

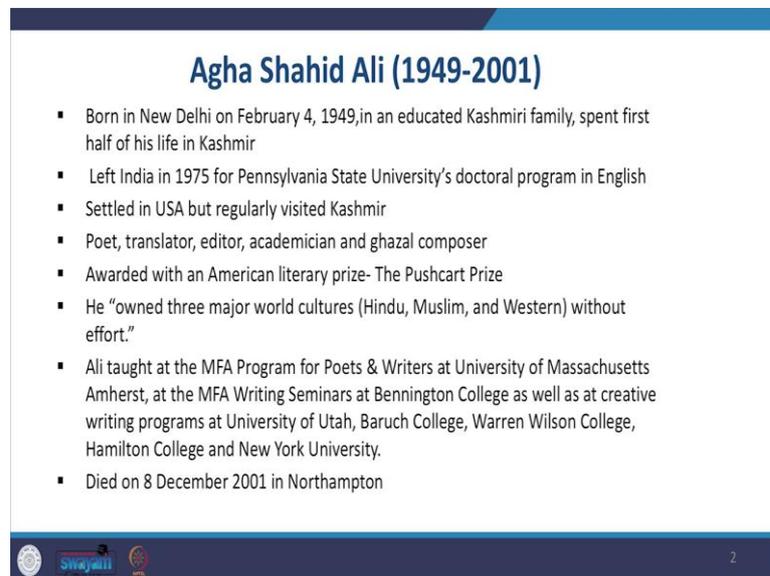
**Indian Poetry in English**  
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**Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee**

**Lecture - 20**  
**Agha Shahid Ali**

Good morning and welcome back to NPTEL online certification course on Indian Poetry in English. All of you must remember that presently we are dealing with diasporic poets especially Indian and in this regard in the previous lecture we had discussed what diasporic is and what were the contributions of A K Ramanujan in diasporic poetry.

Today we have a different poet named Agha Shahid Ali. We shall not only have a look at the bio of Agha Shahid Ali, but we shall also see through his poetry how he creates a new world; a new world of internationalism because Agha Shahid Ali's life was completely different from other diasporic poets. So, before we go, here is a look at his personal life or bio.

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**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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Actually, Agha Shahid Ali was born on February 4th, 1949 in Delhi and he was educated in Kashmir fine. He actually came from Kashmir and his father also was in the field of education. So, Agha Shahid Ali spent half of his life in Kashmir and the other half in Delhi and later on he switched over to USA.

Now, when we talk about Agha Shahid Ali, we can see that in Delhi he did his post-graduation. Prior to that he had already done his graduation from Kashmir, University of Kashmir and then he did his M.A from Delhi University.

Even during his student life Agha Shahid Ali was quite influenced by the world of poetry and drowned in poetry. He was actually very much influenced by T.S Eliot, the postmodern poet. And once he did his M.A, he left for Pennsylvania State University's in order to do a doctorate and you will be delighted to know that he did his doctorate on none other than T.S Eliot and his dissertation finally, was published in the form of a book.

Agha Shahid Ali, of course, came back to India for some time, but then he settled finally, in USA. Being a Kashmiri his heart was always in Kashmir and he always frequented Kashmir. Agha Shahid Ali was a poet translator, editor, Academician and Ghazal composer. When we have a look at Agha Shahid Ali's life, we can find that the poetic influence which he had not only from T.S Eliot, but also from one of the living legends of India, I mean, a Ghazal singer named Begum Akhtar.

Whenever he had time he used to see the performances of Begum Akhtar and was very much influenced by Begum Akhtar. One thing that is very significant of Agha Shahid Ali that he was a trilingual and a tri-cultural. Since he came from Kashmir naturally he knew that language and then in Delhi he also learnt Hindi and then English was already his subject.

So, he owned three major world cultures Hindu, Muslim Western without any effort I think these things came to him quite naturally. He was also awarded because of his poetry and his poetic works he was also awarded the Pushcart Prize which is a very famous American literary prize.

Ali had also the opportunity of teaching the MFA Program for Poets and Writers at the University of Massachusetts Amherst at the MFA Writing Seminars at Bennington College as well as creative writing programs at the University of Utah, Baruch College, Warren Wilson College, Hamilton College and New York University.

You will be surprised to know that Agha Shahid Ali, who was so much influenced by Indian culture and specially of his mother's culture, but then he actually left for his heavenly abode in Northamptonshire that is in USA and that was in the year 2001.

So, this is actually a brief bio about him. As regards his poetry Agha Shahid Ali blends various identities in one. You have already learnt in the previous lecture that most of the diasporic poets are actually struggling in order to establish their own identity. They are straddling between several cultures and Agha was not an exception. So, there were several identities in one---- which is Agha Shahid Ali and the identities were Kashmiri, Indian, American and of course, a diasporic poet.

Actually, majority of his poems are soaked in exile, in pain, in death, a sense of loss, uprootedness and Kashmir seems to be the background of majority of his poems. We can say that he has left his heart at Kashmir.

In some of the interviews and in some of the essays he had also admitted this fact and he writes its large subject matter--- the turmoil in Kashmir because you know Agha Shahid Ali was born in post- independent India and he had witnessed the turmoil that Kashmir was going through and that is why the turmoil in Kashmir accompanies his largest aesthetic canvas so far, as he himself says---- "I wanted to honour the cruel luck of being given as one's subject the distraction of one's home. It had actually a very catastrophic effect on the mind of Agha Shahid Ali."

And he says by serving the language and not letting it become an aesthetic convenience. So, this was a sense of loss that he carried and he carried it even when he used to be in U.S or in America. Very quickly let us come to see that a young man Agha Shahid Ali when he moved to U.S, but even before that he had started writing poetry right from his student days, he has so many collections of poetry. As a diasporic poet, Agha Shahid Ali's heart was steeped and soaked in poetry and poetry alone. It was Agha Sahid Ali who actually introduced Ghazal to Indian English poetry.

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**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)

So, his list of works contains *Bone Sculpture* which came out in 1972 and then as I have said earlier that he was very much influenced by Begum Akhtar. So, he had another collection *In Memory of Begum Akhtar* that came in 1979, then came *A Walk through Yellow Pages* and then came *The Half Inch Himalayas*. If you have a look at the titles of his collections you can understand that in every book there is an indication of his sense of loss, of his sense of the consciousness of his own identity even though he in himself blended three cultures.

Then came *A Nostalgist's Map of America*, then *A Country Without a Post Office*. So, it symbolically says that what sort of time Kashmir and Kashmiri's were witnessing because there could not be the exchange of mails and the letters and all and that is reflected in the collection, *A Country Without a Post Office*. Then came *Rooms Are Never Finished* which was actually his last collection, he also had some other works.

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**His Other Works**

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

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

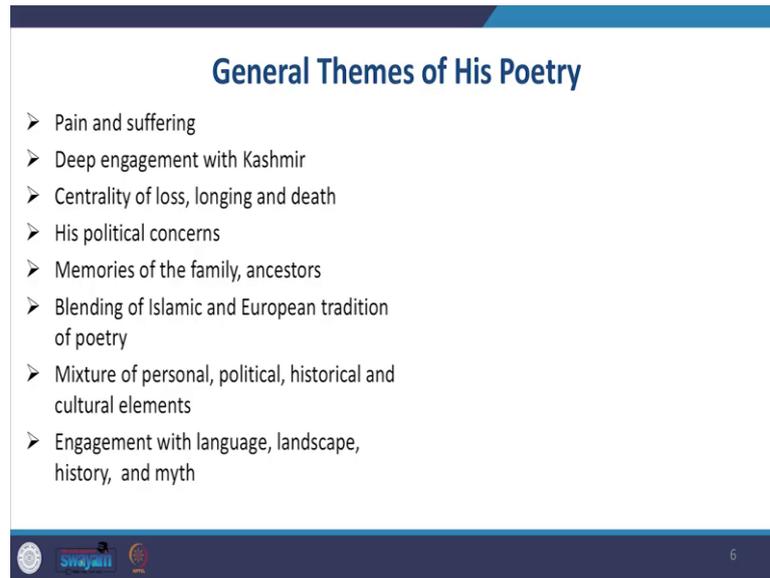
Agha Shahid Ali  
FINALIST FOR THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD  
CALL  
ME ISHMAEL  
TONIGHT  
A BOOK OF  
GHAZALS

Swajati 5

Since he was drawn to Ghazal, he was also drowned to Begum Akhtar, he was also drowned to Rasoolan Bai--- all these Ghazal singers. So, he translated *Faiz Ahmad Faiz* in 1992. He also edited another book that is *Ravishing Disunities Real Ghazals in English*.

And the one that was published posthumously he calls it *Call Me Ishmael Tonight- A Collection of English Ghazals*. So, he says-- I wake up in my dark room alone with sweats. Now, what actually are the themes of his poetry? As I have been saying that the world of diaspora or the diasporic poetry actually comprises sense of loss, identity, death, uncertainty, straddling between two cultures, but in Agha Shahid Ali's world, we find pain and suffering and his actual association with Kashmir.

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**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

swajati 6

In Agha's world we find a centrality of loss, longing and death. Of course, at times he also shows his proclivity towards the political concerns, but majority of his concerns are associated with the memories of family, ancestors and then he also tries to bring close two cultures---- Islamic and European tradition and then there is a mixture of personal, political, historical, cultural elements.

Language, landscape, history and myth also are the major themes in the world of Agha Shahid Ali. We shall see actually it is a very difficult to have a look at all of his works, but then we can take some streaks of the loss or the pain that Agha witnessed and experienced from his early collections.

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*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

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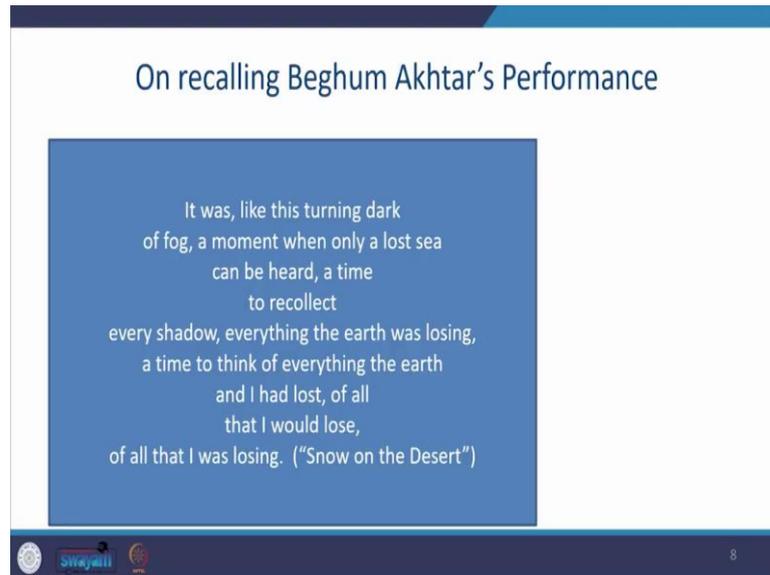
So, the very first collection *Bone Sculpture* which came out in 1972, this does not have any particular form, this does not have any particular style or influence rather we can find the echoes of T.S Eliot and W.H Auden. T.S Eliot he had done a PhD on it.

And then Ali's personal obsession with memory, death, history and nostalgia--- that are also very reminiscent of this book. The next book that came out *In Memory of Begum Akhtar*, that is also actually a full of nostalgia, then his engagement with Ghazal and then his experiences and then also we can find there are certain autobiographical elements which one can come across if one reads some of the poems of this collection *In Memory of Begum Akhtar*.

We can take some of the lines that he writes because you know he was very eager to have the performance of Begum Akhtar and it is said that when Begum Akhtar died in 1974, he actually made it, he ensured that he must go and see the funeral and that is why and those times were very hard times for him as he did not have even money.

So, one of his friends actually helped him get a ticket in 400 rupees, but in one of his poems *Snow on the Desert* what he says is actually true of his reminiscences of Begum Akhtar.

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Where he says: “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.”

So, in the loss of Begum Akhtar, he felt that it was his loss as well of all ‘that I would lose, of all that I was losing.’ So, majority of Agha Shahid’s poems are actually soaked in loss, in pain, in death, in frustrations at times. We can take some of the beautiful lines and the poems from one of his collections entitled *The Half Inch Himalayas*.

Now, if you look at the title you can find that how even being in U.S, how he thinks Himalayas to be on his fingers and he calls it Half Inch Himalayas. This collection also deals with the past change of homes from India to U.S.

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**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)

Swajati 9

Actually, this work has got four sections which deal with exile and loss, there are occasions of fantasies of imaginations. Majority of the poems are like dreams and at places you can find eight or nine syllables in each line of the first couplet with four lines of equal length.

There are some poems where you can find three lines stanzas. Actually what Agha Shahid Ali had lost, I mean, the lost childhood which actually cannot be regained you know and then this actually has been a universal theme you know very pet theme with other English poets as well namely, Wordsworth where you might have found in the “Ode to Intimations of Immortality,” where also we can find the loss of childhood.

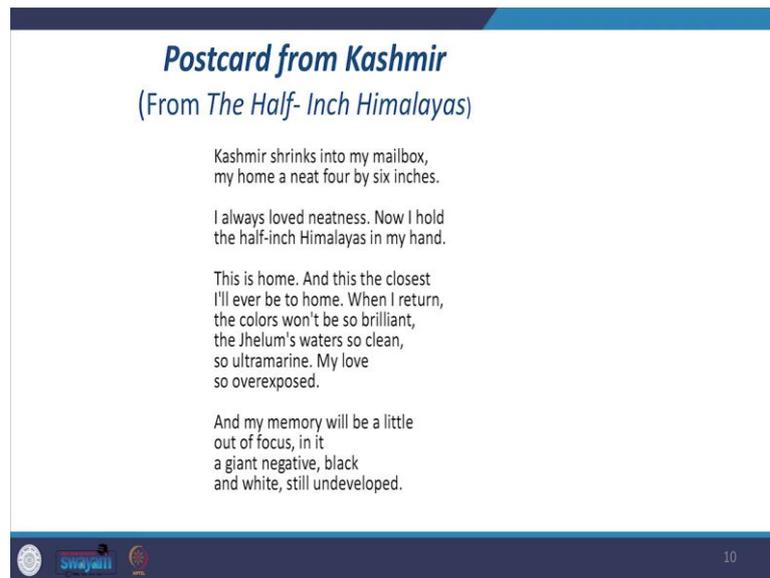
But, here in *Half Inch Himalayas* we can find the pangs, the pains, the sufferings of Agha Shahid Ali. What he says in one of his poems named “Houses”, let us look at the lines. “The man who buried his house in the sand/ and digs it up again, each evening,/ learns to put it together quickly/ and just as quickly to take it apart./ My parents sleep like children in the dark./ I am too far to hear them breathe.”

Let us look at the last line, I am too far to hear them breathe. So, majority of the time the poet in Agha Shahid Ali is actually in the past and the past is the recurring theme in majority of his poems. We can also take some lines from the *Half Inch Himalayas* one of the poems which is one of my most favorite and one of the poems which can be your favorite also as well where you can find how the poets longing for the Himalayas when

he writes in one of the poems entitled “*Postcard from Kashmir*,” this is actually the title of the poem and it has been taken from the *Half Inch Himalayas*.

Let us have a look at the lines so, that you can also verify and justify what sort of loss the poet was carrying on his psyche.

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“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.”

So, the poet time in again goes back to the past and he says that now I hold the half inch Himalayas in my hand. “This is home and this the closest /I will ever be to home. When I return/ the colors will not be so brilliant.”

The poet is actually in the past, but at the same time he is actually thinking of the uncertainties of future where he thinks that by the time “I return, the colors will not 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.”

So, every now and then he wants to live in past and he wants to live in the memories of his time spent in Kashmir and that is why this poem “A Postcard from Kashmir.” Actually, Agha Shahid Ali while majority of his poems are drenched in despair, but then he is not confined only to it.

When he got settled in U.S especially, he could once upon a time he could find or he was told by somebody that even the poetess, Emily Dickinson had also mentioned Kashmir in her poems and you know he was also drawn very much to Emily Dickinson. And then in one of his poems he has mentioned it and it is said that while he was writing poetry every now and then or he was trying to introduce the Ghazal form in English literature, Kashmir always used to be at the back of his mind.

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

<p>1</p> <p>Efficient as Fate, each eye a storm trooper,</p> <p>the cleaners wipe my smile with Comet fingers and tear the plaster off my suicide note.</p> <p>They learn everything from the walls' eloquent tongues.</p> <p>Now, quick as genocide, they powder my ghost for a cinnamon jar.</p> <p>They burn my posters (India and Heaven in flames), whitewash my voice stains,</p> <p>make everything new, clean as Death.</p>	<p>2</p> <p>When the landlord brings new tenants, even Memory is a stranger.</p> <p>The woman, her womb solid with the future, instructs her husband's eyes to clutch insurance policies.</p> <p>They ignore my love affair with the furniture, the corner table that memorized my crossed-out lines.</p> <p>Oh, she's beautiful, a hard-nippled Madonna.</p> <p>The landlord gives them my autopsy; they sign the lease.</p> <p>The room is beating with bottled infants, and I've stopped beating.</p> <p>I'm moving out holding tombstones in my hands.</p>
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We can take a one very famous poem entitled “Vacating an Apartment” from *The Half-Inch Himalayas*. Now, every now and then you can find a sort of displacement, a sort of dislocation, fine. A kind of poetry rather being marginal to the contemporary world, but being very much central to it and then while he vacates an apartment let us look at the feeling, what he feels and what we also as individuals can feel.

“Efficient as fate,/ each eye a storm trooper,/ the cleaners wipe my smile/ with comet fingers/ and tear the plaster/ off my suicide note.” And tear the plaster off my suicide note-- this is just like while you are going to disengage yourself, while you are going to disassociate yourself from something that is so, cordial that is so, close to you they learn everything from the walls eloquent tongues you know.

So, here this vacating an apartment is very symbolical; symbolical in the sense that while a man vacates and this vacating the apartment is like vacating one's country, vacating one's village, vacating one's town and he says--- “even the walls can have tongues/ they

learn everything from the walls eloquent tongues. I mean the memory which is associated 'with the walls now quick as genocide, they powder my ghost for a cinnamon jar.'

"They burn my posters/ India and Heaven in flames, /whitewash my voice strains,/ make everything new,/ clean as death. /When the landlord brings new tenants,/ even memory is a stranger." Now what a sort of irony is this? That when the landlord, the master or the person who actually wants you to vacate, you know, even your own memory becomes a stranger. "The woman, her womb solid" her womb solid and then 'instructs her husband's eyes/ to clutch insurance policies". when everything has been so, uncertain.

Of course, the reference is to Kashmir. "They ignore my love affair with the furniture,/ the corner table that memorized /my crossed out lines. Oh, she is beautiful,/ a hard-nipped Madonna./ The landlord gives them my autopsy, /they sign the lease./ The room is beating with bottled infants/ and I have stopped beating. I am moving out holding tombstones in my hands."

Now, when we look at this poem, we can find that it is not simply vacating an apartment rather it is how a man actually feels his own memory being stranger, when he has to evacuate, when he has to leave and that is why. So, the reference here---- 'the woman her womb solid with the future instructs her husband's eyes.'

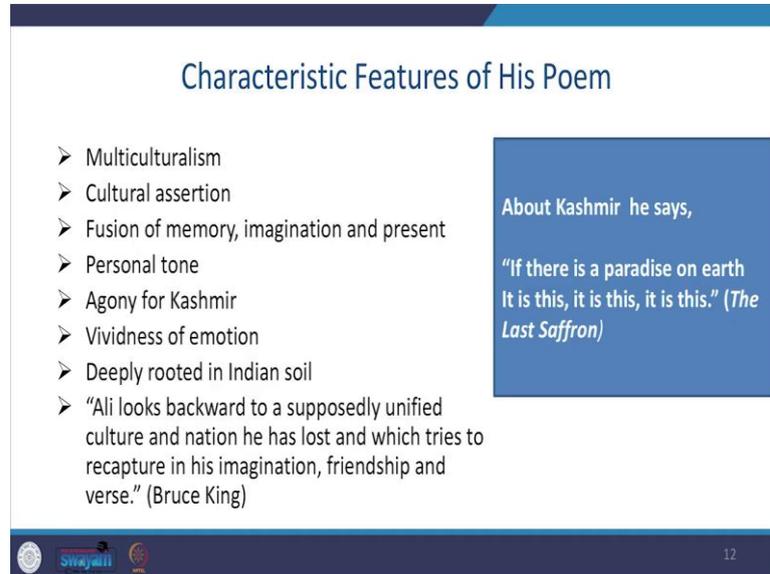
So, when there was a chaos, of course, the chaos here refers to the chaos, I mean, the turmoil that was in Kashmir and then he says the woman is actually worried about the future and then in her womb meaning thereby the coming generation and then she instructs the husband's eyes to clutch insurance policies, at least there should be something that could be a sort of security, my dear friend.

So, this is what Agha Shahid Ali actually reflects in one poem after another. So, if we in a way can have an analysis of the majority of his poems we can find that. And you know it is not only confined only to one locale rather when he was living in U.S.A, he also could find this sense of loss in the part where he was living, in the part where people also had this feeling, we will see in some of the some of the poems or the other.

So, there is a sort of multiculturalism because as a dysphoric poet you are not only confined only to the reminiscences of your own past rather around yourself also you can

see the chaos the dividedness, the uprootedness of other people living from other countries or whatsoever.

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The slide is titled "Characteristic Features of His Poem" and contains a list of features on the left and a quote on the right. The list includes: Multiculturalism, Cultural assertion, Fusion of memory, imagination and present, Personal tone, Agony for Kashmir, Vividness of emotion, Deeply rooted in Indian soil, and a quote from Bruce King about Ali's perspective on Kashmir. The quote on the right is: "About Kashmir he says, 'If there is a paradise on earth It is this, it is this, it is this.' (The Last Saffron)".

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*)

Fusion of memory, imagination and present, fine. Agony of Kashmir we have already seen. If we take a comment by Bruce King it would actually be very pertinent because what he says is----- "Ali looks backward to a supposedly unified culture and nation that he has lost and which tries to recapture in his imagination, friendship and also verse."

He was actually so much close or he had such an affinity with Kashmir that he says that 'if there is paradise on earth, it is this, it is this, it is this.' You can see the sort of assertion that the poet repeats because the poet is not in a position to get rid of the painful memory of Kashmir and its people.

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**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)

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If we come to *A Nostalgist's Map of America*, we can find that this also is divided into four sections and all these sections every section has got different number of poems for example, in the first section we have 5 poems, then followed by 3 in the second, 13 in the third and 8 poems in the fourth one.

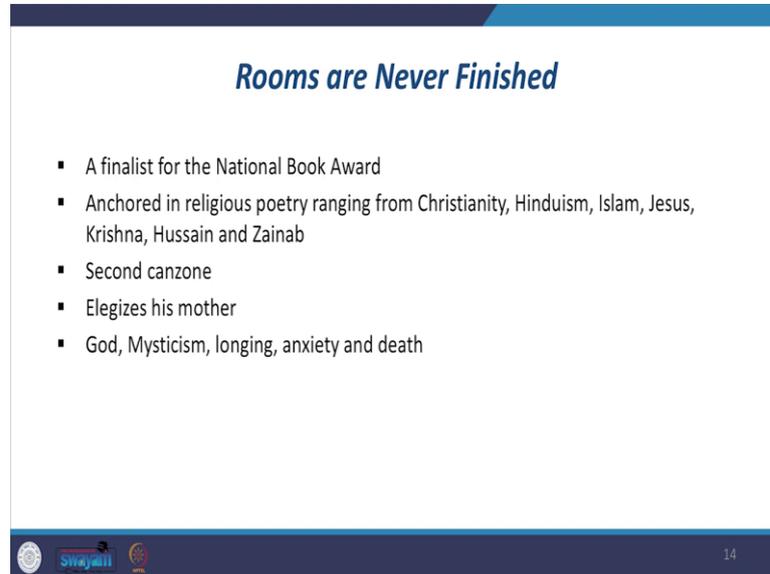
Here again, there is a sense of loss nostalgia for what is not there what is already gone, but then one thing that is quite distinguishing or one thing that distinguishes Agha Shahid Ali from other diasporic poets is that while he has his personal exile, but he actually transforms his personal exile into the topoi of the traveling American. Even the exile of many people in America that also becomes a subject of Agha Shahid's poetry that is why Agha Shahid was respected even in USA and he had settled there.

In one of the interviews with Stacey Chase what he says is ---"One very good thing that happened to me by moving to Arizona," the Arizona is a place in USA where he used to live was that I suddenly found a landscape that could somehow bear my concern and my themes. He actually found a sort of resemblance between Arizona and Kashmir and my themes of exile, loss, nostalgia some of my political concerns as well. And that is why he is one step ahead of other poets namely when we talk about when we had discussed Ramanujan we had seen that the poet was not able to come out of this sense of loss.

But, here in Agha Shahid Ali we find he actually likens his sense of loss with the sense of loss to some of the American people especially in Arizona and there he could find that

not only was there a sort of resemblance, but then he could also find that he was actually trying to smoothen his own wounds that he had received or his people had received.

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When we come to the last collection *Rooms Are Never Finished*, which actually came out in 2001 and this collection was also nominated for the National Book Award.

This collection is anchored in religious poetry ranging from Christianity, Hinduism Islam, Jesus, Krishna, Hussain and Zainab. It is often said that Agha Shahid Ali was very much close to and he had a sort of very strong bonding with his mother and then mother used to tell him stories of different religions as well and that had actually got an imprint on the young poet's mind.

So, in this he has also tried canzone we will discuss what a canzone is. Canzone is actually a poetic form which was developed in Italy and Dante had written the first canzone and canzone's structure is quite/ completely different from the normal poems and all. So, Agha had also tried canzone, but in this he actually makes a sort of elegy he makes an elegy on his mother.

Because he lost his mother because of a very serious disease and then this poem also has got a culmination of God, mysticism, longing, anxiety and death, my dear friend. So, *Rooms Are Never Finished* look at this. One poem that I would actually like to take up from this collection which is very important because it was one hospital named Lenox

hall which we shall discuss later, but before that let us take one poem which because of we have been saying that he introduced Ghazal to English literature specially in America and then from *Rooms Are Never Finished* we can take one Ghazal and look at some of the lines.

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**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 enscribbled 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)

Because this was dedicated to James Merrill who had influenced him too much and it was James Merrill who actually influenced and advised him to take up a pattern and perhaps that was the result which actually prompted Agha to start writing Ghazals also in English.

I will do what I must if I am bold in real time.

A refugee, I will 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?

So, at times he also brings his Indian words since he is writing Ghazal.

Each syllable sucked under waves of our earth

the funeral love comes to hold in real time.

So, Ghazal is, always as you know, that it is a two- line poem and then it is mostly soaked in love it may be love of the beloved, it may be love of the nation, it may be love of the friendship whatsoever.

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

So, loneliness was also a pet theme for him because he had been living alone and after his mother's death he was left abandoned.

Please afterwards empty my pockets of keys  
it is hell in the city of gold in real time.

God's angels again are for Satan, forlorn.

Salvation was bought out sin sold in real time.

And who is the terrorist, who the victim?

We all know if the country is polled in real time.

Actually, Kashmir has always been a very debatable subject and the turmoil that has been going on in Kashmir that actually finds its reflection in one poem after another of Agha Shahid Ali.

And what he says:

Behind a door marked DANGER are being unwound  
the prayers my friend had enscribbled 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.

Now, reference to mother—

Her heart must be ash where her body lies burned.

What hope lets your hands rake the cold in real time?

Now, friend, the beloved has stolen your words read slowly:

The plot will unfold in real time.

So, this was actually a poem for Daniel Hall, but then in the beginning of the poem he actually takes some lines from James Merrill--- a famous poet---‘Feel the patient’s heart pounding oh please this once’ and then I was referring to canzone which Agha Shahid Ali had also tried.

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**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/  
eaebeeccedd/deddaddbbdcc/cdceccaac  
bb/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!

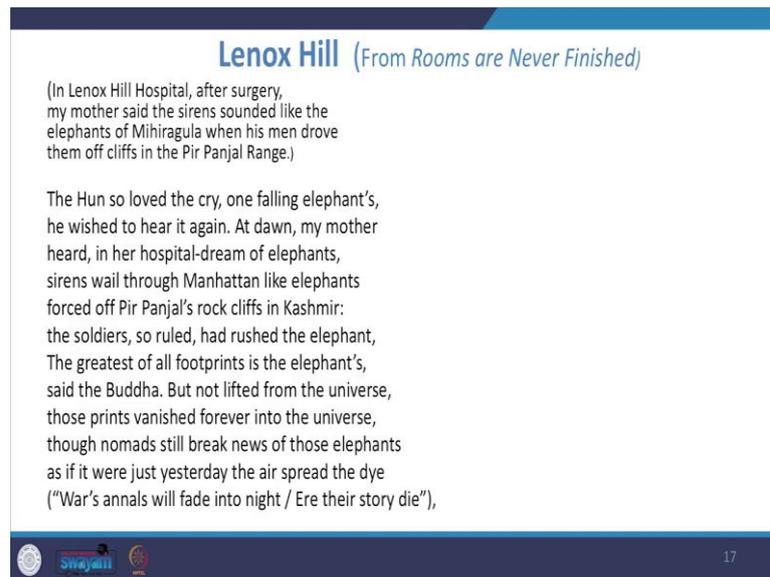
(Hendecasyllabic is a metrical line of 11 syllables.)

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Canzone actually means an Italian song as I told you and in Italy and France this was a practice. The rhyme scheme usually varied it could have 20 lines it is actually more flexible than the sonnet, but the canzone is an ancestor of the sonnet.

As I told you earlier that it was originated by Italian poet Dante, who could write only one because he found that it was just like loading himself with chain. Agha Shahid Ali also wrote three canzones namely *After the August Wedding in Lahore, Pakistan*, *The Veiled Suit* which actually became a part of one of the anthologies of U.S as well and the *Lenox Hill* we shall take some lines from the *Lenox Hill* because the *Lenox Hill* has got its own place since it was a hospital *Lenox Hill* was a hospital where the poet’s mother was admitted. And the poet used to go and see his mother every now and then and there only he composed this poem.

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**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"),

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The Hun so loved the cry, one falling elephant's, / he wished to hear it again./

He compares himself to another nomad like the Huns.

“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.”

Again, the mention of Kashmir time and again, “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.”

We can find that he is not confined only Islam, but he is also he has his eyes for Buddhist philosophy.

“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.”

So, this is actually a long poem and by the time the poem is complete you can be filled not only with a sense of frustration, but with a sense of sympathy and with the sympathies of the poet's sense of loss.

(Refer Slide Time: 33:54)

<p>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</p>	<p>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!</p>
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Now, take for example, “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.”

So, the mother was in such a pitiable condition that the poet time and again wanted the mother to die because that could only be a release and then in a dream like manner the poet says, “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.”

So, again he goes back to his old days of youth when the mother used to tell him stories and then the poet says, but seeing the mother in such a painful situation in such a predicament the poet says-- I wished if she should die. 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.”

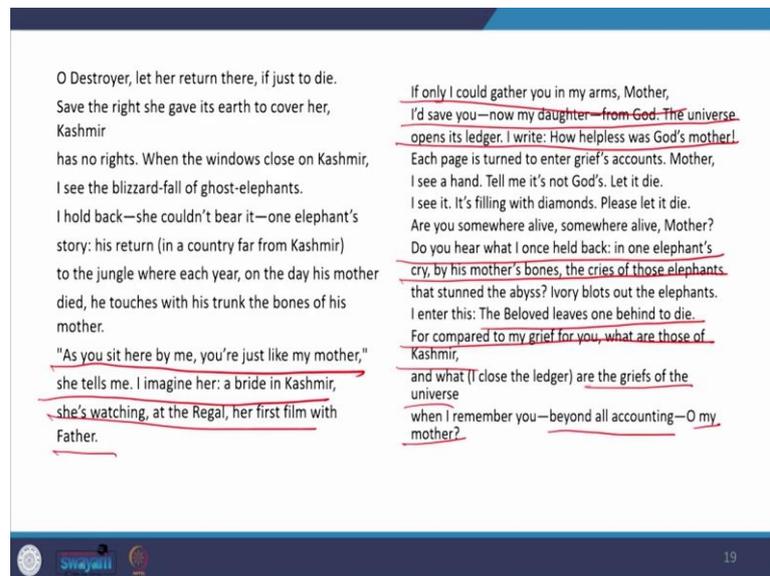
The sense of loss, I mean, without you and here the one can find parallel meanings parallel references not only to his own mother, but to his also motherland that is Kashmir. “She, alone was the universe/ as she earned, like a galaxy, her right not to die,/ defying the Merciful of the Universe,/ Master of Disease “in the circle of 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 is the writing? I answered my mother/ is my poem.”

So, by saying that my mother is my poem he actually unveils another secret that his heart lies in Kashmir his heart lies in his motherland and the mother next to it.

“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/ in the hospital. Kashmir,/ she is dying how her breathing drowns out the universe/ as she sleeps in Amherst. Windows open on Kashmir: There, the fragile wood shrine so far away of Kashmir.”

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And the loss of his mother that was actually very painful and you know as the poem is already given you can read it at your own leisure and pleasure, but I will simply underline some of the lines which are very important. “As you sit here by me, you are just like my mother.”/ she tells me. I imagine her: a bride in Kashmir,/ she is watching, at the Regal, her first film with father.”

Now, there has been no actually running of the movies in Kashmir because of the trouble and the turmoil and then the poet actually goes back and dreams that if he could actually remind her mother of the days when she used to go to watch a movie. “

“If I could only gather you in my arms, mother,/ I would save you- now my daughter- from God. The universe/ opens it ledger. I write how helpless was God’s mother.”

The poet actually becomes the mother and the mother becomes the poet: “Do you hear what I once held back in one elephants/ cry, by his mother’s bones,.../ the beloved leaves one behind to die./ For compared to my grief for you, what are those of Kashmir/ and what are the griefs of the universe/ when I remember you-beyond all accounting- O my mother?”

So, there is actually a loss and this is not a loss of his own mother, but then this is also a loss of Kashmir, this is also a loss of one land that was very close to him, but then the poet actually reveres in the reveries of the past and he also wants to offer to his ailing dying mother once upon a time what Kashmir was and what he called the paradise on earth.

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*The Country Without a Post Office(1997)*

- ❖ Turmoil in Kashmir and influences of James Merrill
- ❖ 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.”

Swayam 20

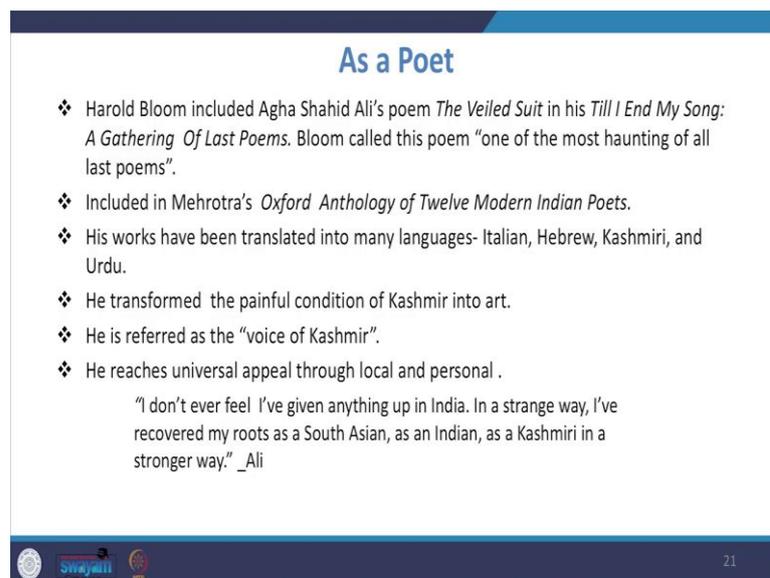
Then comes *The Country Without Post Office* where I have already told you that this also talks about the turmoil in Kashmir and this collection is actually influenced by James Merrill. As I told you James Merrill was another poet in America who had influenced him very much and here we can find canzones, sestinas; sestinas is another form of poetry specially in Italy and in French where you can find that it can have six stanzas of six lines and then there can be a quatrain.

And then there is another poetic form-- a villanelles which also the poet used. In this collection we can also find the influence of Emily Dickinson we all know that Emily Dickinson was also such a poet whose life was written in nothing except pain and suffering and he found a sort of resemblance with Emily Dickinson and Emily Dickinson had linked amorous to Kashmir. I had already told you that there is a mention of Kashmir in the poems of Emily Dickinson and that one can find.

So, Emily Dickinson had been a major influence and as regards the influence of James Merrill what Agha Shahid Ali says is: "I value him immensely as a presence in my work, and I would say he is in some ways the formal spirit guiding me through *The Country Without a Post Office*. So, *The Country Without a Post Office* itself is symbolical of the trial and the tribulations of the Kashmiri people fine.

And then when we have had a detailed discussion on some of the major poems of Agha Shahid Ali, we can find that Shahid was such a poet who actually tried to mend the fences and he wanted to falsify that even when you leave a country and you feel the pangs, but there also you can commit toward the same sort of pangs which can be felt by other people and there was a sort of identification of his own pains with the pains of the people who were actually living in Arizona or in the part where he was living.

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**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

Swajati 21

So, when we have to estimate him, I mean Agha Shahid Ali, as a poet we can find that even many important anthologists also have included some of the poems of Agha Shahid

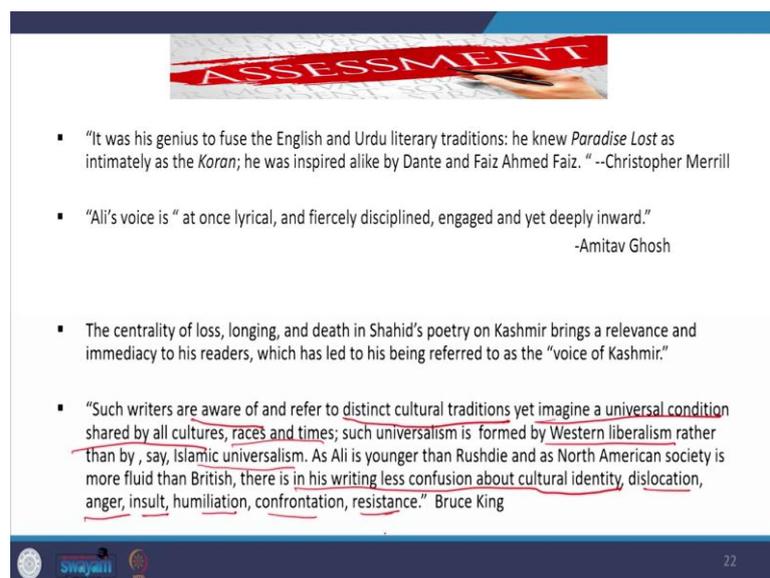
Ali in their poetic works. So, *The Veiled Suit in Till I End My Song: A Gathering Of Last Poems* which was actually done by Harold Bloom. So, Bloom actually gave this poem by Agha Shahid Ali space in his work and he called this poem one of the most haunting of all last poems.

Even Agha Shahid Ali's poem is included in Mehrotra's Oxford Anthology, fine, and then his works have been translated into many languages that actually give us a sort of stamp of what a sort of poet Agha Shahid Ali was.

He transformed the painful spirit and he actually tried to convert the predicament of Kashmir into art and you know the entire world looks at with on the when we talk of Agha Shahid Ali. He is most often called as a "voice of Kashmir" in one essay after another we have found such reflections. He is such a poet that even though being a diasporic poet he has actually created a niche even in America and that is why what he says is--- "I do not ever feel I have given anything up in India."

So, India has not been given up India is still there India resides in him and he says—"In a strange way I have recovered my roots as a South Asian, as an Indian, as a Kashmiri in a stronger way." So, what we find in Agha Sahid Ali that there is actually a sort of sense of loss, but this sense of loss also gets not only a sort of identification in the loss or in the pains of other people, but then he actually tries to recover through their losses.

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**ASSESSMENT**

- "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, aces 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

Swajal 22

So, finally, when we are going to make a proper assessment of this poet, we can take some of the lines of some of the critics and these lines are very important for example, Christopher Merrill what he says, is not only realistic, but what he gives is an eye opener for many of us.

“It was his genius to fuse the English and Urdu literary traditions: he knew *Paradise Lost* as intimately as the Koran; because he was a student of English literature and it is said that he knew *Paradise Lost* as much as he knew Koran; he was inspired alike by Dante and Faiz Ahmed Faiz.” He had also translated Faiz Ahmed Faiz you all know that.

“Ali’s voice is” at once lyrical and fiercely disciplined, engaged and deeply inward.” That is what Amitav Ghosh, the famous writer and the famous writer who also settled abroad. And then the centrality of loss, longing, and death in Agha Shahid’s poetry on Kashmir brings a relevance an immediacy to his readers, which has led to his being referred to as the “voice of Kashmir”.

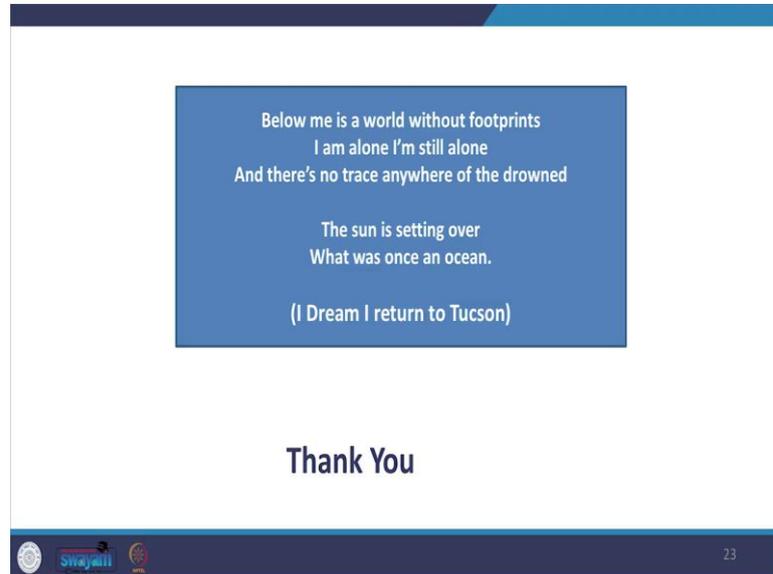
We can also include the comments of Bruce King who in his book *Modern Indian English Poetry* says, “Such writers are aware of” aware of a sort of consciousness is there and “refer to distinct cultural traditions.” Agha Shahid Ali was a poet who had already heard about the independence movement and all and the problems in Kashmir and so, he had a distinct cultural tradition yet imagined a universal condition shared by all cultures, races and times; such universalism is formed by Western liberalism.

We here cannot say that the East is East and the West is West and never the twins shall meet, but here there is actually an attempt to blend the two cultures. So, 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 and all.

So, we have already seen that the world of Agha Shahid Ali even though it is steeped in pain yet there is actually an attempt to overcome the pain and pain can only be neutralized by pain and this we could have we have already witnessed while his identification with other people in Arizona and specially with many of the contemporary poets as well. So, before we come to have a close of this lecture let me also recite some

of the lines and that also from his own I mean from Agha Shahid Ali where he says the poem is titled “I Dream I return to Tucson” .

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And what he says,

“Below me is a world without footprints.”

We often say that our footprints are very important, but then he says—“Below me is a world without footprints/ I am alone, I am still alone/ And there is no trace anywhere of the drowned.” Those who have left us we do not have any trace and there is no trace anywhere of the drowned. “The sun is setting over/ what was once an ocean”., The sun is setting over what was once an ocean.

So, my dear friends, having discussed Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry especially diasporic poetry, we can all realize that the beautiful poems of Agha Shahid Ali will never set, but will always be on the rise and making us all aware that the entire world is a beautiful platform, where all the cultures meet and this meeting we find in the beautiful world of none other than Agha Shahid Ali. Thank you very much for a patient listening and in the next lecture we shall take up some other diasporic poet.

Thank you.