submitted a joint appeal to reverse the court decision. Half of El Kurd's family home was overtaken by Israeli settlers when he was only 11 years old. He watched as the settlers threw out some of their family belongings and kept others. The settlers burned their disposed furniture and celebrated a bonfire around it. In 2020 the settlers came in stronger with the occupation. In an interview to Mondoweiss, El Kurd reminisces about this dreadful day, "I was speaking to my neighbors recently, and I told them that I know this has happened to us before, but it's still

Fig.9. El Kurd, Mohammed [@mohammedelkurd],This is what Israeli colonizing of Palestine looks like. #savesheikhjarrah

#جراح_الشيخ_حي_انقذوا

so shocking that on May 2nd, people are going to snatch us out of our homes again and throw us in the street. And there's nothing we can do to stop them." The #SaveSheikhJarrah campaign gained online attention which gives young activists like El Kurd a platform to show the atrocities of Israeli government against indigenous Palestinians. Recent years saw

a shift of narrative when it came to Palestinian resistance. As explained in the Introduction, the Holocaust Cipher is used to quench European guilt when it came to the Jewish genocide in World War 2. The Holocaust was seen as a failure of the European society which deemed itself as the superior and most advanced civilization in the world. The Holocaust exposed the level of 'barbarity' the West was capable of, which they associated with colored races. To compensate for that guilt, The Balfour Declaration was passed and they promised the Jews of Europe a separate homeland in Middle East, in the region of Palestine. The Balfour Declaration is the spine of the Zionist project. Zionism is an ideology rooted in racial purity and apartheid as it represents the expulsion of Palestinians to build a Jewish state. I view this as a part of the colonial matrix of power that is actively trying erase Palestinian history from the books using an ideological narrative that the land of Judea which encompasses modern day Levant[5] was promised to Jews by a divine decree[6]. Here the colonial entity Israel utilizes "Theological politics of knowledge" (Mignolo 460) to refer to themselves as the chosen people of Canaan (Ancient name of Palestine). This asserts the narrative that Palestinians are encroaching on a land that was divinely promised to them. The colonial matrix of power which was responsible for the genocide of Jewish people in Europe turned out to be the strongest proponents of Zionism. Zionism was disguised as Jewish Nationalism when it was just another colonial project. The Holocaust Cipher overshadows genocides committed by European colonizers in parts of Africa and Asia. Establishment of Israel was seen a redemption arc for the European powers which was giving birth to yet another genocide in Palestine. The First and Second Nakba took place when Print media dominated the social sphere. Media houses were state run and news was easily censored. Which led to a lack of awareness regarding the history of Palestinian expulsion and genocide. Israel's assent saw the erasure of Palestine from world maps, literally and

[5] The Levant refers to the region which borders the Eastern Mediterranean Sea which includes present day Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

[6] Israeli legitimacy usually refer to the Old Testament verse Genesis 15:18 where God Promises the land of Canaan to Abraham's progeny who later becomes the twelve tribes of Israel through his grandson Jacob (who was also called by second name Israel"

metaphorically. Prior to 1948, the area now called Israel was labeled as Palestine on world maps.

Protest poets like Ghassan Kanafani and Mahmoud Darwish were at the forefront of Palestinian resistance poetry. However, it is through modern resurgence of Palestinian voices on social media that led to the rediscovery of their poetry and the other side of the story when it came to Palestine. The west and modern state of Israel did not take into account that after 70 years, the world will be connected by the internet which will broadcast their atrocities unfiltered and live to the whole world. Poets and Activists like El Kurd and the late Refaat Alareer paved way for a new round of Palestinian resistance poetry which recalls history, Palestinian heritage and modern cultural and geographical erasure of Palestine.

Mohammed El Kurd's debut poetry collection *Rifqa (2021)* uses the legacy of his grandmother, Rifqa El Kurd to paint a self-portrait of himself as he grew in a home that was half taken by Israeli settlers. In the afterword of the book, he iterates that modern media 'infantilizes' Zionism. "The world grieve Israeli loss without qualifiers, despite the disparities in death toll" (El Kurd 94). The world demands justification to mourn dead Palestinians and for them to be seen as human. El Kurd is nonchalant and unapologetic in his poetry. The world has turned their backs on Palestine, thus El Kurd, "no longer feel(s) responsible to give humans eyes for humanity", (El Kurd 94). El Kurd explains that his poetry is non revolutionary and nor will it free Palestine, but he wished to liberate Palestine and its "historic entity" by any means necessary. He is taking a strict decolonial stance with his rejection of Zionism and western narrative of Palestinian identity.

6.1 Poetry is Older than Israel: Countering Zionist Narrative

Mohammed El Kurd's grandmother is older than Israel. He establishes it as a fact to challenge Israel's legitimacy as a nation state. He uses his memories spent alongside his grandmother to paint a Jerusalem that is hidden by media. He makes an attempt of reversing Palestinian erasure in "Who Live in Sheikh Jarrah?" The poem is constructed through the erasure of an article by the same name In *New York* times in April 2010. The poems look scattered around the page as words are chosen from a newspaper clipping to construct his own sentences. He calls Shiekh Jarrah a refugee. He has been taking refuge inside a refugee. He recalls his childhood "razed by Israeli bulldozer" (El Kurd 3). This expulsion is not a

recent phenomenon, the expulsion did not start on 2nd May 2020. Sheikh Jarrah existed before 1948, when Israel was established. Every Palestinian struggle starts from 1948. The poem has a headline in the middle which reads "colonialism in Jerusalem killed the peace" (El Kurd 3) as a reminder that Jerusalem was a Hub where people from the three Abrahamic faiths lived together in harmony. It was the Israeli colonialism and the Zionist project that disturbed this peace. Israel distributed the space between the three Abrahamic faiths

El Kurd was born on 15 May, which is also commemorated as the Nakba day, as it marks the first round of Palestinian expulsion in 1948. He calls the day of his birth as an "unkindness" that "rewrote my autobiography". It is poignant reminder of the day when Palestinian was stripped of its freedom. In the poem "Born on Nakba Day", El Kurd looks bad at his genesis.

> "I was born on the fifteenth anniversary of the Nakba
> to a mother who reaped olives
> and figs
> and other Quranic verses,
> watteeni wazzaytoon" (El Kurd 4)

El Kurd uses figs and olive as a motif of his Palestinian Identity. He quotes the first verse of Surah At-Tin from the Quran which some exegesis interpret as alluding to the figs and olives of Jerusalem, showing the cities holy status in Islam. Islam is a part of El Kurd's identity and like Agha Shahid Ali, she also uses it a cultural symbol in his poetry. It is to be noted that El Kurd does not claim that Jerusalem is only a city for Muslims. He is aware that Jerusalem is a palimpsest of many histories as it fell to many powerful dynasties over centuries. Zionists believe that they are the chosen people of this region and God gave Jerusalem to them as a promised land. Figs and olives are a part of Palestinian culture and El Kurd finds the appreciation for these fruits in his religion too which intensifies his connection to his land as his mother reaped olives and figs from the gardens of Jerusalem.

> "I was born on the fiftieth anniversary of the Nakba.
> Outside the hospital room:
> Protests, burnt rubber,
> Kuffiyah'ed faces and bare bodies,
> Stones thrown onto tanks," (El Kurd 4-5)

Palestinians are born into violence. As some who was born on the fiftieth anniversary of the Nakba, EL Kurd's life has been riddled with violence. As his mother was ready to give birth to him and his sister, lives were taken outside the hospital room. He stresses on the tanks which had the US flag imprinted on it. The US is the largest arms supplier to Israel, making them equally responsible for Palestinian genocide. Against these tanks, Palestinians can only defend themselves by using rocks. Palestinian protestors don the Kuffiyah, a traditional black and white Palestinian scarf which has become a part of Palestinian liberation. There are many iconic photos of Palestinians facing a tank with nothing but rocks. But perhaps the most significant is of Abu Amro as he faces the Israeli forces with a slingshot and a Palestinian flag in his right hand. The picture is often

Fig.10. Hassona, Mustafa, Abu Amro with a slingshot, 2018

Fig.11. Delacroix Eugene, Liberty Leading the People

compared to the famous French Revolution painting by Eugene Delacroix, "Liberty Leading the People" as it portrays the same revolutionary fervor as Abu Amro's picture. El Kurd creates an "artistic rupture" (Rancier 25), connecting the present to the past by using repeated analogy. "Stones onto tanks" creates an image of a power struggle. The tank belonging to a powerful regime versus a proletariat with stones as a weapon. Here we see references to mediums of critical cultural memory that preserves instances of resistance in different periods of time. "Stones on tanks" is not an isolated phrase, but it becomes a verbal palimpsest where one is reminded of Abu Amro, "Liberty Leading the People." And the 'Tank Man' from Tiananmen Square massacre who stood up against a row of tanks in defiance of a bloody government crackdown in Beijing. El Kurd's description of a Palestinian protestor can be associated with many photographs, but personally I was reminded of Abu Amro when reading this poem. El Kurd thinks he was born into poetry, and it was fate that he was born the Nakba day. Life disappears in an instant, "happens between breaths." (EL Kurd 5) in Palestinian. However, every Palestinian birth is a form of resistance.

In “This is Why We Dance”, El Kurd’s father tells him to dance even in times of defeat. “Anger is a luxury we cannot afford” (El Kurd 7) to which he questions why even anger is a luxury to Palestinians. Palestinians are expected to sit through their oppression without raising their voice, otherwise they are labeled violent and dangerous. Israeli media uses Palestinian anger as a bait to paint them as villains in the eyes of the world. With the recent Gaza genocide that left the entirety of Gaza strip in rubbles, Hamas troops are vilified for starting the conflict whilst Israel has closed off Gaza since the last 70 years. It is disheartening to see that El Kurd talks about the 2008 Gaza bombings in this poem, where he knows that a “child is breadless, in Khan Yunis,/ dipped in a roof’s rubble” (EL Kurd 6). The reality has not changed since. This genocide saw many children buried under rubble, clinging onto bread and candy. El Kurd’s poetry is narrating the past that he grew up, but such images are still coming out of Palestine to date.

“Bulldozers Undoing God” is written in honor of Mahfouza Oude and her photograph where she is holding on to an olive tree with Israeli soldiers in the background with bulldozers.

“A chain is corseting
The tree’s waist and hers,
Flesh in flesh, Olive skin on olive skin” (El Kurd 11)

Fig.12. Ashtiyeh, Jaafar, Palestinian Mahfoza Oude, 60, cries as she hugs one of her olive trees in the West Bank village of Salem, 27 November 2005. Mahfoza and other villagers lost dozens of their olive trees after they were chopped down by Israeli settlers

The Palestine Liberation Organization revealed in a report that Israel has destroyed over 75% of the olive trees in Palestine. Olive is a symbolic crop for Palestinians. Olive leaves are also a part of the Kuffiyah design. As El Kurd lists, olives are a part of the Palestinian breakfast spread “olives/za’atar/tomatoes and cucumber/tragedy/ tear gas and

tea." (El Kurd 11). Olive trees are also hard to grow. It can only fruit after 3 years of growth, after which its fruits in abundance. Uprooting olive trees is akin to uprooting Palestinians. Mahfouza Oude clings onto her beloved tree because "her skeleton is that of the trees" and separating her from is like "undoing God" (El Kurd 12). El Kurd calls the Israeli soldiers "leaf born yesterday" as they face against a grandmother that is older than Israel itself. Grandmothers like Oude and Rifqa make Jerusalem because they gave birth to the Palestinian men and women living in the region.

Jerusalem is a Palimpsest. It is one of the most conquered and the most destroyed cities in the world. Yet its indigenous people rebuild it again and again. It a crossover for Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Outside of Biblical record, the region has been known as Palestine. William Shakespeare mentions Palestine in Othello, a play perform in the 17th century. Jerusalem is a columniation of different architectural styles ranging from Roman to Ottoman. It dons olive and orange trees, the latter affecting British colonists to an extent that they names a dessert after it, Jaffa Cakes. When empires fall, another is built on top of it, the fallen becomes a mark in history. However Jerusalem is built upon itself. It carries its history and legacy with its people and its geography. Its people are always ready to rebuild it because they recognize the mark of their homes. But the invader does not care for heritage, they only destroy to make space for themselves. They do not care for the land, nor do they cultivate it. The recent return of Palestinians back to Gaza after the January 15th, 2025 ceasefire a remainder of this. Palestinians go back to their homes which are nothing but rubble, because the land matter to them. El Kurd writes with the same sincerity because his grandmother carries the key of her house around neck. El Kurd is aware of his presence and how it affects the Palestinian narrative projected online and mainstream media. Just like his grandmother and other Palestinian grandparents who wear their house keys around their neck, El Kurd wears his poetry around his neck as well. Like Mahmoud Darwish and Ghassan Kanafani, El Kurd's poetry is a medium of critical cultural memory as it encapsulates the current reality of Palestine.

In "Rifqa", El Kurd draws a portrait of his grandmother that represents Jerusalem in itself. The poem is also a history of Palestinian expulsion and the memory of the two Nakbas. His grandmother lost her house in Haifa to Israel in 1948. It was a "morning of a red-skied May" (El Kurd 17) when the invaders broke the door to Rifqa's house as her family escapes with their key around their neck. Since the first Nakba. Since that day every

Ramadan observes fast with rifles instead of the villagers songs. Ramadan is a month of Fasting and observing patience. For Palestinians, every month is Ramadan because they have to be patient with their circumstances. The poem also explores Palestinian dehumanization.

> "Seven decades later
> They harvest organs of the martyred,
> Feed their warriors our own." (El Kurd 16)

El Kurd calls this Israeli Necroviolence. Israel is known to have the largest skin bank in the world. It is a matter of discussion as to how they harvest the skin to fill these banks. In a now deleted article, Swedish journalist Donald Bostrom accused Israel of organ harvesting from Palestinian detainees in Israeli prisons. Even Palestinian bodies are plundered like their lands. Both turned into rubble and dust.

Rifqa left her traces in Haifa. She her vines of roses in her occupied home, her neatly folded clothes, left in suitcases in case she comes back to wear them. She wore her key around her neck like other refugees until "her key" and "her neck" merged together to become the same color (El Kurd 19). In 1956, the period of the second Nakba, United Nation Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestine build temporary housing for the refugees along the Jordanian border. Rifqa was relocated there. She grew roses around her house again. Only "this time the roses had thorns/just in case" (El Kurd 20). The thorns are supposed to stand in for barbed wires, to the keep the invaders at bay. And yet again Palestinians were displaced in the UNRWA shelter. This is also when Rifqa lost her husband and became a widow. El Kurd then travels to 1967 where another Nakba struck the neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah. It was renamed as Shimon Ha'tsiddik. The official name was changed but it still had vines of grapes and roses planted by Rifqa. The children who experienced these Nakbas became El Kurd's family.

> "the twenty-first century didn't stop the Nakba
> From continuing years of resistance
> Popular fever and rashes
> Unable to stop this cancer from spreading" (El Kurd 21)

The Nakba followed into the 21st century as El Kurd was born during the Nakba day. He was denied his house before he could live it in. His family had to pay fines to access their own property. But the Israeli government opened it for the colonizers instead. In a viral from April 2021, Muna el Kurd, Mohammed El Kurd's sister, confronts a settler Yaakov Fauci on their house's front lawn. Muna tries to reason with Yaakov that he is settling in a stolen property. Yaakov replies without remorse that if he does not steal it, then someone else will. This is a confrontation between a settler and a native but it exposes the wider interaction between Israelis and Palestinians. As this video became viral, Yaakov became the posterchild for Israeli settlers. He represents the colonial settler mentality of Israel and the Zionist project. Yaakov also attacked Muna with a color spray after the confrontation.

Fig.13. Muna El Kurd confront Israeli settler Yaakov Fauci

El Kurd concludes the poem with a geometry of his grandmother's face, where each wrinkle is a trace of the past, "They tell the story of the particular events:/organized, plural, /ongoing." (El Kurd 23)

With his grandmother at the center of his poetry collection, El Kurd creates an intersection between the female experiences in oppressive society. In his afterword, he asserts the need to mention women's participation in the Palestinian rhetoric as "they aren't just trembling in their victimhood". The grandmothers and mother of Palestine cherish the land as their own child. They are also the most vulnerable group alongside children in a war struck region. The violence they face is similar but they also stay resilient in the face of violence. In "Three Women", El Kurd compares the experiences of three women from Atlanta, Jerusalem and Gaza. The three woman find themselves in a state of childbirth. The woman from Atlanta "black-haired and brown-skinned" (El Kurd 40), goes to an emergency room to give birth. She seems to be have been sexually assaulted by her 'uncles' and 'lovers'. The pain of childbirth creates a 'riot' in her throat which expels "poetry made of cuss words and drums." The woman from Jerusalem "olive-skinned and olive-selling" (El Kurd 42) is waiting at a military checkpoint, waiting to get access so she can rush to the labor room. The soldiers at the

check point deny her access without a permit, the woman pushes against the checkpoint, which is seen as a threat by the Israeli soldier who shoots her without any hesitation. The woman in Gaza is ready to give birth, but "her hospital bed is her home's rubble". (El Kurd 43). She is stuck under her collapsed home, with no trace of her husband except a 'bloodied beard'. The roof of her house is compared to Mary's sage, which hid her away from King Herod. This woman is concealed from the world due to the rubble. She is tired, her child is coming and her circumstances will not allow for a safe birth. "She imagines the umbilical cord, a noose." Women from three different cities, from vulnerable societies are connected through their shared experience of childbirth. The women from Gaza gives birth in rubble, which is still an ongoing reality. She is compared to Mary, another Palestinian woman. If she were to be alive today, she too might have given birth to Jesus amidst rubble. To condemn the genocide in Gaza, Palestinian Christians canceled Christmas celebration. Scene of Nativity in Palestinian Churches depicted Jesus born amongst rubble.

"Sheikh Jarrah Is Burning" provides an analysis on how Israeli and western media distributes t Palestinian suffering in the news. It is a prose poem written in the form of paragraphs with detailed description how Sheikh Jarrah's occupation was broadcasted. "The Nakba asserts Sheikh Jarrah is not an exception to the rule" (El Kurd 87). He calls Sheikh Jarrah a microcosm of the Zionist settler colonial project. El Kurd and many activist from Jerusalem have been calling it an Apartheid, but the media refuses to acknowledge words like apartheid, ethnic-cleansing and colonialism when it comes to Israel, "The media won't call it illegal" (El Kurd 87). He calls organizations like Nahalat Shimon 'Zionist philanthropy' as they sell Palestinian land illegally to settlers from America. Yaakov Fauci illegally occupied the El Kurd house through their services. Settlers from America barge into Palestinian homes with rifle. Upon Palestinian protests, the Israeli defense force puts up cement barriers and checkpoints near Palestinian homes to silence them. They provide security to the settlers who invade homes. El Kurd has to provide his ID to enter home. With such obvious signs that point to an apartheid system, western still refuses to call spade a spade "I told an American reporter this is apartheid, but she's not entirely convinced. I look at the

Fig 14. Jesus in Rubble

cuts she sustained, jumping over my neighbor's fence". (El Kurd 87). The hegemonic regime creates a cognitive dissonance amongst its police order, such as journalists and media houses. Even though the American journalist is a direct witness of the apartheid, she will look away as she is a distributor of the hegemonic regime. The El Kurd family protests the occupation but the IDF confronts them with Baton. The IDF sprays the protestors with skunk water. Muna's hands are blistered as a result. The Zionists chant for their death. The El Kurd siblings are detained for a few hours due to the protest. El Kurd calls his arrest comical. The IDF soldiers try to intimidate him during interrogation. "There's a circus in their brutality" (El Kurd 88). They look like cowards with their armor and M-16 rifles while Palestinians fight them with plastic chairs. The American journalist who refused to see the apartheid is kicked out of the neighborhood. El Kurd says that "decolonization is not an abstract theory" (El Kurd 88). Decoloniality entails total rejection of the Modern European Imperial System, which Zionism is a part of. This poem encapsulates how the colonial matrix of power aids Zionism through media manipulation. The reporter who refused to see the IDF soldier's action as morally wrong represents the collective amnesia of mainstream media from the west when it comes to Palestinian suffering because they are profiting off the Zionist project themselves. They are a part of the modern neo-liberal system that laud Israel for being the only democracy in the Middle-East. El Kurd acknowledges decoloniality as his actions when writing poetry are decolonial. He is countering the hegemonic narrative about Israel and Palestine by rejecting Zionism and Israel altogether. His poetry serves as a counter-archive that looks at Jerusalem, Shiekh Jarrah and Gaza from his perspective and lived experiences.

CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

7.1 Findings of the Study

This research has undertaken a cultural analysis of Esther Belin from Navajo Nation, Agha Shahid Ali from Kashmir and Mohammed El Kurd from Palestine; poets from contested regions whose poetry resist the active spatial erasure of their homeland under colonial, oppressive regime. By using decolonial frameworks, urban palimpsest theories and cultural memory, this research shows how the poets regain control over their narratives, challenge colonial amnesia and reassert Indigenous and oppressed identities.

The first research question asks how the poets create an "equalization" between their poetry and visual activism in urban and virtual spaces. All three poets cross the boundaries of literature by integrating their work into larger movements of resistance. Mohammed El Kurd is a poet and social media activist. His collection *Rifqa* (2021) juxtaposes personal and collective trauma, his digital documentation of Israeli settler violence in Sheikh Jarrah amplifies Palestinian voices globally. Esther Belin merges Navajo oral traditions with typographical experimentation in *Of Cartography* (2017), reclaiming Indigenous space through text and image. Agha Shahid Ali's *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997) links Kashmiri history with global solidarity, as seen in his references to Irish resistance and Sufi symbolism. These poets dismantle the distinction between art and activism, prove that poetry can mobilize real world movements while preserving cultural memory. The second research question asks how the poets turn urban spaces into literary palimpsests. Andreas Huyssen's concept of cities as layered archives of memory is key here. Belin maps Navajo cosmology onto highways and reservations, exposing the colonial infrastructures that divide Indigenous lands. Her poem "Study on the Road to Los Angeles" critiques U.S. Route 491, a highway built on stolen Navajo land, as a symbol of displacement. Ali reimagines Srinagar as a palimpsest of Mughal history, Sufi shrines and mass graves. He contrasts Kashmir's "Paradise on Earth" imagery with its militarized reality. His depiction of burnt post offices and undelivered letters magnifies the erasure of Kashmiri voice under Indian occupation. El Kurd's poetry reads Jerusalem as a palimpsest, where Israeli bulldozers scrape away Palestinian homes to overwrite the city with Zionist narratives. By showing these spatial contradictions, the poets reveal how

colonial powers erase Indigenous presence, their poetry rewrites these spaces with subversive histories. The third question looks at how the selected poets use cultural memory as way to combat their spatial erasure. Walter Mignolo's concept of decoloniality supports the poet's rejection of Eurocentric modernity. We see this in Esther Belin's use of code-switching between Dine Bizaad and English. She uses Dine Bizaad without translation as a way to combat the assimilationist policies imposed on the Native Americans. She confronts the United States civilized violence against her people through the Indian Relocation Act and boarding schools. Agha Shahid Ali archive's Kashmir's palimpsestic identity through cultural symbols like paisleys, saffron and geographical markers like the Himalayas and River Jhelum. His Elegy for Habba Khatun mirrors the current silencing and exile of Kashmiri voices. Mohammed El Kurd uses his memory as a weapon with unfiltered rage towards the Zionist state of Israel. He invokes his grandmother's memory, who lives a life of constant Nakba, contrasting her lives history with Israel's manmade project of Zionism. Poems like "Bulldozers Undoing God" roots the olive tree, a symbol of Palestinian identity. The ecological destruction of Palestinian gardens reflects the collective trauma of its people.

This research negotiates interdisciplinary dialogues between cultural studies, postcolonial theory, and memory studies. By applying Mieke Bal's cultural analysis and Jacques Ranciere's "aesthetic regime of politics," it demonstrates how protest poetry redistributes sensory and narrative power to marginalized communities. The poets' works exemplify Huyssen's "urban palimpsest," revealing how cities become battlegrounds for historical visibility. For Belin, Ali, and El Kurd, poetry is not merely reflective but generative: it constructs alternative geographies where Indigenous and oppressed identities thrive despite erasure. Their resistance is both textual and spatial, merging metaphor with materiality—a dynamic that existing scholarship on protest literature often overlooks. Protest poetry is not a passive literary marker but it underscores an active reclamation of space, culture and memory in the face of colonial erasure.

7.2 Recommendations

This study's interdisciplinary approach places protest poetry at the center as a place of cultural memory spatial resistance, and decolonial practice. The research can expand to encompass protest poets from other disputed area or areas often overlooked in the

mainstream. These include the Rohingya, Sámi, Romani, and Kurdish communities, who are often forgotten when it comes global protest poetry. For example, the Rohingya are a stateless group currently facing genocide in Myanmar, yet they've created spoken and written poetry that tells of their displacement and strength. The Sámi people, whose native lands cover Arctic Europe, use joik (their old song-poetry) to fight back against harmful colonial projects and climate damage. Such practices are similar to Navajo storytelling about land and urban spaces. Huyssen's concept of the Urban Palimpsest can be adapted to see how oral traditions reclaim the Arctic Circle as a living record. Romani literature is looked down upon as just "folk art," due to centuries of stereotyping. However, it offers rich oral histories of survival in various parts of the world, fighting racism. Future studies can adapt methodologies where these communities can be contacted for on-field ethnographic study.

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