

The Subcontinent Palimpsest in Alamgir Hashmi's Poetry

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I

Acclaimed, at the turn of the millennium by Indian poet and critic Vinay Dharvadkar for his style as the “enfant terrible of contemporary Pakistani Poetry in English” (245), and acknowledged as “The most widely published and well-known English -Language poet from Pakistan” (Coppola 214), Alamgir Hashmi has come to be recognized as “a major world poet...a cosmopolitan writer”(Goodwin vi). A close reading reveals that Hashmi's poetry is replete with spaces which are layered in terms of historical and cultural inscription, erasure and reinscription. The discussion focuses on this Pakistani poet's palimpsest reading of inscriptions on the Subcontinent by various conquerors such as the Aryans, Ashoka, Tamerlane, Alexander the Great and Muhammad Bin Qasim in order to illustrate the cultural accretion which has made the Sub continent such a rich area of historical study. This paper seeks to explore how Hashmi blends the accuracy of a historian and the skills of an archaeologist with the rich metaphors of a poetic consciousness, The result is a reconstruction of the multilayered socio cultural experience of the Subcontinent and a restoration of the historical erasure of culture and civilization wrought by conquest and colonization.

The study is divided into separate sections .The first section briefly traces the evolution of the term ‘Palimpsest’ from the ancient to modern ,from manuscript to metaphor. This is followed by the analysis of three of Hashmi's contemporaries namely Shuja Nawaz ¹, M. Athar Tahir², Salman Tarik Kureshi ³,who also attempt palimpsest readings of the historical inscriptions on the Sub continent ,and thereby forge links between the rise and fall of civilizations in this region. The comparison would facilitate a literary overview of the context in which Hashmi reworks the Palimpsest . The succeeding sections explore individual poems by Alamgir Hashmi drawing on other Pakistani poets writing in English ,such as Adrian A. Husain⁴ and Zulfikar Ghose ⁵ who also share Hashmi's desire to establish a connection with their multicultural heritage. This comparison highlights the fact that Hashmi's stylistic method is more complex and comprehensive in terms of the readings it generates. This is because the process of exposing constitutional layers of a solid body is facilitated by cutting a cross section, and then examining it under a microscope .In the same manner, Hashmi takes a slice of history and presents it under the poetic lens revealing all the different layers of cultural and social accretion which may otherwise have been ignored or passed over as insignificant. Thus it is Hashmi alone who attempts to

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replicate the form of a palimpsest on the poetic page so that the layering of history and the erasures wrought by conquest or colonization can be seen simultaneously.

At the literal level the word 'Palimpsest' is derived from ancient Greek meaning "scraped again" (OED 393) and refers to "Paper, parchment or other writing material prepared for writing on and wiping out again like a slate" (OED 393). The reference is to valuable papyrus, or vellum which was used as a writing surface in ancient times and had to be partially erased in order to be used again. However, in most cases the lower layers on such surfaces can be restored by archaeologists and are partially still visible under its recent use or overwriting. This word appeared in the seventeenth century when British historians used it for discussing ancient writing tools and manuscripts, and McDonagh in *Writings on the Mind* notes that "the palimpsest became a recurrent metaphor in the nineteenth century for the human psyche and for history" (208). It was however in the twentieth century that 'Palimpsest' began to be used metaphorically when applied to literature, film and theatre "to refer to the multiple meanings of any word and the multiple layers or levels of meaning in any text" (Murfin and Ray 264) implying a process of looking beyond surface meaning in order to see the deeper subtext.

The palimpsestic readings of inscription on the Subcontinent by various conquerors has been a subject of interest to quite a few Pakistani poets writing in English. In his poetic travelogue titled "*Journeys*" Shuja Nawaz identifies the dual role of the Pakistani poet as that of an archaeologist and engraver of history so that "A poem is a stone raised/from shafts sunk into the memory" (IV. 85-86) in order to inscribe "The marble that rings with each chisel stroke/of his mind" (IV.106-107). This excavation of the Collective Unconscious is further explicated through the journey metaphor. This implies that the individual perspective has to be abandoned for the collective and communal. He begins with a reference to the Indus basin settlement on a tract of land between the rivers Jhelum and Chenab in the Punjab region where "History sprouted in the Chaj Doab" (I. 24) and then refers to the conquest of Sindh by Muhammad bin Qasim as "The north wind took the seed /of our struggle to the Sindh" (I. 25-26). The historical reading of this topography acknowledges the erasure of the Indus Valley civilization by the Aryans and the invasion of Alexander the Great in "And when we speak, a voice/ emerges that brings back from the curving/ hills sounds that had been carried/ by travelers from Greece, the steppes, and sands/ of Arabia." (II. 41-45).

Other than conquest, history is also inscribed in the linguistic. This seems to be a major concern of M. Athar Tahir in "A Certain Season" where "Sanskrit, Greek, Turkish, and Persian/And tongues now scratched on rock faces/Or pressed into seals were as common as pipal leaves" (18-20). He too reads historical writing and rewriting on the Subcontinent beginning with the "Dravidian burden of reed bows" (87) connecting it to "the Aryans/ set them in motion" (50-51). However, Tahir is also able to read the erasures wrought by colonial occupation with the "White Man" (35) followed by the "convoy of jeeps, trucks /and anonymous might /on the move" (58-60).

Another Pakistani poet, Salman Tarik Kureshi, highlights the contemporariness and relevance of such palimpsest reading in one of six poems for Rudyard Kipling (well known as the great apologist for the British colonial occupation of the Sub continent) titled "A

Better Man Than I”.Kureshi addresses Kipling and talks of the city of Lahore “(where the subcontinent began; where/invasers paused/by the banks of the Ravi,” (III. 25-27) .Later in the same poem he redefines the British perspective of colonial occupation referring to the savage Druid ancestry of the British at a time when the Indus Valley Civilization had already flourished and been destroyed .

II

The concern with spatiality and the palimpsest is a necessity of the metaphysical consciousness emerging from Alamgir Hashmi’s choice of genre and language of expression ,both of which he addresses in his talk to the 62nd World Congress of International PEN(1995):

Growing up in my parents’ home in Lahore with its three spoken (English, Urdu, and Punjabi) and two half-spoken (Persian and Arabic) languages...English won out early enough. I chose it, or perhaps it chose me; I don’t write in any other language...I suppose that the *imaginative space of the poem* (my italics) is the fictive cartography of the continents; (*The Vintage Years*1997)

Choosing self-exile during the military dictatorship of General Zia-ul Haq in Pakistan , and living, teaching and writing in Europe, America and Canada his “poems are full of shifts between places –slippages, the negotiation of geographic and cultural spatialities that I find so attractive as a multi-national reader” (Kinsella 10).

Like an archaeologist Hashmi too attempts to excavate layers of historical inscription and read traces of colonial overwriting in “*A Topical Poem*”. That the poem is a palimpsest is made evident not only by its content, as it attempts to scrape away the historical layers of conquest on the Indian Sub Continent, but also through its form, as it is divided into seven sections which represent potent fragments of political and historical writing and rewriting. This invites a palimpsest reading and “To deconstruct history or texts...is in other words, to offer an insight into, or partial presentation of, a totality which as a totality is un-presentable” (Crowther 99).The poem attempts to read, restore and thereby to reconnect the traces of historical overwriting of the layers of the partition of Sub Continent , the conquest of Sind and Punjab, Ashoka’s reign and to even read inscriptions on the land as far back as Alexander the Great and the Aryans.

The construction of palimpsest space begins in “*A Topical Poem*” with:

Today, upon reading the newspaper in a week, I suddenly find the trains like rattlesnakes are running, friendship eagerly commuting between Lahore and Amritsar once again. (I. 1-6)

Just below the apparently thin layer of friendship and restoration of communication ties between India and Pakistan, lie the traces of “riots and massacres of everyday; /...and

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hot argument over the border” (I.10-13) since 1947 both countries have fought two wars in 1965 and 1971. Through metaphor, Time becomes a reusable parchment for the inscription of historical narrative , “It can be recycled/like a brown paper bag, tin can,/alphabet soup...coke...” (III. 24-28).

What is interesting is that Hashmi’s palimpsest works at two levels: the historical and the emotional. This may be demonstrated through an analysis of the next section of the same poem, which recovers the fragment of a very significant date in Muslim history namely “711 A.D” (IV. 28).It seems that Hashmi is drawing on Muhammad Bin Qasim’s conquest of Sind in this year, which began the advent of Islam in the Sub Continent, because he clarifies that this is the time when “The Muslims blue-penciled across /Sind and the Panjab (IV. 29-30)”. On closer analysis it becomes evident that this date is synonymous with another international event: the Muslim conquest of Spain (which occurred in the same year) after which the new Islamic territories were unified under the Islamic Umayyad Caliphate called Al Andalus. Thus portions of Muslim history are pieced together to establish causal connection and impact. At the emotional level Hashmi also constructs a layered effect. We are invited to read the underlying irony beneath the apparent objective reporting of factual detail about Muhammad Bin Qasim’s troops who began:

...correcting in God’s name the errors of composition
and faith against lesser judgment, for Ashoka’s empire
was too gilded with legend, the climate overruled by the
sun dividing his violence with shrewd repose. (IV.30-
35).

The apparently successful Muslim conquest therefore may be read either as a purification of the land or a desecration of Buddhist culture and erasure of Mauryan tradition. It is however also ironic, that Ashoka’s reign, especially the earlier part when he was expanding his empire, was also violent and his last war against the state of Kalinga left more than a million dead. Thus a layer of cruelty rein scribes another, and history repeats itself.

The fifth section of “*A Topical Poem*” begins the reconstruction of another fragment of Indo Pak history which surfaces with the mention of the Macedonian king, Alexander the Great.His motivation for the invasion of India was very different from that of the Muhammad bin Qasim because:

... Alexander Did not find himself daru, coming out To
India, through the undulations Of coniferous valleys,
for the sweet elixir of Hunza home-bound he had shaken
hands with defeated kings only to die later. (V.47-53)

It is through the use of the technique of embedding the *Hindi* fragment “daru” (V.48) referring to “potent distilled alcohol derived from the flowers of the mahwa tree” (Carstairs 220), into an *English* poem by a *Pakistani* poet that Hashmi reconstructs the multilayered socio cultural experience of the history of the Sub Continent, which in its diversity, must have left its traces on the Greek invader who dreamt of uniting the Subcontinent and Europe .Alexander even married a Persian princess encouraging the mixing of Greek and oriental ideas and customs. Another example of the same technique is the similar use of an

Urdu word in ‘The Lay of the Lost Minstrel’ (49-50) where Hashmi refers to the forced and violent colonial occupation of land and property in terms of “a spitting image/of *maidans* rumbled by jackboots” (38-39). The Urdu word functions as a trace of the original writing which has been erased and overwritten during 350 years of colonial occupation by the British of the Subcontinent. It stands for the gradual erasure of indigenous languages by English. This seems to be synonymous with the erosion of cultural and social diversity in this region as a result of colonial occupation. At the same time the use of the indigenous word in a Hashmi poem also becomes the space, which in defying translation, resists submission. Thus the poet seems to be reclaiming his heritage and initiating a process of decolonization. English no longer remains the ‘pure’ heritage (or even legacy) of the Colonizer, instead it is tainted by its contact with the colonized. Instead of ‘repelling’ indigenous words it ‘absorbs’ them and the bicultural space engendered becomes the equivalent of a mongrel mutation.

In “*A Topical Poem*” the feats of the Macedonian invader of the Indian Sub Continent are scraped away to reveal traces of the Vedic period beginning with the Aryans entering India through the Khyber Pass in 1500 B.C. and settling in different regions of northwestern India. The poet writes:

I do not know if the Aryans

Floundered along the way down:

...

When they came down from the mountains,

They saw their skins had changed colour

And they had the same, ordinary, local faces. (V. 55-56, 61-63)

The racial synthesis, indicated in these lines, became the basis for the social and cultural adaptation of these foreign invaders to the agrarian lifestyle of the local indigenous people. And, whereas the historian has to remain objective in his reporting of facts, it is the superimposition of various layers of historical conquest in palimpsest space that allows the poet to satirize elements such as the Aryan’s invention of the caste system “So the dictate came:/the degree of your touch ability will/slide from the relevant point/of descent from the Himalayas” (V. 64-67). What gradually becomes obvious is that:

Any cultural experience is itself an accretion of many layers, and the term is valuable because it illustrates the ways in which pre-colonial culture as well as the experience of colonization are continuing aspects of a post-colonial society’s developing cultural identity...The concept of the palimpsest is a useful way of understanding the developing complexity of a culture, as previous ‘inscriptions’ are erased and overwritten, yet remain as traces within present consciousness. This confirms the dynamic, contestatory and dialogic nature of linguistic, geographic and cultural space as it emerges in post-colonial experience. (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 175-176)

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The idea that sometimes the underwriting on a palimpsest affects the legibility of the overwriting is a point that Hashmi illustrates towards the end of “*A Topical Poem*”. We are informed of an ambivalent political relationship between the Sikhs and Muslims: :

The Sikhs are wonderful: their wisdom
Is their own, we divided the Panjab
And the Panjabi with them in 1947.
Their hair and turbans
black out what’s going on beneath,
so did the Air Force in the last war.
well, they blackout
And come west for the Guru each year. (VI. 73-80)

Despite the enmity the Sikhs are accommodated amicably once every year when they make their annual pilgrimage to the shrine of Guru Nanak in Nankana Sahib, Pakistan. Thus military secrets and political enmity are put aside, or deliberately forgotten at cultural and religious events.

III

“*Pakistan Movement*” is another poem by Hashmi, which like “*A Topical Poem*”, begins with cross border movements between India and Pakistan, and invites a palimpsest reading. Both poems are divided into sections or layers, however, whereas the segments of the latter explore the historical past of this region through inscriptions of invaders on the Indian Sub Continent, the former is more personal, focuses on the future of a newly born country, and voices the hope and aspirations attending the new birth through seasonal images of growth and harvest.

“*Pakistan Movement*” begins with the chaos and turmoil which characterized the withdrawal of Britain from India after the partition. The opening lines of the poem are indicative of how the poet plays with layers of connotations:

Movement, sure. Millions moving
From that side to this side
From this side to that side, and back again sometimes,
across the thoughtful moment
wherein stood those who were undecided, and suspect,
like border- posts signifying the mid-century frontier. (I.1-6)

The term “*Pakistan Movement*” is an expression applied to the political struggle of the Muslims for a separate homeland on the basis of religious and cultural differences with the Hindus. As the title of Hashmi’s poem, in addition to the high patriotic and Islamic ideals of the Muslims voiced in the Two Nation Theory, the term also becomes connotative of the chaos and confusion characterizing cross border migration at the time of partition, when displaced Hindus and Muslims tried to reach the territories, which according to British subdivision, constituted their own countries.

Hashmi begins an evocation of images from the Collective Unconscious in order to reconstruct the historical past of the partition of the Sub continent “The sultry summer ---if

you know what I mean—behind us./The blistering journeys on foot, the grinding oxcart/expeditions, the slow, steamy railways/and their marauders behind us.”(I.7-10) With each phrase a memory of suffering, bloodshed, colonial betrayal, and destruction surfaces until the partition trauma is reconstructed in its entirety, “The slit throats of the nobility, the malfunctioning/desire, England’s fond promises/and snuffed-out love of the communal streets;/their moonlight shadows of lead, the changing of the colours/and ‘47’s burning streets behind us.” (I.11-15)And although many of the readers may not have been a direct witness or victim of the withdrawal of the British from the Subcontinent it is possible to retrieve the experience from palimpsest traces as the poet states “I have surely come across it before, /in one of the books, or what I imaged on an alien shore/perhaps appointed by time for a landfall” (II.21-23). Such traumatic historical experiences are not forgotten and erasure or editing of incidents from short term or long term memory are not counted as losses because they can be retrieved from the Collective Unconscious and thus repossessed.

The dreams, hopes and aspirations of nations also leave traces on the Collective Unconscious, so that Allama Iqbal’s patriotic poetry, and Muhammad bin Qasim’s conquest all form a logical connection in Hashmi’s poem which itself also assumes a link in the historical chain as:

Think this is where we wanted to be from the beginning of
our time; a land as beautiful as a poet’s dream; or ever before
he found it, the Arab sailor’s act of faith. (“Pakistan
Movement” I.16-20)

It seems that these aspirations have allayed earlier trepidations when the poet had affirmed in “On Being Called ‘Alienated’ and Other Names” that “The reason is not obvious, for I have/know the wrath and the grace of this land” (32-33).

The second section of the poem “Pakistan Movement” increases the structural coherence of movement and migration through concurrent images of rising and falling. There is a gradual build up of rising energy, paradoxically, without any movement at all in “That’s my boat, these oars: the sail’s down. / The movement’s upwards from the south/and the choice considerable” (II.24-26).The global overview of landscape described emphasizes the cyclical movement of history .This is achieved by combining the aerial perspective of migratory birds with the seasonal as “The sea lions skid on imaginary ice, transfixing the world/with a new axis of summer ,.../...the people rising everywhere, free to grow /how they will, if they will.”(II.30-31, 38-39).

In the last section of the same poem, Hashmi’s vision fuses metaphors of surging and slow moving water, sowing and reaping, as well as topography and flora to demonstrate that the future is worth investing in and hoping for. Time becomes a palimpsest layered by erasures of history ,geography and cartography as the poet concludes with “...the cyclical crops I was looking at--/and the interminable deltas of hope, /where the rivers are either in torrent or endless flow, /the past being a curious valley, the present tense./Future’s is the only flower worth tending in this earth” (III.40-44).

IV

The previous discussion proves that motion is a significant feature in both “*A Topical Poem*” and “*Pakistan Movement*”. It is also the structural backbone of Hashmi’s poem titled “*Demo*”. This poem attempts to read the historical connection between the movement of military troops of invading armies and modern political demonstrations. A historical reference deliberately builds up a false analogy between the fourteenth century Muslim invader Tamburlaine’s conquests and present public protest against political oppression “The whole city is on the move/toward a goal which Temur knew/when his savage stallions galloped/past the citadel. Time has/ gathered dust/and walled it in.”(1-6).

Tamburlaine’s conquests of Turkistan, Russia, Hindustan, Syria, Anatolia, Armenia and Georgia may be viewed as erasures because entire cities such as Delhi, Isphahan, Damascus, and Baghdad amongst many others were wiped out and the inhabitants ruthlessly massacred by the troops. A dual perspective is generated in that, on the one hand Tamburlaine is viewed by many as a hero in terms of spreading Islam and cleansing central Asia of infidels. However, on the other hand, he is also denigrated by many on account of the massive carnage committed during his exploits. That there is no comparison in terms of the passion, purpose and design which fuelled the Mongolian warlord’s army (of which Hashmi cites as example the conquest of the impenetrable citadel of Aleppo in Syria), and present street demonstrations, becomes obvious when the poet speaks of “But men are moving. / They shout their throats out/...’ ‘Down with this’/and ‘Down with that’ ” (11-12, 18-19).

Where palimpsest space facilitates connection and clarity, it also serves to highlight dissimilarity and disintegration so that public participation in protest is reduced to exhibitionism and entertainment as everyone is “On the move! On the move!/Somebody is gabbling about Stakhanovism./Another gadabout is nibbling a sandwich/while the poodle in his arms,/by turns, wakes and sleeps” (20-24).

The single minded passion, selflessness and valour of great rulers of the past have been eroded and replaced by a lack of commitment and half-hearted participation. In “*A Short History of India*” Zulfikar Ghose also voices the deterioration of leadership by tracing the historical cycle of politics in the subcontinent from Ashoka’s rule to modern democracy as “Ever since Ashoka’s wheel advertised/the endless potential of endeavour, / the wobbly wheel of the bullock cart/has ploughed the pumpkin earth”(1-4).And he comes to the same conclusion as Hashmi summarized as “Look now at the enfranchised people, /the spoiled votes of a democracy:/passivity can never be ruled, nor a wheel negotiate a ditch” (9-12).

Hashmi uses the vexillological yoking together of various causes such as communism, protest, Pakistani patriotism, peace and even caution in race car driving through a respective listing of coloured banners in “*Demo*” , in order to recreate the layered texture of the historical ,cultural and societal fabric as :

Numerous banners have been strung
on this bamboo. Someone is always there
to hold it. Today we have a red flag:
yesterday ,it was a black one.
And tomorrow I do not know.

Bring any red flag, black flag, green flag,
white flag, yellow flag, flag , flag, flag...
It will do. (25-32)

But at the same time the lines also demonstrate political erasure and reinscription wrought by petty causes, shifting allegiances and profitable alliances.

Hashmi thus demonstrates how it is characteristic of the palimpsest that we can see the process of erasure and retention of past history simultaneously "... there is time, and there is history, /cynical of such moments covered in dust" (9-10) and after all "Someone must hold the bamboo" (33).

V

In tracing the historical background of Peshawar, a city in the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan, Alamgir Hashmi in the poem titled "*A Guide Map of the Northwest*" attempts to map a region known for its cultural diversity in which "The unruly Swat River, /for instance tosses out history/like a squirming catch/which must sell" (20-23) and demonstrates that geography is a succession of erasures and over writings which have transformed the globe. The region, which the poet has chosen to excavate the historical details of, is a very rich one, as it has absorbed the culture and traditions of various empires which it has been annexed with. The area which came to be known as Peshawar was a part of many empires such as the Gandhara Empire, the Persian Achaemenid Empire and then the Hellenic Empire of Alexander the Great, followed by the Maurya Empire. It was ruled by Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Parthian kings, the Mughals, Iranian invaders and the Sikhs. From 1849 to 1947 it remained under British rule..

The appropriation of colonized space as a major thematic concern is hinted at in the opening two lines of the same poem quoted directed from the famous Bombay born English poet and novelist Rudyard Kipling's poem "*The Ballad of the King's Jest*" (1.5-6).The intertextuality generated, also creates a multi textural effect which substantiates that "The Palimpsest introduces the idea of erasure as part of a layering process. There can be fluid relationship between these layers. Texts and erasures are superimposed to bring about other texts or erasures. A new erasure creates text: a new text creates erasure" (Galpin). Hashmi's narratology attempts to redirect the reader's attention from the margin to the centre and from the colonial to the post colonial. In a "*A Guide Map of the Northwest*" 'As the snow - bound trade of the North comes down/To the market square of Peshawur town', /I quote from Kipling/... the Pathans-/In English idiom pre-'47/Had to rhyme with 'batons'"(1-3 , 6-8).

It is in this naming that the historical past of the city can be retraced. The Kushans, a tribe from central Asia, founded the city called Purushapura(also known as 'Lotus Land') that would become Peshawar, which was the name given to it by the Mughal emperor Akbar (meaning 'The Place at the Frontier' in Persian).In the lines quoted above the allusion to the colonial pronunciation of Pathans rhyming with "batons" (8), the spelling of "Peshawur" (2), as well as the reference to "had to" (8) signify the 'imperial' construction of native identity through 'naming' which "is one of the mechanisms used by colonizers to inscribe themselves upon the land in an act of ownership" (Cryderman).Vacant space

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becomes place when it is named because “. Place itself, in the experience of the post-colonial subject, is a palimpsest of a process in language: the naming by which imperial discourse brings the colonized space ‘into being’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 175).

When the poet arrives in Peshawar, the reader is given the first hint that what is undertaken as a walk through the main market of the city, is in fact a journey through history, time and space leading to discoveries about cultural identity. Hashmi explains, “Once you are here, you find /stunning extremes prevail:/old ambuscades echo in the space/gnarled like mountains./(You are hearing yourself!)”(14-18).

The poet employs the technique of embedding Peshawar’s pre- colonial past in its post colonial present. This creates the impression that the past is still very much alive in the commerce of the city. The fact that Peshawar was a commercial and trade centre advantageously situated on the Silk Road is acknowledged by the poet as “From the silk we have or can borrow, /a ribbon now ties, Pindi to Kashgar ;”(37-38). This strategic position facilitated it in becoming a centre of trade and a main crossroad of various cultures between Afghanistan, India, the Subcontinent, Central Asia and the Middle East. But all the hustle and bustle of trade has deteriorated “...the rubble lost its shine/in these parts, no caravans of silk,/furs, and gold thread from Samarkand and/Bukhara now;”(30-33) and the flow of cultural and commercial exchange has been stemmed because “our cloth, indigo, tea, and mascara/we keep ourselves”(34-35).

A slice of history may be recaptured as “time seems tied in the same knot” (38) and relived through commercial transaction, which is a reliable gauge of the cultural. The exploration, which is conducted through a catalogue of detail, is very oriental in its sensibility as the auditory and olfactory complement the visual, in an attempt to replicate the confusion and mystery .We are told that Peshawar is “A place of winding alleys,/noise and intense aromas,/dense with shops, cyclists, horse-drawn/tongas ,carts pulled by water buffaloes/and put-putting”(41-45).

The last lines of the poem plot the deterioration of this grand city from a hub of trade and commerce, to an arms manufacturing stronghold “.... Out in Dera,/shotguns sell disguised as canes/and a ballpoint pen can kill!”(48-50).The arms culture prevalent in this region is evident in the fact that even today a tribal system operates here in defiance of rule by the Pakistani government .The military bent of mind of the local people may be traced back to the reality that they have had to defend their territory against many European invaders who came through Kabul via the Khyber Pass identified by Adrian A. Husain in “Khyber” where there are “...signs /of an unyielding:/...pickets----derelicts of the Empire--/quite at home on these hills.(16- 17, 23-24).

Moreover, the determination of the border called the Durand line between Afghanistan and Pakistan by the British in 1893 resulted in the partition of Pakhtun territories and border conflicts followed for reunification. However, Hashmi is careful not to ignore the rich creative tradition of Peshawar manifest in its various markets trading in a wide assortment of the artistic, ranging from a prolific oral narrative tradition, and the crafts, to metal ware merchandising, denture development and furniture. The description of the main city in “A Guide Map of the Northwest” is rendered in terms of a maze of at least four interconnected markets with distinct functions and attractions for avid shoppers. There is the “...Qissa

Khawani,/the Street of Storytellers,”(51-52),the “ Misgaran Bazar for copper and brass goods./Or you can turn into Namakmandi,/the salt market,/also home to the false teeth makers;”(54-57)and then there is the possibility that “...you are/looking for grass prayer-mats of Pathan Bazar/or pitchforks made of bent sticks,/and charpoies”(59-62) .This description depicts the accretion of cultural change as a reservoir of Hindko culture.

As a conclusion it may be said that the journey of the Pakistani poet writing in English into the future lies through the acknowledgement and celebration of a multicultural and multilingual heritage. Hashmi’s excavation of layers of cultural accretion reveals connections between apparently divergent civilizations ,cultures and religions such as the Muslim, Indian, Buddhist ,Mauryan , Dravidian ,Macedonian, Persian and even the British, inhabiting the same topographical and geographical territories at different points in the continuum of time.

It is in this Palimpsest space that history unveils its layered construction, and the x-ray vision of the poet facilitates a perspective which becomes mutually inclusive in that it is not only cross cultural, but also cross national. The exploration of the palimpsest in Alamgir Hashmi’s poetry reveals that the Subcontinent has absorbed the impact of cross cultural trends and left its mark on the oriental poetic consciousness. This stratification invites engagement and exploration in order to discover new realities and relations with the past. It cultivates a perspective which encourages viewing events in terms of a continuum ,and not in isolation. The attempt to read traces of historical writing , overwriting and erasure is also the attempt to restore lost fragments and severed connections. Hashmi’s construction of palimpsest space not only reveals the rich multicultural and multilingual heritage of the Subcontinent, but also attempts to replicate the palimpsest stylistically on the poetic page in terms of embedding indigenous words and place names which are absorbed as readily into the English Language as the experience of conquest and colonization is integrated into the layering of history.

End notes

1. Shuja Nawaz was born in Jhelum , the Pothowar region of the northeast Pakistan. He received a postgraduate degree in Journalism from Columbia University, and settled in suburban Alexandria ,Virginia. Besides writing poetry, he has worked on translating Punjabi poetry into English.
2. M.Athar Tahir was the Rhodes Scholar for Pakistan at Oriol College ,Oxford (1974),the Rotary International Scholar at the University of Pennsylvania (1979) and the Hubert Humphrey Fellow at the University of Southern Clifornia(1984).He is also an elected Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and writes short stories, translations ,essays and poetry .
3. Salman Tarik Kureshi(b.1942) received his education in Lahore and later from the London School of Economics. He was a founding member of ‘Mixed Voices’ forum for poetry and prose.
4. Adrian A.Husain (b.1942)was born in Kanpur,India.He received his education in England, Switzerland, Italy and at New College, Oxford .He received his Ph.D from the University of East Anglia and a recipient of the Guinness Poetry Prize (1968) .In 1979 he founded,a multilingual and multi cultural forum called ‘Mixed Voices’ for creative writing.
5. Zulfikar Ghose was born in Sialkot ,Pakistan in 1935.He migrated to England in 1952 and later settled in Austin ,Texas.(1969).He has published poetry,literary criticism and novels.

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