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NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

Indian Poetry in English

Lecture 20: Agha Shahid Ali

BINOD MISHRA

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001)

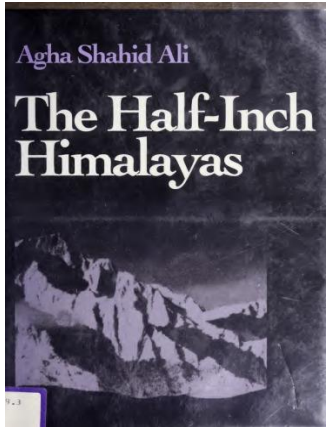
- Born in New Delhi on February 4, 1949,in an educated Kashmiri family, spent first half of his life in Kashmir
- Left India in 1975 for Pennsylvania State University's doctoral program in English
- Settled in USA but regularly visited Kashmir
- Poet, translator, editor, academician and ghazal composer
- Awarded with an American literary prize- The Pushcart Prize
- He "owned three major world cultures (Hindu, Muslim, and Western) without effort."
- Ali taught at the MFA Program for Poets & Writers at University of Massachusetts Amherst, at the MFA Writing Seminars at Bennington College as well as at creative writing programs at University of Utah, Baruch College, Warren Wilson College, Hamilton College and New York University.
- Died on 8 December 2001 in Northampton

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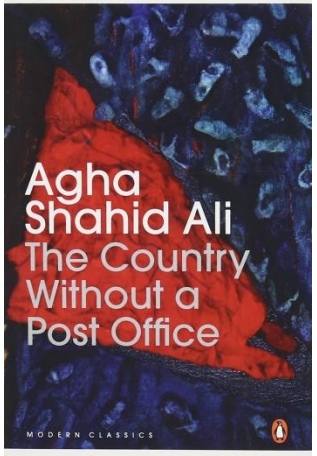
- Agha Shahid Ali is a poet who blends various identities in one- Kashmiri, Indian, American and diasporic poet.
- He knew Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Kashmiri and English.
- Hallmark of his poetry- Pain of exile, sense of loss, and nostalgia

❑ Kashmir--background of his poetry.

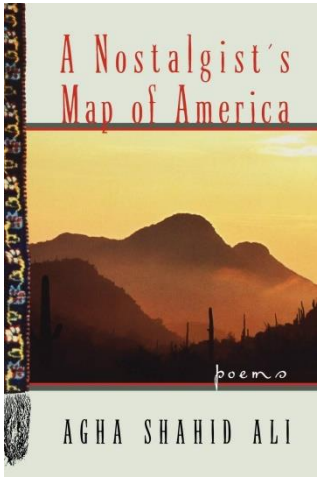
"Its large subject-matter, the turmoil in Kashmir accompanies my largest aesthetic canvas so far. I wanted to honor the cruel luck of being given as one's subject the destruction of one's home[land] . . . by serving the language and not letting it become an aesthetic convenience."

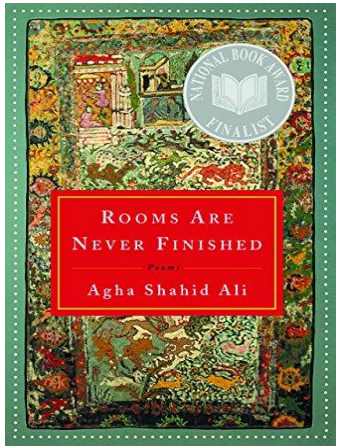


His Works (Poetry)



- *Bone Sculpture (1972)*
- *In Memory of Begum Akhtar (1979)*
- *A Walk through Yellow Pages (1987)*
- *The Half- Inch Himalayas (1987)*
- *A Nostalgist's Map of America (1991)*
- *The Country Without a Post Office (1997)*
- *Rooms Are Never Finished (2001)*

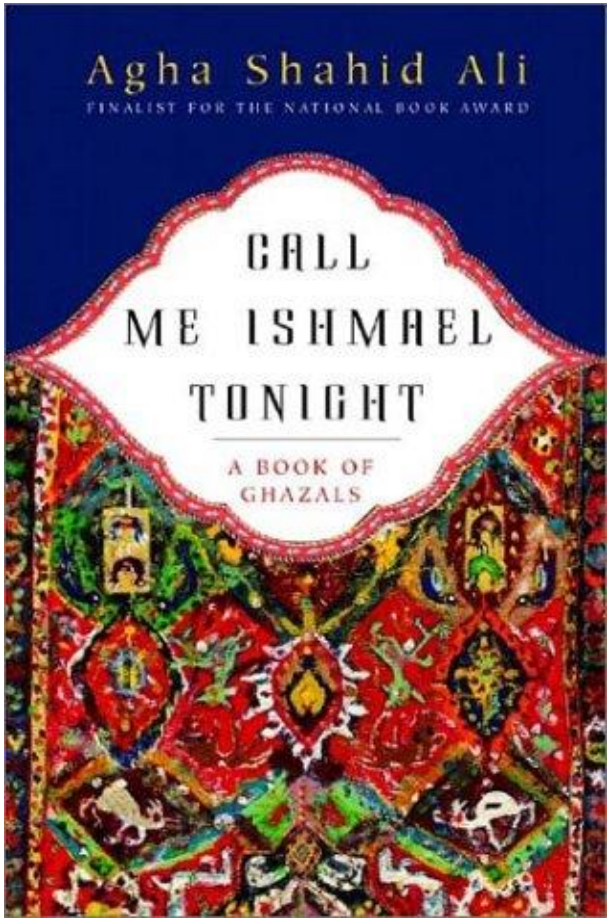




His Other Works

- Translated Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1992)
- Edited *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English*
- *Call Me Ishamael Tonight* (2003)- A Collection of English Ghazals

"I wake up in my dark room
alone with sweats."



General Themes of His Poetry

- Pain and suffering
- Deep engagement with Kashmir
- Centrality of loss, longing and death
- His political concerns
- Memories of the family, ancestors
- Blending of Islamic and European tradition of poetry
- Mixture of personal, political, historical and cultural elements
- Engagement with language, landscape, history, and myth

His Early Collections

Bone-Sculpture (1972)

- Without any assimilated influences/style
- Echoes of T.S. Eliot & W.H.Auden
- Ali's personal obsessions viz. memory, death, history, family, nostalgia

In Memory of Begum Akhtar(1979)

- Nostalgic for Kashmir
- English poetry coloured in music and pattern of ghazal
- References to Rasoolan Bai and Begum Akhtar
- Many poems are autobiographical

On recalling Beghum Akhtar's Performance

It was, like this turning dark
of fog, a moment when only a lost sea
can be heard, a time
to recollect
every shadow, everything the earth was losing,
a time to think of everything the earth
and I had lost, of all
that I would lose,
of all that I was losing. ("Snow on the Desert")

The Half-Inch Himalayas

- Delineation of past, change of homes from India to U.S
- Four sections, dealing with exile and loss
- Fantasies and imaginings, dream like poems
- Eight or nine syllables in each line of the first couplet, with four
- lines of equal length.
- Three line stanzas

- Securities of childhood -- a universal theme.

The man who buried his house in the sand
And digs it up again, each evening,
Learns to put it together quickly

And just as quickly to take it apart.
My parents sleep like children in the dark.
I am too far to hear them breathe.

(Houses)

Postcard from Kashmir

(From *The Half- Inch Himalayas*)

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,
my home a neat four by six inches.

I always loved neatness. Now I hold
the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.

This is home. And this the closest
I'll ever be to home. When I return,
the colors won't be so brilliant,
the Jhelum's waters so clean,
so ultramarine. My love
so overexposed.

And my memory will be a little
out of focus, in it
a giant negative, black
and white, still undeveloped.

“Vacating an Apartment” from *The Half-Inch Himalayas*

1
Efficient as Fate,
each eye a storm trooper,

the cleaners wipe my smile
with Comet fingers
and tear the plaster
off my suicide note.

They learn everything
from the walls’ eloquent tongues.

Now, quick as genocide,
they powder my ghost for a cinnamon jar.

They burn my posters
(India and Heaven in flames),
whitewash my voice stains,

make everything new,
clean as Death.

2
When the landlord brings new tenants,
even Memory is a stranger.

The woman, her womb solid with the future,
instructs her husband’s eyes
to clutch insurance policies.

They ignore my love affair with the furniture,
the corner table that memorized
my crossed-out lines.

Oh, she’s beautiful,
a hard-nippled Madonna.

The landlord gives them my autopsy;
they sign the lease.

The room is beating with bottled infants,
and I’ve stopped beating.

I’m moving out holding tombstones in my hands.

Characteristic Features of His Poem

- Multiculturalism
- Cultural assertion
- Fusion of memory, imagination and present
- Personal tone
- Agony for Kashmir
- Vividness of emotion
- Deeply rooted in Indian soil
- "Ali looks backward to a supposedly unified culture and nation he has lost and which tries to recapture in his imagination, friendship and verse." (Bruce King)

About Kashmir he says,

"If there is a paradise on earth
It is this, it is this, it is this." (*The Last Saffron*)

A Nostalgist's Map of America(1991)

- Four sections comprising 05,03,13 and 08 poems
- Nostalgia for what's gone
- Personal exile transformed into the topoi of the travelling American

"One very good thing that happened to me by moving to Arizona was that I suddenly found a landscape that could somehow bear my concerns and my themes of exile, loss, nostalgia ... Some of my political concerns, too."
(Agha Shahid Ali, interview with Stacey Chase)

Rooms are Never Finished

- A finalist for the National Book Award
- Anchored in religious poetry ranging from Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jesus, Krishna, Hussain and Zainab
- Second canzone
- Elegizes his mother
- God, Mysticism, longing, anxiety and death

Ghazal (from *Rooms Are Never Finished)*

Feel the patient's heart
Pounding—oh please, this once—
—JAMES MERRILL

I'll do what I must if I'm bold in real time.
A refugee, I'll be paroled in real time.

Cool evidence clawed off like shirts of hell-fire?
A former existence untold in real time ...

The one you would choose: Were you led then by him?
What longing, O Yaar, is controlled in real time?

Each syllable sucked under waves of our earth—
The funeral love comes to hold in real time!

They left him alive so that he could be lonely—
The god of small things is not consoled in real time.

Please afterwards empty my pockets of keys—
It's hell in the city of gold in real time.

God's angels again are—for Satan!—forlorn.
Salvation was bought but sin sold in real time.

And who is the terrorist, who the victim?
We'll know if the country is polled in real time.

"Behind a door marked DANGER" are being unwound
the prayers my friend had enscrolled in real time.

The throat of the rearview and sliding down it
the Street of Farewell's now unrolled in real time.

I heard the incessant dissolving of silk—
I felt my heart growing so old in real time.

Her heart must be ash where her body lies burned.
What hope lets your hands rake the cold in real time?

Now Friend, the Belovèd has stolen your words—
Read slowly: The plot will unfold in real time.

(for Daniel Hall)

Canzone

- A poetic form invented by the Italian poet Dante who himself could write only one because he found that it was like “loading himself with chain.”
- It’s a difficult form of poem which is generally written in a metrical lines of 11 syllable.
- Consists of five 12 line stanzas followed by a 5 line envoi.
- Rhyme scheme- abaacaaddaee/ eaeebeeccedd/deddaddbbdcc/cdcceccaacbb/bcbbdbbeebaa/ abcde

Agha Shahid Ali wrote three canzones-

- *After the August Wedding in Lahore, Pakistan*
- *The Veiled Suite*
- *Lenox Hill*

Canzone

Means “song” in Italian.
A lyric poem originating in Italy & France.
Usually made up of 10-line syllables or hendecasyllabic lines with end-rhyme.
Rhyme scheme may vary.
Can have up to 20 lines.
Can be broken into stanzas.
A bit more flexible than the sonnet, but…
The Canzone is an ancestor of the Sonnet!

(Hendecasyllabic is a metrical line of 11 syllables.)

Lenox Hill (From *Rooms are Never Finished*)

(In Lenox Hill Hospital, after surgery,
my mother said the sirens sounded like the
elephants of Mihiragula when his men drove
them off cliffs in the Pir Panjal Range.)

The Hun so loved the cry, one falling elephant's,
he wished to hear it again. At dawn, my mother
heard, in her hospital-dream of elephants,
sirens wail through Manhattan like elephants
forced off Pir Panjal's rock cliffs in Kashmir:
the soldiers, so ruled, had rushed the elephant,
The greatest of all footprints is the elephant's,
said the Buddha. But not lifted from the universe,
those prints vanished forever into the universe,
though nomads still break news of those elephants
as if it were just yesterday the air spread the dye
("War's annals will fade into night / Ere their story die"),

the punishing khaki whereby the world sees us die
out, mourning you, O massacred elephants!
Months later, in Amherst, she dreamt: She was, with dia-
monds, being stoned to death. I prayed: If she must die,
let it only be some dream. But there were times, Mother,
while you slept, that I prayed, "Saints, let her die."
Not, I swear by you, that I wished you to die
but to save you as you were, young, in song in Kashmir,
and I, one festival, crowned Krishna by you, Kashmir
listening to my flute. You never let gods die.
Thus I swear, here and now, not to forgive the universe
that would let me get used to a universe
without you. She, she alone, was the universe
as she earned, like a galaxy, her right not to die,
defying the Merciful of the Universe,
Master of Disease, “in the circle of her traverse”
of drug-bound time. And where was the god of elephants,
plump with Fate, when tusk to tusk, the universe,
dyed green, became ivory? Then let the universe,
like Paradise, be considered a tomb. Mother,
they asked me, So how’s the writing? I answered My mother
is my poem. What did they expect? For no verse
sufficed except the promise, fading, of Kashmir
and the cries that reached you from the cliffs of Kashmir
(across fifteen centuries) in the hospital. Kashmir,
she’s dying! How her breathing drowns out the universe
as she sleeps in Amherst. Windows open on Kashmir:
There, the fragile wood-shrines—so far away—of Kashmir!

O Destroyer, let her return there, if just to die.
Save the right she gave its earth to cover her, Kashmir
has no rights. When the windows close on Kashmir,
I see the blizzard-fall of ghost-elephants.
I hold back—she couldn't bear it—one elephant's
story: his return (in a country far from Kashmir)
to the jungle where each year, on the day his mother
died, he touches with his trunk the bones of his mother.
"As you sit here by me, you're just like my mother,"
she tells me. I imagine her: a bride in Kashmir,
she's watching, at the Regal, her first film with Father.

If only I could gather you in my arms, Mother,
I'd save you—now my daughter—from God. The universe
opens its ledger. I write: How helpless was God's mother!
Each page is turned to enter grief's accounts. Mother,
I see a hand. Tell me it's not God's. Let it die.
I see it. It's filling with diamonds. Please let it die.
Are you somewhere alive, somewhere alive, Mother?
Do you hear what I once held back: in one elephant's
cry, by his mother's bones, the cries of those elephants
that stunned the abyss? Ivory blots out the elephants.
I enter this: The Beloved leaves one behind to die.
For compared to my grief for you, what are those of Kashmir,
and what (I close the ledger) are the griefs of the universe
when I remember you—beyond all accounting—O my mother?

The Country Without a Post Office(1997)

- Turmoil in Kashmir and influences of James Merril
- Canzones, sestinas, and villanelles
- Influence of Emily Dickinson,
- Links Amherst to Cashmere
- Emily Dickinson--- a major influence

"I value him immensely as a presence in my work, and I would say he's in some ways the formal spirit guiding me through The Country Without a Post Office."

As a Poet

- Harold Bloom included Agha Shahid Ali's poem *The Veiled Suit* in his *Till I End My Song: A Gathering Of Last Poems.* Bloom called this poem "one of the most haunting of all last poems".
- Included in Mehrotra's *Oxford Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets.*
- His works have been translated into many languages- Italian, Hebrew, Kashmiri, and Urdu.
- He transformed the painful condition of Kashmir into art.
- He is referred as the "voice of Kashmir".
- He reaches universal appeal through local and personal .

> "I don't ever feel I've given anything up in India. In a strange way, I've recovered my roots as a South Asian, as an Indian, as a Kashmiri in a stronger way." _Ali



- “It was his genius to fuse the English and Urdu literary traditions: he knew *Paradise Lost* as intimately as the *Koran*; he was inspired alike by Dante and Faiz Ahmed Faiz. “ --Christopher Merrill

- “Ali’s voice is “ at once lyrical, and fiercely disciplined, engaged and yet deeply inward.”

  -Amitav Ghosh

- The centrality of loss, longing, and death in Shahid’s poetry on Kashmir brings a relevance and immediacy to his readers, which has led to his being referred to as the “voice of Kashmir.”

- “Such writers are aware of and refer to distinct cultural traditions yet imagine a universal condition shared by all cultures, races and times; such universalism is formed by Western liberalism rather than by , say, Islamic universalism. As Ali is younger than Rushdie and as North American society is more fluid than British, there is in his writing less confusion about cultural identity, dislocation, anger, insult, humiliation, confrontation, resistance.” Bruce King

Below me is a world without footprints
I am alone I'm still alone
And there's no trace anywhere of the drowned

The sun is setting over
What was once an ocean.

(I Dream I return to Tucson)

Thank You

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