

Unit 1

Postcard from Kashmir (Agha Shahid Ali)

About the Poet: - Agha Shahid Ali was born in New Delhi on February 4, 1949. He grew up in Kashmir and was educated at the University of Kashmir, Srinagar and later University of Delhi. He earned his Ph.D from Pennsylvania state University in 1984, and an MFA from the university of Arizona in 1985. Shahid moved to the United States in 1976. Agha Shahid immortalized his homeland in his poetry. He transformed the nature of English poetry to accommodate his original and authentic attitude towards language and subject matter. As a diasporic writer, Kashmir, haunts the poet's imagination and Shahid resurrects a poetic image of the Far-away home land that characterizes the Kashmir of 1990s.

The Poetry Collections of Agha Shahid include *Call Me Ishmail Tonight: A Book of Ghazals*, *Rooms are never finished*, *the Country Without a Post Office*, *the Beleoved Witness*, *A Nostalgist's Map of America*, *the Half Inch Himalayas*, etc.

Shahid held teaching positions at the University of Delhi, Penn State, Princeton University, Hamilton College Baruch College, University of Utah, and Warren Wilson College. Agha Shahid Ali died on December 8, 2011 of brain cancer.

Introduction: The Poem 'Postcard from Kashmir' presents the poets' nostalgic feelings about his homeland. His homeland haunts his imagination and he longs to feel and Talk about it in this poem. The poem is introductory poem of his anthology titled "Half inch Himalayas. Though the poem has 14 lines but cannot be categorized as a sonnet as it lacks the stanza structure, metre and rhyme pivotal to the sonnets.

Summary: -The speaker in the poem describes his feelings after receiving a postcard from his native land- Kashmir, a region of Indian subcontinent. The postcard contains a photograph of Kashmir-a place the speaker still considers his home. This four by six-inch photograph, is looked at with love by the speaker, who is geographically, distant from Kashmir and lives in one of western countries.

The speaker claims that he always loved heatness- a trait that was typical of Kashmir of his childhood days. But, the irony of the fact is expressed by his claim that he holds the half inch Himalayas in his hand now. The enormous and massive mountain range is reduced to a small, tidy picture undesired by the poet.

The most ambiguous line of the poem is "this is home" which either can mean the poet's inability to leave the place where he lives and has compromised it for his homeland.

It is glaringly clear that the ultimate aim of the poem is to express the poet's unbounded patriotic love to Kashmir, the place he is proud to call home.

Textual Questions

(A) How has Kashmir 'shrunk' into the poet's mailbox?

Ans: The poet, actually receives a mail with a photograph of his home land called Kashmir. Being, geographically distant, he is overwhelmed by the photograph of the land he cherishes and wishes to return. Moreover, he wishes to return. Moreover, the short and small photograph cannot represent a region which is massive in area. He is not certain whether he can ever return to his native land and claims that this is home- Which either can mean that he has to satisfy himself with photograph only or the foreign place, which he has compromised into his home now.

(B) Explain the ironic effect of the line “Now I hold the half. Inch Himalayas in my hand”.

Ans: Agha Shahid in many of his poems describes his nostalgic feelings about his homeland. The childhood memories of his native land are in his mind and he tries to imprint them while looking at the photograph received by him through a postcard. He expects Kashmir to be same neat and clean but the lost beauty of his dreamland can be traced from the line: “Now I hold half inch Himalayas in my hand”, the half inch Himalayas are Ironical to the extreme that the vast and massive geographic area has shrunk and lost is neat and clean attitude. In addition, Irony of not ever returning to the birth place finds a poor substitute in four by six-inch post card with a photograph in it.

(C) Why does the poet use the word ‘over exposed while describing his love for Kashmir’?

Ans: The photograph of the native land received through a postcard has been symbolically used by the poet. The photograph presents a micro picture of the land, he cherishes and desires to return. At the same time, the poet feels it impossible to leave the place he works. So, the running ultramarine waters of Jehlum, the massive mountain range of Himalayas make the poets’ love for this land over exposed. The irreducible gap between reality and aspiration make the poet overemotional and he cherished the photograph that works a link between the land he can’t return and he land he cherishes. The poet even vaguely contrasts the beauty and brilliance of the cherished homeland with the Kashmir he might visit in future.

Q. Why is Kashmir compared to a gaint negative, black and white skill undeveloped at the end of poem?

Ans: The speaker of poem assumes that the real sights of Kashmir will be different that the images of the native land formed during the poet's childhood. Living in a distant land he is not sure about the current beauty and atmosphere of his native land. The photograph presents a poor substitute for the same the words gaint negative black and white still under developed present the contrast between the actual beauty of the land and the scenic view in the photograph. It can never carry the same spirit and brilliance of the land. Since his native land is divided between India Pakistan and China, the place never can develop properly. In short, the photograph fails to satiate the poet's love for his homeland.

2. How does the poet's sense of nostalgia get reflected in the poem?

Agha Shahid Ali spent his childhood in Kashmir. After early education he moved to Delhi and then to the U.S for further education. While making career by teaching in the U.S, he often wrote poems depicting the beauty, love and brilliance of his home.

Among many anthologies *the Half Inch Himalayas* also deals with poet's nostalgic feelings about the land to which he feels impossible to return.

Living in a Foreign land, the poet once receives a post card from Kashmir. He believes that his homeland too has metaphorically shrunk to the post card. As his homeland is really divided between three countries, he claims that he holds the half inch Himalayas in his hand. The poet also compares the homeland he knows with that he might encounter once he returns. He claims: "When I return the colors won't be so brilliant"

The longing for the homeland is profound but the chances of his return are dim. Looking at the Photographs he claims "this is home", but some critics believe that the time is ambiguous and can also mean that the place of his current dwelling is his home. The poet even talks of ultramarine waters of Jehlum. The contrast

between the land of his dreams and actual land of Kashmir is expressed through the line “And my memory will be out of focus”.

In short, the ultimate aim of the poem is to project the poet’s nostalgic feelings for his homeland and same has been done aptly.

Q.2: Explain the various poetic techniques that the poet uses to emphasis the beauty of his homeland?

Ans: Like T.S Eliot, Agha Shahid experimented with the diction, metre and over all structure of his poems frequently. Agha shahid not only introduced Ghazal genre in English, But brought innovations in translation world. The poem in question *Post Card from Kashmir* is fine example of experimentation with poetic techniques to get the desired aims.

The poem comprises of 14 lines but cannot be called a sonnet since, it lacks both the content and form of traditional sonnets. There is no fixed stanza structure, metre and rhyme pre requisite of traditional sonnets.

Irony has been employed in this poem titled *Post Card from Kashmir*, the word home either can mean Kashmir and the U.S where the poet presently resides.

The speaker mention that he is a great lover of neatness. The irony is found in the fact that he can now hold half inch Himalayas in his hand. The massive and enormous mountain range reducing to half inch Himalayas, surely brings Irony with it. It signifies that one of the most impressive aspects of his home land has been shrunk and made to see far less unimpressive and insignificant. Although the post card lies in the speakers hand he has lost touch with the very reality of his homeland. The techniques of ambiguity is also used in the poem. The most intriguing line is “This is home” which either can be the place depicted in the photograph “or” the place where he currently resides. The line emphasis the fact that the poet is unable to return to his native land.

There is ambiguity towards the end of the poem, as the poet reveals that he is out of focus and believes the giant negative she lies under developed.

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UNIT 2

“The Wolf’s Postscript to ‘Little Riding Hood’. (AghaShahid)

Introduction to the Poem: - Agha Shahid has personified the wolf- one of the most infamous characters in a European mythical tale. The poet turns didactic and makes the wolf write a postscript to bring home his view point in the Poem. The wood cutter of the tale is also re-created to present the opposite view of the same tale.

In the old tale, we find a little girl wearing red hood visiting her ill grandmother. She however, meets the wolf who rushes to her grandmother’s house, eats her up, dresses like her and waits for the girl to come. The bad wolf devours her too. The voice reaches a passing wood cutter who kills the wolf and rips his body to retrieve the grandmother and clothes thereof. There are many version of the same story but all common in the notion that wolf eats the grandmother and the red hood girl.

Summary:-The poem is didactic in nature. The poet personifies the wolf- the bad villainous character in the popular culture. The wolf justifies himself by providing contrasting view of the old story. The wolf begins by boasting that it is for the sake of future generation that he provides his version of the story. He wants permission fromhis readers to tell them that little girls should not speak to strangers. They also must not wonder in search of strange flowers. The wolf explains that he would have gobbled the red hood girl

right then in the jungle while encountering her for the first time. He candidly admits that the girl was fairly pretty but he is not a child molester. He feels that he gave enough time to the girl to decide how not to be countered by him. Even the wolf boasts that he had all the courage to defeat the woodcutter but scarified himself to bring joy and bliss to the children. To see children laugh gives joy to him as well these justifications on part of wolf seem genuine and right to the readers.

Textual Questions

What does the poet mean by the expression grant me my sense of history?

Ans: Throughout the pages of popular culture, the wolf in questions is remembered as bad man eater and savage. To bring a moral home the poet makes the wolf his spokesperson and an opt tool for serving his purpose. The personalized wolf tries to make himself genuine and authentic to readers and for that purpose the wolf boasts that his sense of history is different that of myths. He forwards his sense of history and justifications of killing the red hood girl and her grandmother.

Q.2: Why did not the wolf gobble here up right in there in the jungle?

Ans: According to the poet, the reason for the wolf not gabbling the red hood girl right there in the Jungle is that he wanted to give enough time to the girl to think over the dangers approaching. The reason also severs as bringing authenticity to the tale. Had the wolf gobbled the girl there in the forest, the rest of tale could have no purpose to serve and children would not have believed him.

Q.3: How does the wolf justify the ending of the fairy tale?

Ans: The ending of the fairy tale brings some sort of poetic justice where the wolf, according to him, set allows himself to be killed by woodcutter. The wolf was very eager to make children laugh by looking at

the garbage spilling out of his belly with perfect sense of timing. Moreover, the ending justifies the whole story and brings home the moral that little girls should not wonder away in search of flowers and should not talk to strangers.

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UNIT 3

Introduction of A.K.Ramanujan and his "Of Mothers Among Other Things....."

. Would you say that the poem builds a contrast between nature and community? Which one appeals to the speaker and why? Do you agree with his view?

Ans The speaker in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" makes several choices, many of which his dearly beloved horse does not agree with. The biggest choice that he wrestles with is whether to return to the warmth and safety of the village or to stay and watch the woods fill up with snow. Our speaker throws up a contrast between the two. Our speaker does seem to have a hard time making his decision. He ultimately decides to return home, but it seems to take all of his willpower. Our speaker is almost enticed into staying and watching the woods fill up with snow, but if he stays too long, we've got to believe that he might freeze to death, catch a really bad cold, or forget his way home. Nature is a beautiful siren in this poem, compelling our speaker to hang out in spite of the dangerous consequences. Yes we agree with his view as there has to some via media that is a balance in enjoying the joys of the worldly things and also a salubrious communion with nature.

c. Describe the atmosphere created in the poem. How does the poet succeed in creating this ambience or mood?

Ans.The atmosphere in the poem is first that of tension as the poet is torn between two thoughts which is an apt reminder of Hamletian proposition; that is whether to embrace nature or go back to the mundane chores, promises and obligations of the world. He kind of digs this aloneness, however, and is glad that no one is there to watch him. We get the feeling that he'd rather be all by his lonesome in the freezing cold than back in the village. Nature helps make things even lonelier, too, for it happens to be freezing cold, snowing, and dark out there.

The poet succeed in creating a different halo and ambience by giving some perfect contrasts like that of farmhouse and woods, nature and culture, life and death etc

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A.K.Ramanujan

AttipatKrishnaswamiRamanujan had equal expertise in both English and Kannada. He was considered an expert in Indian literature. Ramanujan was born in the city of Mysore to an Iyengar family in the year 1929. He received his education in the University of Mysore and the Indiana University. As a writer Ramanujan had the experience of both the native as well as the foreign milieu and as a result he was able to incorporate the cultures and conventions of both the east and the west.

Ramanujan's poetry seemed to grow out of Indian experience and sensibility with all its memories of family, local places, images, beliefs and history. At the same time his writings included a modern stance with its scepticism, ironies and sense of living from moment to moment in an ever changing world in which older values and beliefs are often considered as unrealistic. Ramanujan through his writing could evoke the warmth of traditional family life and closeness of long remembered relationships. More often he showed conflicts, arguments and surprises. He also showed that the supposed glory of Tamil cultural heritage is a fiction which ignored the reality of the past.

It can be said that Ramanujan's memory are located in the specific society of the Tamil Brahmins. His poems avoided vague generalizations about India and were set in particular situations or scenes or developed from reflections on specific topics. Nor did his poem contain a fixed attitude or stance which the poems set out to communicate rather the poems changed direction and seemed unpredictable as they developed with the ending often different from the values implied at the beginning of a poem. The sophistication with which Ramanujan recreated and treated South Indian culture was also reflected in his techniques which like his translation often seemed a modern recreation of the spirit and methods of Tamil and Kannada verse.

The word play, puns, inner rhymes, rhetorical devices, ironies, distanced neutrality of tones, understatement, compression and elliptical progression of the poems had similarities to his translations. This does not mean that Ramanujan was not affected by the reading of Yeats and other contemporary writers but as a writer he was highly aware of the conventions, techniques and structures of Indian verse and these had been used and transformed in his English poetry. The complexity, instability and irony of Ramanujan's poems seemed very modern as was the way they appeared to offer themselves as imagistic statements to be appreciated and interpreted as the reader wishes.

AK Ramanujan a shining personality in the realm of modern Indian English poems had passed away in the year 1939 due to a reaction to anaesthesia which was applied to him during an operation.

OF MOTHERS AMONG OTHER THINGS.....A.K.Ramanujan

WHAT IS THE POEM ALL ABOUT..

The poet remembers his mother. He sees her very old now but cannot forget her youthful images since his childhood. He compares her with a blackbone tree because the tree is old and twisted at the moment but was young some time ago. He then compares her hands with the claws of an eagle because like an eagle's claws, her hands and fingers transformed, grew rough and twisted with works that she did for the family.

The images in this poem (quoted above) are based upon contradictions. The first, "upon this twisted / blackbone tree the silk and white / petal of my mother's youth," dramatizes the contradiction between a twisted black tree and the white of youthful skin. The two contrasting images are so deftly woven together that the petals of the black tree represent the "silk and white" of a mother's youth. Thus at one and the same time, nature symbolizes the "twisted" spent youth of a worn out mother and her past energized, soft youth of "silk and white petal[s]."

A similar contradictory contrast occurs in the next image where her beautiful diamond earrings spray forth sewing needles, one of the tools of a mother's trade. Later, her hands and feet are compared to an eagle's talons in another contrasting contradiction. Her eagle's feet-hands are wet--another tool of a mother's trade: wash water--and her pink feet are crippled talons, crippled from an accident with a garden mouse trap.

Another comment about the imagery is that, in the midst of the improbable comparisons, true events are told: running in from the rain to the sound of crying babies ("crying cradles"); a foot caught in a garden mouse trap; a withered figure that was a "onetime wing" of prowess and beauty. The punctuation is critical for understanding these improbable, contrasting, contradictory comparisons that comprise the imagery because, by themselves, they defy logic and need signposts pointing to logical comprehension. The punctuation provides these signposts. The simple punctuation of period (end stop) and comma tell where each logical unit of imagery begins and ends. For instance, consider the punctuation in this passage:

From her ear-rings three diamonds
splash a handful of needles, 5

and I see my mother run back
from rain to the crying cradles
The rains tack and sew
with broken thread the rags
of the tree-tasselled light. 10

Despite the irregular capitalization, we know that all the lines form a logical whole because of the punctuation. We know that the "handful of needles" splashing from the diamond earrings is logically connected to "The rains tack and sew" because the comma indicates the continuation of a thought. The absence of further punctuation shows that it is the "rags" that she sews in light speckled by the shadow of trees:

The rains tack and sew
with broken thread the rags
of the tree-tasselled light.

Judging the comprehension of students...

Briefly answer the following questions

a. How does the poet use the technique of juxtaposition of the past and the present to recollect his mother?

Ans. The poet conjures up his mother through the medium of images recollected through the lens of past and at the same time the present status of the mother is also presented. The poem begins with the mention of "the twisted backbone tree" that is now quite old and bent like his mother. The poet uses profuse imagery to make us understand the different patches and phases of his mother's life-her youth, her middle age and old age. We get the complete picture of the mother by comparison of her past with the present i.e. an immaculate juxtaposition.

b. What words/phrases does the poet use to describe the self-sacrificing nature of his mother?

Ans. The words/phrases that show the self-sacrificing nature of the mother are: "...see my mother run back from rain to the crying cradles. The mother has lost her finger in attending to her household chores - "but her hands are wet eagle's two black pink-crinkled feet".

c. Comment on the significance of '...on talon crippled in a garden trap/set for a mouse'.

Ans. These lines show the extremities of the mother's suffering- her pink feet are crippled talons, crippled from an accident with a garden mouse trap.

d. Comment on the emotional effect of 'My cold parchment tongue licks bark...'

Ans. Here the author is completely floored by the drudgery of his mother and is emotionally moved to find her in a wretched state. Even in this feeble state, the author finds his mother attending to her household chores-...*when i see her four still sensible fingers slowly flex to pick a grain of rice from the kitchen floor.*

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Some Important Questions of the Poem 'Obituary' by A. K. Ramanujan.

Question: Discuss the Customs and Traditions of the poem "Obituary" by A.K. Ramanujan?

Answer: In "Obituary" the narrator discusses his father's death. He is the eldest son, so the responsibility to maintain the ancient rituals is his, and he does, dutifully following the Hindu customs. As is common in their culture, there is little mourning after death, and the narrator discusses the ways his father annoyed him. But despite those thoughts, he still does his best to be respectful, and his lack of emotions may be from his culture or their relationship.

The poem "Obituary" was written by A.K. Ramanujan. An obituary is usually a tribute to the person who has passed away, featuring the high points of his life. Such is not the case in this poem. Written in first person, the son is the narrator of the poem.

Seeming quite disgruntled with his father, the son points out all of the things his father left undone. His bills were unpaid, and he left unmarried daughters. His grandson, a bed wetter, was named after the grandfather, but improperly. The house in which the narrator grew up leaned against a tree. Apparently, the father had a hot temper which may be part of the son's unhappiness:

Being the burning type, he burned properly at the cremation...

When the father was cremated, coins were placed on the body's eyes. In keeping with the Hindu custom of swift cremation, bodies are cremated within 24. After the cremation, the sons dug through the ashes to find hot coals to throw in an eastward fashion into the river.

The father would have no headstone with the dates of his birth and death. To the son, the dates are parentheses encapsulating the time of the father's life. From his birth to his death, the son feels that his father did many things incorrectly or incompletely:

like his caesarean birth in a Brahmin ghetto and his death by heart- failure in the fruit market...

He hears that his father's obituary took two lines in a local newspaper four weeks after his cremation. The son often bought sugar cane placed in one of these newspapers shaped like a cone. In the beginning, the son says that he looks for the paper for fun, and then he says he would like to have the obituary.

in newspaper cones that I usually read for fun, and lately in the hope of finding these obituary lines.

Since the narrator is the oldest son, he will be responsible for any ancient rituals that the culture requires. There is little mourning when a Hindu dies because they believe that once a person is born he or she never dies. Often there is little crying. The son does not show any strong feelings for the father's death which may be due to the Hindu custom or his irritation with his father.

Now, everything is different. Understandably, the mother is changed; her husband has died. Despite the displeasure with his father voiced by the narrator, he still respectfully wants to have the paper with the father's obituary.

Question: Comment on the emotional differences expressed by the son towards the father in "Obituary" by A.K. Ramanujan?

Answer: A.K. Ramanujan, an Indian poet, muses about a father's death in the poem "Obituary." Writing in free verse, the narrator tells the story of a son and father's relationship after the death of the father. Each stanza provides a different view of the father from the son's perspective.

The narrator feels disgruntled by the problems his father left him. His legacy is evaluated by what he has left undone. The son finds nothing but unhappiness. Probably the speaker is the oldest son because he is the one who is usually left to take care of the father's estate in Indian culture.

His heritage basically provides a set of inconveniences: unpaid bills, unmarried daughters, and a house with its own set of problems. A grandson, who wets the bed and was named after the speaker's father, is a hindrance as well.

In a typical Indian funeral ceremony, the father is placed on a funeral pyre and cremated. The father had a hot temper since the poet states that he was the "burning type." Apparently, the father's body burned well.

He burned properly at the cremation

As before, easily

And at both ends...

Afterwards, the eye coins, used to keep the eyes shut during the burning, were intact. Little was left unburned except for a few bones. The sons pick them up and throw them into the river as the priest told them.

There will be no headstone with his full name and the date of his birth and death. The narrator refers to parentheses which symbolically hold the man's life between them. The father's life was off kilter: his birth was caesarean; life in a ghetto; death in a street market.

With a different set of emotions, at this point in the poem, the narrator seems to long for some remembrance of his father. But someone told me:

He got two lines

in an inside column

Of a Madras newspaper...

In the hope of finding these obituary lines...

The narrator discovers that his father had a two line obituary in a local paper a month after he died. The paper is sold by street vendors. The son often gets sugar cane in one of the papers rolled in a cone and then reads it later. The son wishes that he could find a copy of the obituary.

Sadly, the father left his family, particularly the narrator's grieving mother. Now, the family rituals will be without him and up to the son. The son wants some meaning for his father's existence; this has become the son's quest.

Question: Discuss whether "Obituary" by A. K. Ramanujan is about the speaker's dead father or a larger commentary on death itself?

Answer: In "Obituary" by A. K. Ramanujan, I did not find a larger commentary on death, but a seeming discontent over the perceived failures of a father's life. There are facts regarding the speaker's father's birth and death, and dates—as there *might* have been on a headstone had he not been cremated.

...like his caesarian birth
in a brahmin ghetto
and his death by heart-
failure in the fruit market.

He did not come naturally into the world; perhaps dying anywhere other than in bed would have been considered unnatural as well. We learn of the cultural traditions as the speaker's father is cremated, and what is left that the sons dispose of at the priest's directions.

However, it seems more the intent of the writer to shed light on the man himself, and how he was perceived:

Father...left dust
on a table of papers,
left debts and daughters,
a bedwetting grandson
named by the toss
of a coin after him...

Sadly, the man's life is "evaluated" by the things he left half-done, rather than by the things he accomplished. There were debts unpaid and daughters unmarried; the only importance reflected in the "grandson" is that the boy seemed only to receive his grandfather's name by chance—perhaps *literally* by the toss of a coin—not out of respect for his grandfather.

However, the speaker notes...

Being the burning type,

he burned properly

at the cremation

as before, easily

and at both ends...

This seems a clear allusion to the cliché regarding "burning the candle at both ends."

The contemporary explanation of this saying describes:

...a life that is lived frenetically and unsustainably - working or enjoying oneself late into the night only to begin again early the next day.

The idea previous to this was that burning a precious candle at both ends was deemed a terrible waste, as it would burn faster and last less time. In either case, the son seems unhappy with the way he father lived his life. Although historically gold coins were placed in the mouth of the deceased, here they are placed on his eyes, and strangely, they are untouched by the fire. Why? In many cultures, they were with the body to provide passage to the next life. In this case, perhaps they are untouched as the dead man needed no help; perhaps it was a way to show that he was not a traditional man—and he rejected the coins. It could also be a statement that the father never did things the way most other people did—another negative observation.

The poet notes that had there been a headstone, it would not have contained...

...everything he didn't quite

manage to do himself...

This also has a negative connotation. In fact, the writer seems to have little sympathy or interest in the death of the man.

But someone told me

he got two lines

in an inside column

of a Madras newspaper...

The speaker does not look through the paper himself, but someone else tells him of the only record of the death (*not* on a headstone). The newspapers then find their way to holding food, e.g., a jaggery. The paper is one step away from the trash. On occasion, the writer reads the newspapers that wrap his food.

...that I usually read

for fun, and lately

in the hope of finding

these obituary lines.

The search for the obituary is a causal one. He ends, perhaps bitterly, noting the death changed his mother. The mother, at least, seems to miss her husband. The author, sadly, seems to resent his dad and the yearly ritual—the acknowledgement the death—maybe a waste of his time.