

## **Political Renegotiation of Scriptural Spaces in Alamgir Hashmi's Poetry.**

**Amra Raza**

*University of the Punjab, Lahore.*

### **Abstract**

This paper examines how Alamgir Hashmi, one of the most widely acknowledged Pakistani poets writing in English, draws on Buddhist, Christian and Muslim scriptural Spaces as a frame of reference and then re-explores them to construct humanist space. This process of political renegotiation of scriptural frames of reference, and reconstruction in poetic space results in an enrichment and widening of appeal without decreasing the significance of, or challenging sacred space. In this process Hashmi also cleverly constructs a shared space of suffering between the seers and the Pakistani poet writing in English, since their vision seems to be beyond the masses.

**Key Words:** Spatial constructs, frame of reference, sacred spaces, Pakistani Poet writing in English.

### **Introduction**

A careful examination of some of Alamgir Hashmi's poems with Muslim, Buddhist and Christian frames of reference such as "Gautum"(MSK88-89), "A Life"( NTTNTP58-62), "Lot's Wife" (IOP38),and "The Prophet"(IOP12-13) indicate that he effects a complex process of desacrilegising and humanizing of sacred space (charted in the scriptures). This does not in any way debunk, decrease the importance of, or challenge the validity of the sacred space or the persons in the scriptures. It in fact, enriches, personalizes, and thus widens it. It is in this way that the established sacred space is widened as it is re explored to construct humanist space.

There is a similarity in the slices of scriptural space which Hashmi chooses to examine and reframe in his poetic narrative. The focus is on those moments in the lives of the proponents of various religions, such as Siddharta Gautama , Jesus Christ and the Prophet Muhammad(PBUH), when they have made their decision to accept the ministry of God (in the case of Christianity and Islam),or their own higher faith(in the case of Buddhism). The motivation is to find salvation and help people to ease their suffering. It is the moment of their greatest strength because they have realized their true vocation, but ironically it is also this decision which

## South Asian Studies 29 (2)

alienates and isolates them from their community of either non-believers or the people who cannot comprehend their following or faith.

Other Pakistani poets writing in English also draw on scriptural space. Shuja Nawaz in "The Stone Buddha" writes, "Strong/smooth ambassador of the frozen hours/you revive memories of a sacred past...You are moulded by all that precedes/and all that follows" (3-5, 11-12 J), and M. Athar Tahir in "Birthday Sutra" also seeks expression in sacred space with :

When sun's re-entry  
into the domain of the bull  
conjures up those weeds  
I had rooted out last year;  
.....  
then do I dare mount a crucifix  
or make for a cave  
or like Gautum go into saffron exile?(3.29-32,41-43 JBTP)

The poem "Gautum" (MSK88-89) frames the decision of the Shakya prince Siddharta, to abandon the life of ease and luxury in his father's palace and find a way to end the cycle of human suffering or 'samsara' reinforced by birth and rebirth. The poem arrests in particular, the moment of hesitation Gautum must have had when he crossed the threshold of the palace (when he was approximately 30), leaving his young wife Yashodhara and his infant son Rahula behind. But it also marks a point of decisive action in which an individual has made the decision to be true to his calling and even fulfilled the prediction made by the great seer Asita at his birth, that Siddharta would be the man to find an end to human suffering by discovering "the extinction of birth" (Conze 36).

The frame of reference in Hashmi's "A Life" (NTTNP 59-62) is Christ's ministry and crucifixion. After being baptized by John the Baptist, Jesus went into the wilderness for 40 days and was tempted by Satan. On his return from the wilderness John was arrested and Jesus took up the message of God. The poem charts the space of approximately three years in which, after being rejected by his own people in Nazareth, Christ began his ministry in Galilee, Judea, Jerusalem, Perea (between 27 and 30AD), and then returned to Jerusalem where he was crucified. "A Life" is divided into 3 sections titled 'Galilee', 'Bethsaida' and 'Golgotha' which have significant connotations as biblical spaces. Galilee comprises the largest northern region of Palestine. In fact this region forms the locus of much of the three gospels of the New Testament because much of Christ's ministry occurred on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Four of Christ's apostles were recruited here, and the Sermon on the Mount was also delivered on a hill overlooking this sea. Moreover, Christ also performed many miracles in this region such as walking on water, calming a storm, and feeding 5000 people with only five loaves and two fishes. Bethsaida was a fishing village in the days of Christ situated where the Jordan River enters the Sea of Galilee, whereas Golgotha was a place of execution outside Jerusalem also called 'Calvary.'

“The Prophet” (IOP12-13) draws on the beginning of the ministry of the prophet Muhammad (pbuh). The sacred space it explores is the time when the eminent members of the polytheistic Quresh tribe approached the Prophet’s (pbuh) paternal uncle, Hazrat Abu Talib, telling him that he should stop Muhammad (pbuh) from preaching monotheistic and warned him that his nephew’s life would be in danger if he did not desist. Maulana Safiur Rahman Mubarakpur in Arrahiqul Makhtum explicates that when Hazrat Abu Talib conveyed this message to the Prophet (PBUH) he calmly stated that were the Quresh to put the sun in his right hand and the moon in his left he would still not give up preaching the oneness of Allah (139).

The common denominator in these Hashmi poems with a religious frame of reference seems to be the vision or faith of the individual which lies beyond the comprehension of the masses. And Hashmi cleverly constructs a shared space in which the prophet and the poet are united in their predicament of suffering. M. Athar Tahir also uses this technique when he writes:

No, I am no Christ  
nor have I carried any cross  
along the road.  
yet the mosquitoes around my head  
thorn the dusk into a halo. (“Crucifixion” 6.78-83 YY)

The use of triple negatives reinforces the identification, instead of negating it. The narrative in emphasizing the difference in fact highlights the similarity in the suffering of a modern Pakistani poet writing in the language of the colonizer, isolating him from his own community.

The vocations of poet and prophet both connote personal suffering, the quest for salvation, the patient endurance of the skepticism of the masses, and acting as a medium for the transference of a divine or inspired message. However, whereas other Pakistani poets writing in English also use the religious frame of reference, the identification between poet and prophet is often incomplete and shared space serves only to heighten the poet’s dissatisfaction. Daud Kamal

I have read  
somewhere  
that Buddha  
gave a handful  
of yellow leaves  
to Annanda  
and told him  
that besides those  
there were  
many thousands  
of other truths  
scattered  
all over the earth.

.....

I, too, have tried  
to plumb  
the depths  
of my being  
but found nothing-- (1-13,18-22 "The Gift" ASV)

And M. Athar Tahir in "Birthday Sutra" voices a similar dissatisfaction and realizes that, unlike Siddhartha Gautama, he cannot break the cycle of monotony:

It was a full moon of May  
Like this, many centuries ago,  
When under the shadow-play  
Of leaves and light  
His search had ended  
In the still centre of the turning world.  
But tonight for me  
Is another beginning  
For in the four spokes of the wheel  
My life was knit  
And I must go on  
Until I find silence  
And a finger pointing the way. ( 7. 69-81 JBTP)

The frame of reference for Hashmi's poem "Lot's Wife"(IOP 38 ) is the disobedience of the Prophet Lot's wife who had been warned not to look back at the city of Sodom when they were fleeing, because God had decreed that it would be destroyed. She chose to lag behind and looking back, was killed along with the rest of the inhabitants. This event is described in the Bible( Luke ch. 17 sec 28-37 .802),and in the Quran ( Surah 7 *Al A'raf*Ayat .80-84, Surah 11 *Hud*Ayat. 77-78 and 81-81, Surah 15 *Hijr*. Ayat 57-75, Surah 29 *Ankabut*Ayat. 28-34 ). However, it is in this poem that Hashmi chooses to frame the space in which Lot's wife makes a decision which, like the other scriptural characters, leads to her destruction, but (unlike the other characters)is devoid of salvation.

Scriptural narratives emphasize the factual, temporal, causal and historical. They have a wide canvass which justifies the domain of public ministry. Poetic narrative space seeks to construct alternative reality registering sensitivity to the imaginative, personal, private and the emotive. Thus when sacred space is reframed and reconstructed in poetic narrative space it is enriched and the meaning deepened .Hashmi acknowledges this as a technique quite explicitly in "Gautum" where he makes clear that the domain of the poem lies beyond the familiar:

How Gautum had succumbed  
to the spirit  
a seduction that made him  
desert the shadiest groves  
of love and irrigated rice-  
fields;

or how he had widowed his wife  
 in his life is painfully  
 familiar. Then let's celebrate  
 the discontent that fell upon him,  
 the unhappiness of a fine brain  
 that seeks employment .(1-12 MSK)

In "A Life" (NTTNTTP 58-62) the religious frame of reference is followed very closely. It includes the reframing of many biblical events such as Christ's disciples being refused entry into the village of the Samaritans ( Luke ch. 9 sec.51-56 .793), the feeding of 5000 people by Christ with only five loaves of bread and two fishes (Luke ch.9 Sec.10-11 .792 ,Mathew ch.14 Sec.14-21), and the storm at sea just before the arrival of Christ and his disciples in the country of the Gadarenes ( Luke ch.8 sec.22-25 .790, .Mathew ch.8 sec.19-27). The poem also refers to Christ's walking on water ( Mathew ch.14 sec.22-34 ), his boarding of Simon's ship telling him to cast his nets which came out full whereas the entire night's fishing had been unsuccessful ( Luke ch.10 sec.38 .794, Mathew ch.4 sec.18-22), and Christ's fasting in the wilderness for 40 days ( Luke ch.4 sec.1.785).

However, what gradually becomes obvious on a comparative analysis of the scriptural narrative on the one hand, and the reconstruction of poetic space on the other hand, is the sensitivity of poetic space to heat, mood, speed, distance as well as visual and personal detail in Hashmi's rendering and reframing of the biblical. Thus we are told in section one of "A Life" titled 'Galilee' that Christ and his disciples were:

For all this hot and tired  
 .....  
 Their cheeks were flushed,  
 their voices angry. And as they came  
 nearer ,they quickened their pace,  
 each wanting to be the first to explode.  
 Breathlessly they told it—  
 the people in the village had refused  
 to receive them,  
 had given them blunt notice  
 to seek shelter somewhere else.  
 The other ten were indignant too. (9, 16-25 NTTNTTP)

The difference between scriptural space and poetic space becomes even more evident on a closer analysis of the narration of the same event in the New Testament where the event about the inhospitable attitude of the Samaritans is reported without emotive detail:

51 AND it came to pass, when the time was come that he should  
 be  
 received up, he steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem,

## South Asian Studies 29 (2)

52 And sent messengers before his face:and they went ,and entered into

a village of the Samaritans, to make ready for him.

53 And they did not receive him, because his face was as though he

would go to Jerusalem.

54 And when his disciples James and John saw this, they said, Lord, wilt

thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume

them, even as Elias did?

55 But he turned and rebuked them, and said, ye know not what manner

of spirit ye are of.

56 For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save

them. And they went to another village. (Luke ch.9 793)

Poetic space is more effectively infused with the anger and frustration of Christ's followers as this event is reframed by Hashmi in section one of "A Life" as:

'Lord ,these people are insufferable,'  
one cried.'Let us call down fire from Heaven.'

The others joined:

Make them pay for their boorishness.

Show them they cannot affront

Us with impunity. Come, Lord ,

The fire—

But there are times

When nothing a man can say

is saying

what fire would consume where words failed; (31-41 NTTNTP)

It is the spatial sensitivity of poetry which registers such details as facial expression, gestures and even posture with the insertion of minute details about Christ in the same section as :

His lips tightened;

his eyes strained, foreshadowing the bitter weeks.

Quietly he gathered up his shawl.

Down the road they trailed

after him to his silence. (46-50 NTTNTP)

Thus when Hashmi reframes the scriptural characters in poetic space they become more human. And in bringing them within the human ambit their reverence is in fact increased.

Poetic space allows the exploration of the mind space of the protagonist in a way in which, for example, Christ becomes more human in his suffering. This is because his feelings and resolutions are not simply reported and thus taken for granted as in scriptural narrative. The reader is invited to enter his mind space and follow the reconstruction of the progression of events from the protagonist's view point, experiencing a simultaneity of occurrence characteristic of dramatic narration where the spoken word creates the action. In the second section of "A Life" titled 'Bethsaida' we are told that:

He had not long to wait.  
 The high tide of revolt had subsided  
 The courage which had never deserted him cleared his soul,  
 Steadied his muscles  
 Aware how wind ripples  
 In water like laughter echoing a lost woe,  
 He knew he had to face it. (87-93 NTTNTP)

The visual and the auditory strongly reinforce the personal and private, as we are informed that Pilate's soldiers hunt for Jesus in the third section of the same poem 'Golgotha':

The soldiers were already at the entrance of the garden.  
 From his vantage on the hill,  
 He could mark the progress of their torches  
 Across the brook, up the path.  
 The clang of their arms rang jarringly through the trees;  
 Rough exclamations smote the air  
 Like profanity in a temple. (94-100 NTTNTP)

The narrative through this technique emphasizes the quick, purposeful movement of the group which is contrasted strongly with Christ's resolute and stationary position on the hill. Moreover the high and low perspective of the hunters and the hunted lends the poetic space an almost cinematic clarity.

The temporal is plotted in the Bible with "Now...", "And", or "In the meantime" to emphasize a causal connection without being specific. This is done to withstand the test of time which all holy texts must endure. Hashmi uses a different technique to chart the temporal when he reframes sacred space in poetic narrative. There is sensitivity to the passing of time evoked through the position of the sun, and the lengthening of shadows which adds a cyclical rhythm to the historical as in section one of "A Life":

Half an inch taller in the morning,  
 They had walked long  
 Before the day could gauge  
 The size of men  
 In the hourly drain of annoyances. ( 1-5 NTTNTP)

Time is also charted through unnatural events which act as milestones of the past as in, "They had seen the famines,/wars ,and migrations through..."(3-4 "The

## South Asian Studies 29 (2)

Prophet” IOP)and the seasonal since, “As always ,summer had a kind/of persistence in the last” (25-27 “Gautum” MSK).

The reverent distance carefully cultivated and maintained in scriptural narratives is often bridged in poetic space which, in arresting the moment, dwells almost lovingly on imaginative detail. This technique is illustrated in section six of M.Athar Tahir’s “Birthday Sutra” as:

It was on the banks of the Nairanjana  
O Gautum ,that you fasted to live  
On a single seed of sesame  
Or a grain of rice  
Which did not help. (50-54 JBTP)

But it is perfected in the evocation of the sensual and sensitive by Hashmi in “Gautum” where we are told that:

... At night  
Gautum went to his wife’s room  
And saw her sleep lit by an oil-lamp,  
The infant sleeping sweetly  
surrounded by the flowers.  
He wanted to bow to kiss them.  
But the fear prevented him, lest  
He should wake his wife. (27-34 MSK)

“The Prophet” (IOP12-13) also follows the Quranic frame closely in references to the prophet being called a poet and a madman when he recited verses from the Holy Quran (Surah 15 Ayat 6, Surah 38 Ayat 4, Surah 68 Ayat 61, Surah 6 Ayat 53, and Surah 83 Ayat 29-33) in “Come off it, they said:/you sound inspired/go write a book of poems;or see a doctor”(36-38IOP) . However, the focus of the poem is Hashmi’s delight and appreciation of the poetic beauty of God’s inspired verse and the great affection and reverence for the Prophet (pbuh) in:

“Even if  
you brought over  
the sun to shine in my right hand;  
even if  
you brought over  
the moon to shine in my left hand.”  
I don’t know what they thought;  
but I love the words  
and the man who spoke out  
in spite of them (45-54 IOP)

Another technique Hashmi uses to humanize scriptural space is a clever contemporizing of suffering. For example in the New Testament version we are told, “And Jesus answering said, “O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you, and suffer you?’ ” (Luke ch.9 sec41 .793). This frustration is



humanized as it is voiced from a modern perspective by Christ in the second section of Hashmi's poem "A Life":

God ,must I ride the country circuit  
and sit in a dingy office ,  
settling the community's petty disputes?  
What futile rebellion is waiting  
At the narrow limits of my life? (73-77 NTTNTP)

And in "Gautum"(MSK88-89), Siddhartha's discontent with royal life, and longing for spiritual fulfillment is expressed through the analogy with man's aspirations in a modern world as "the leisure which brims over/a summer holiday and must return/to the dull sanity /of routine "(13-16 MSK).

Religious space is also transcended as it carries the burden of sanctity .Thus a thought is often framed in the humanistic vein such as for "Lot's Wife" who expresses her frustration and yearning as:

I only want to sit  
in the rider's seat,  
not collect fuel in vacant  
parking lots ,and finish  
my cornet in peace . (6-10 IOP)

She complains in the manner of any feminist wanting to break free from a husband obsessed with duty, punning with almost malicious delight on 'lot':

I am tired of alarmists,  
Adventurers ,and the likes  
Of you for an old crone.  
Now just leave me alone,  
And thanks a lot.(11-15 IOP)

Similarly Siddhartha, like a modern day husband ,on the threshold of abandoning his wife in the dead of night decides against kissing her goodbye for fear that she might wake up, playfully subverting modern idiom, "...Or was it/the old rule that one should /let a sleeping girl lie?"(34 -36 MSK).This not only modernizes scriptural space, but also personalizes it.

In Hashmi's appraisal of the scene just after Christ's crucifixion described in the third section of "A Life"( NTTNTP 58-62) there is an inherent cynicism as he writes "And, when two faithful women looked to heaven,/only bird's droppings/seemed through the air/the signal of his death."(155-158 NTTNTP).Nothing seems to have changed, since even in those days, much like today, it did not take long for the masses to forget the suffering and sacrifice of its spiritual leaders.

## Abbreviations

Within the Text abbreviations of Collections of Poems by Pakistani Poets Writing in English

## South Asian Studies 29 (2)

MSK:	My Second in Kentucky
NTTNP:	Neither This Time Nor This Place
IOP:	Inland and Other Poems
JBTP:	Just Beyond the Physical
YY:	Yielding Years
ASV:	A Selection of Verse
J:	Journeys

## Bibliography

- Alamgir, H. (1979). *My Second in Kentucky*. Canada: Vision Press.
- Al-Mubarakpuri, S.-u.-R. (2002). *Ar Raheeq Al Makhtum : The Sealed Nectar*. Saudi Arabia: Darussalam Publishers & Distributors.
- Edward, C. (1959). *Buddhist Scriptures*. Australia: Penguin Publishers.
- Hashmi, A. (1988). *Inland and other Poems*. Islamabad: Gulmohar Press.
- Hashmi, A. (1981). *My Second in Kentucky*. Lahore: Vision Press.
- Hashmi, A. (1984). *Neither This Time Nor This Place*. Lahore: Vision Press.
- Kamal, D. (1997). *A Selection of Verse*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Shuja, N. (1998). *The Stone Buddha: Journeys*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Tahir, M. A. (1991). *Birthday Sutra: Just Beyond the Physical*. Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications.
- Tahir, M. A. (2001). *Yielding Year*. Lahore: National Book Foundation.

## Primary Sources

- Hashmi, Alamgir. (1981). *Gautum My Second in Kentucky*. Lahore: Vision Press. 88-89.
- Hashmi, Alamgir. (1984). *A Life Neither This Time Nor This Place*. Lahore: Vision Press. 58-62.
- Hashmi, Alamgir. (1988). *Lot's Wife Inland and Other Poems*. Islamabad: Gulmohar Press. 38
- Hashmi, Alamgir. (1988). *The Prophet Inland and Other Poems*. Islamabad: Gulmohar Press. 12-13.

## Secondary Sources:

- Conze, Edward. (1959). *Buddhist Scriptures*. Australia: Penguin 36.
- Kamal, Daud. (1997). *The Gift. A Selection of Verse*. Karachi: OUP. 1-13, 18-22.
- Mubarakpur, Maulana Safiur Rahman. (2003). *Arrahiqul Makhtum*. Lahore: Zahid Bashir Press. 139.
- Nawaz, Shuja. (1998). *The Stone Buddha Journeys*. Karachi: OUP. 3-5, 11-12.
- Tahir, M. Athar. (1991). *Birthday Sutra. Just Beyond the Physical*. Lahore: Sang-e-Meel. 54.
- Tahir, M. Athar. (2001). *Crucifixion. Yielding Years*. Lahore: National Book Foundation. 60-63.

## Biographical Note

**Dr. Amra Raza**, is Associate Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

---