

Introduction

Shahid and His Life

TAPAN KUMAR GHOSH
SISIR KUMAR CHATTERJEE

“They ask me to tell them what *Shahid* means—
Listen: It means ‘The Beloved’ in Persian, ‘witness’ in Arabic.” (“Ghazal”)

Agha Shahid Ali was born in New Delhi on February 4, 1949, eighteen months after India’s independence. His father hailed from Srinagar in Kashmir, and his mother from Rudauli in Uttar Pradesh. Shahid’s ancestors, who were Shia Muslims, had come to Kashmir from central Asia.¹ They were *hakims*, practitioners of unani medicine, and appointed as court physicians of Kashmir. Shahid’s great-grandfather was the first Kashmiri Muslim to matriculate and later to be appointed as an official in the court of the Maharaja of Kashmir.² His grandmother was one of the first educated women of Kashmir. She passed the matriculation and took several other degrees and became the Inspector of Women’s Schools. She could quote poetry from four languages: Urdu, Farsi, Kashmiri, and English. Shahid’s father, Agha Ashraf Ali, carried on the family tradition of public service in education. He taught at Jamia Milia University in New Delhi and later became the principal of the Teachers College in Srinagar. In 1961, when Shahid was twelve years old, Ashraf Ali went to the United States with his family to pursue a PhD degree in comparative education at Ball State Teachers College in Indiana. For the next three years, young Shahid attended school in

Indiana. Later his family returned to Srinagar, where Shahid completed his schooling. What is important about this early exposure to America is that Shahid was able to take the country in his stride when he returned there as a post-graduate student in the mid-1970s. The cultural divide that troubles many a diasporic writer had hardly any effect on Shahid. He felt physically at home in both countries, although psychologically and philosophically he was stuck in a state of perpetual reterritorialization and deterritorialization, to put it in geophilosophical terms.

Shahid started writing poems at the age of nine, and his medium of expression became English. In the introductory essay on his translation of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's Urdu poems, *The Rebel's Silhouette* (1995), he made a clear distinction between his mother tongue, which for him was Urdu, and his first language, which was English. He was, however, aware of the pitfalls of using English as his poetic medium and of the criticism that he would invite from the votaries of nationalism in postcolonial India. In an early poem, "dear editor" (*Bone-Sculpture*), he writes in a justificatory tone:

call me a poet
 dear editor
 they call this my alien language

i am a dealer in words
 that mix cultures
 and leave me rootless. (1–6)

Shahid received his BA degree from the University of Kashmir, and in 1968 he joined Hindu College in Delhi to study toward an MA in English literature. He passed with distinction and was soon appointed as a lecturer at the same college. It was during this period that he published his first collection of poems, *Bone-Sculpture* (1972), with professor P. Lal's Writers Workshop in Calcutta. This was followed by *In Memory of Begum Akhtar & Other Poems*, in 1979, also published by the Writers Workshop.

Shahid returned to the United States in 1976 and earned a PhD degree at Pennsylvania State University for his dissertation on T. S. Eliot, which was later published as a book entitled *T. S. Eliot as Editor* (1986). He then went on to earn a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree in creative writing at the University of Arizona, which led to his procuring a job of teaching at Hamilton College in New York in 1987. In 1993, he became a professor of English in the MFA program at the University of Massachusetts

at Amherst. Shahid was a successful teacher, much admired by his students and colleagues. He was loved by all who came into contact with him and who read his poetry. Through his spirit of hospitality, as well as his culinary skills, he won the hearts of friends and acquaintances alike. After 1976, Shahid lived primarily in the United States. His parents continued to live in Srinagar, and it became his custom to spend the summer months with them every year. "I always move in my sad heart between countries," he told Amitav Ghosh during a conversation.³ Traveling between two countries, between home and the world, Shahid thus became an intermittent but first-hand witness to the escalating violence that seized Kashmir from the late 1980s onward.

Shahid's sexuality (more specifically, his "gay" identity) has been a subject of great interest to critics. Shahid has been generally categorized as a homosexual or gay poet. But very little is truly known about his sexuality, although he was known to have had a number of intimate relationships with both men and women. Moreover, only one critic, Hoshang Merchant, has highlighted Shahid's gayness.⁴ Perhaps the best way to define Shahid's sexuality would be to describe him as a "Queer" poet, although his queerness is related less to his biological orientation and more to his artistic philosophy and poetics. Shahid himself asserted: "Sex is very central to my *way of looking at the world*."⁵ In the context of Shahid's sexual orientation, Gayatri Gopinath provides the most significant clue in her essay "Out of Focus: Agha Shahid Ali's Queer Optics" (which is included in this book), where she contends that Shahid was "neither a closeted homosexual nor an explicitly out gay poet; indeed the dichotomy of closet vs. Outness, public vs. Private, are relatively meaningless categories in relation to both his life and work." In Arizona in early 1995, Shahid married a much older woman, Jamie Stanley Taylor, to whom he dedicated *A Nostalgist's Map of America*. Their marriage lasted almost seven years, before Shahid died on December 8, 2001, of brain cancer, an affliction that had claimed his mother's life three years earlier.

A brief account of Shahid's upbringing and sociocultural background evinces that he hailed from a culturally sophisticated and socially enlightened upper-class Muslim family. Three languages—Urdu, Kashmiri, and English—were commonly spoken in the Shahid household. Poems were recited in these languages, and poets and musicians frequently visited their home. It was a culturally rich atmosphere, with no hint of any kind of parochialism in the house. The family's tolerance extended to religious affairs, and Shahid was educated at an Irish Catholic school only because the school was an

elite institution in Kashmir. In an interview with Christine Benvenuto,⁶ Shahid said, “When I was a kid, I remember telling my parents that I wanted to build a little Hindu temple in my room, and they said sure. And then once I said I wanted to build a Catholic chapel with pictures of Jesus, and they said sure, they brought me statues of Jesus, they brought me statues of Krishna, they said go ahead, build your temple. It was a wonderful atmosphere full of possibilities of self-expression.” It is thus no wonder that Shahid’s worldview was essentially humanist and absolutely free of insularity or dogmatism. His political views were influenced largely by his father,⁵ whose beliefs were akin to those of the most secular, left-leaning Muslim intellectuals of the Nehruvian era. Although respectful of religion, Shahid firmly believed in the separation of politics from religious practice.

Shahid was an exile, albeit a self-exile, as he had not been politically forced into his position. He voluntarily chose to live in the United States for personal and professional purposes. One can identify his voice as “a kind of deeply rooted, and yet cosmopolitan voice with a deep desire for internationalism.”⁷ His poetry draws materials from three major cultures—Hindu, Muslim and Christian—which formed an inextricable part of his intellectual and emotional make-up. He made use of Greek, Hindu, and Islamic myths, as he had been exposed to all of these while growing up. Shahid’s poems are highly allusive, and his allusions operate in a transcultural and transgeographic mode that weaves different locations, histories, and literary traditions into a richly complex artistic web. His readers come across frequent intertextual references to a host of canonical poets including W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, G. M. Hopkins, W. H. Auden, Emily Dickinson, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and Osip Mandelstam. But the greatest influence on Shahid’s poetry came from the American poet James Merrill, who was in many ways Shahid’s friend, philosopher, and guide. He once said to Christine Benvenuto: “I value [Merrill] immensely as a presence in my work, I would say he’s in some ways the formal spirit guiding me through *The Country without a Post Office*.”⁸ Shahid dedicated this book of poems to Merrill. In his later poems, too, James Merrill, like Osip Mandelstam, makes significant appearances. However, Merrill’s influence on Shahid’s poetry was largely formalistic, while that of Mandelstam was political.

Exile, separation, loss (of home, history, and loved ones), evanescence, death and longing without limit reappear time and again as themes in Shahid’s poetry, although from *Bone-Sculpture* to *Rooms Are Never Finished* the only subject that remains constant is Kashmir, his “imaginary homeland” whose geographical and cultural map he has drawn and redrawn like an expert cartographer. In reply to a question asked by Stacey Chase: “What

do you regard as the major themes that you keep coming back to?," Shahid said, "It is a sensibility more than a theme. And the sensibility seems informed by a sense of loss. Things vanishing. Loss. And this can take place in an engagement with language, in an engagement with landscape, in an engagement with history, in an engagement with myth and legend. In all of them, there seems to be . . . this overriding sense of the evanescent, the vanishing. And I suppose that's what inspires me to write." Throughout his poetic career Shahid followed the "route of evanescence" to draw a nostalgist's map of "separation's geography" and "desolation's desert." An acute awareness of transience and of ineluctable separation from, and loss of, persons and things one loves most is the central ontological condition of Shahid's poetry.

Agha Shahid Ali and His Work

Agha Shahid Ali's poetic career began with the publication of *Bone-Sculpture* in 1972. This volume (published in Calcutta by Writers Workshop) is the work of a budding poet who has not yet found his distinctive individual poetic voice. The influence of Euro-American modernists such as Eliot, Yeats, and Auden is too obvious to be overlooked. The opening poem "Bones," for example, is reminiscent of Eliot's "The Waste Land":

The years are dead. I'm
 twenty, a mourner in the Mohorrum
 Procession, mixing blood with
 mud, memory with memory. I'm
 still alone. (11)

Loneliness, cultural dislocation, and separation from family and home coexist alongside the poet's personal obsessions with death, memory, history, ancestors, and a past he knows little about. "Bone" is a recurring image, and the volume features several poems about death and funeral pyres. A wry, cynical, almost Eliotian humor marks a poem named "Cremation" in which a person's bones refuse to burn when fire is set to his flesh. It evokes the speaker to remark caustically: "who would have guessed / you'd be stubborn in death?" There is no narrative link among these poems, and they "anticipate the surreal, somewhat grotesque lyricism" found in Shahid's later poetry.¹⁰

Shahid's focus in his second collection of poems, *In Memory of Begum Akhtar* (1979), is on Old Delhi and its Mughal history and culture. The

title poem is an elegy for the renowned ghazal singer Begum Akhtar whom Shahid had idolized and who, like his own mother, had left a deeply abiding influence on his poetry. The news of the sad demise of Begum Akhtar, one of the finest ghazal singers in the subcontinent, who had “finally polished catastrophe, / the note [she] seasoned / with decades of Ghalib, / Mir, Faiz,” made Shahid ‘wish to talk of the end of the world.’” He also wrote poems on Thumri singer Rasoolan Bai, whose house in Ahmedabad was burnt during the riots in 1969; K. L. Saigal, who made Shahid nostalgic about his father’s youth and his “wasted generation”; and Satyajit Ray’s *Pather Panchali*. There are seven poems on the walled city, one each on Jama Masjid and The Jama Masjid Butcher. “Qawwali at Nizamuddin Aulia’s Dargah” describes how the Mughal dynasty fell to the plunder of Persian Nadir Shah:

That drunk debauched colourful king
dances again with hoofs of sorrow
as Nadir skins the air with swords,
horses galloping
to the rhythm
of a dying
dynasty. (29–35)

The partition of India, which also divided communities and cultures, features as prominently as Urdu and its most famous poet Ghalib, “who, at the crossroads of language, / refusing to move to / any side, masqueraded / as a beggar to see / our theatre of kindness.” Two “Autobiographical” notes inform the poet’s loss of faith in the family religion of Islam and its reason:

Dreams of Islam crumbled for me
when our servant, his shoes
stolen at the mosque,
turned deaf to the muezzin’s call. (1–4)

After this incident his “tongue forgot the texture of prayer” and his “voice cracked on Ghalib.” Once again, one finds the note of loss and nostalgia for pre-partition India with its rich Islamic culture and the poet’s painful awareness of evanescence, of time passing. This second book also reveals Shahid’s skill in weaving repetitive images and symbols as well as recurrent places, themes, and biographical details into the thematic structures of his poems.

Shahid became a recognizable poetic voice with the publication of two collections of poems in 1987: *The Half-Inch Himalayas* and *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages*. In fact, the years between 1987 and 1997 were the most productive in Shahid's poetic career. During this period, he published five anthologies—two in 1987—and translated Faiz Ahmed Faiz's Urdu poems into English (*The Rebel's Silhouette: Selected Poems by Faiz Ahmed Faiz*). Each anthology bears signs of the poet's gradually increasing maturity. By this time Shahid had settled permanently in the United States and, despite his annual visits to Srinagar, his relationship with Kashmir—and by extension India—had become tenuous. Kashmir was now, more or less, “an imaginary homeland” inhabited only in memory. But the poems written at this stage evince increased referential range, improved poetic technique, and confident use of American idiom. *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987) marks Shahid's transition from India to America. Of the thirty poems in this collection, twenty-three are set in India and the rest are located in his new home. The opening poem “Postcard from Kashmir” introduces the theme of the anthology: exile, loss of home, and the impossibility of reclaiming it except through memory, as the speaker in this poem laments that it is only the Kashmir printed on the postcard (which has now shrunk into his mailbox), a mere simulacrum of his native place, that is “the closest” he will “ever be to home.” In a number of poems of this volume Shahid conjures up his past and family history. “A Lost Memory of Delhi,” for example, describes the time immediately before the poet was conceived:

I want to tell them I am their son
 older much older than they are
 I knock keep knocking

but for them the night is quiet
 this the night of my being
 They don't they won't

hear me they won't hear

my knocking drowning out
 the tongues of stars. (25–33)

In “A Dream of Glass Bangles” the poet imagines his mother wearing bangles, “like waves of frozen rivers,” on her arms as a newly married bride. Both

these poems are remarkable for their use of three-line stanza that Shahid now appeared to prefer. In some poems, he reminisces his ancestors (“Snowmen” and “Cracked Portraits”) and family heirloom. An out-of-the-way reference to “Dacca gauzes” in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* makes Shahid recall a family legend:

Those transparent Dacca gauzes
known as woven air, running
water, evening dew:

a dead art now, dead over
a hundred years. “No one
now knows,” my grandmother
says. (1–6)

The grandmother “wore / it once, an heirloom sari from / her mother’s dowry” and it “proved / genuine when it was pulled, all / six yards, through a ring.” Years later, when this invaluable sari tore, the fragments were distributed as embroidered handkerchiefs among “the nieces and daughters-in-law.” The familial loss is interwoven at the end with a cultural loss and a critique of colonialism as the lost heirloom becomes a metaphor of a greater tragedy underlying India’s economy under British rule:

In history we learned: the hands
of weavers were amputated,
the looms of Bengal silenced,

and the cotton shipped raw
by the British to England. (19–23)

Personal and familial history thus merges with the larger official history of the country. “After Seeing Kozintsev’s *King Lear* in Delhi” begins with the heart-rending cry of the Shakespearean hero:

Lear cries out “You are men of stones”
as Cordelia hangs from a broken wall.

The poem then contrasts the former splendour of the capital of Mughal India with its present decadence and ends with a moving description of the tragic fate of the Emperor-poet Bahadur Shah Zafar:

I think of Zafar, poet and Emperor,
 being led through this street
 by British soldiers, his feet in chains,
 to watch his sons hanged. (14–17)

The poet's imagined homeland is the multicultural and multiethnic pre-partition India where his mother "played old records / of the Benaras thumri-singers, / Siddheshwari and Rasoolan, their / voices longing, when the clouds / gather, for that invisible / blue god." The poems set in America describe the poet's deracinated life that is always on the move, from one airport to another, from one apartment to another, constantly changing routes and locations, and completely devoid of memory. When he vacates an apartment, the cleaners "burn my posters / (India and Heaven in flames), / whitewash my voicestains, / make everything new, / clean as Death" ("Vacating an Apartment"). These poems reveal that by now Shahid has mastered an American poetic idiom and learned to connect poems metaphorically into loose narratives. But what is most remarkable about the poems in this volume is the poet's awareness that nothing has changed with the change of home and that "the moon did not become the sun" ("Stationary") despite his hectic, shifting journeys. His life remains as "stationary" as before, the exilic condition of a homeless foreigner haunting him as a constant reality.

A Walk Through the Yellow Pages (1987) is Shahid's all-American book, both thematically and stylistically. Published by a small Arizona press (Sun/Gemini Press, 1987), this chapbook is a collection of thirteen poems divided into six sections. The opening sequence "Bell Telephone Hours" breaks into five parts, each poem headed with a play on words taken from Bell Telephone advertisements: "Has anyone heard from you lately?"; "Call long distance: the next best thing to being there"; "It's getting late. Do your friends know where you are?" Failure of communication is a thematic trope of these poems, which often contain a grotesque humor. In the last poem of this section, a TV ad, "Today, talk is cheap. Call somebody," provokes the poet to dial the Information Desk in Heaven. But instead of the Angel of Love, it is the Angel of Death who receives his call:

I said, "Tell me, Tell me,
 when is Doomsday?"
 He answered, "God is busy.
 He never answers the living.
 He has no answers for the dead.
 Don't ever call again collect." (15–18)

Two poems of this volume are based on language games, and one on graffiti (“Poets on Bathroom Walls”), while the last three poems are reinterpretations of Grimm’s fairy tales about Hansel and Gretel and Red Riding Hood. The idiom and narrative style of these poems unveil the poet’s fears and insecurities engendered by homelessness and cultural dislocation. The exilic condition prevails, and the anthology continues the surrealist world of nightmare and fantasy that often appeared in his earlier poems.

A Nostalgist’s Map of America (1991) is a collection of forty-two poems written in the years following Shahid’s meeting with James Merrill, “the poet who was to alter the direction of his poetry.”¹¹ Amitav Ghosh writes in his memoir of Agha Shahid Ali: “It was after this encounter that he began to experiment with strict metrical patterns and verse forms such as the canzone and the sestina. No one had a greater influence on Shahid’s poetry than James Merrill.”¹² For years Shahid would send his poems to Merrill, his American mentor. It is Merrill who wrote the blurb for *A Nostalgist’s Map of America*:

If I may speak for “America,” it is a privilege to be held in so mercurial, many-faceted a gaze as this poet’s, who goes to the heart of my troubles and turns them into bitter honey.

This book has a remarkable structure; it is divided into four sections with images and themes recurring in each. The epigraph to the anthology, “Eurydice,” is a poem of forty-one lines that took Shahid an entire year to complete (Benvenuto). It is written from Eurydice’s point of view and reworks the classical myth of Orpheus against the background of Nazi horror:

I am a woman
brought limping to Hell

under the Night
and Fog decree.
But they’ve let him come
here to Belsen, rare passenger
in a river-green van. (1–7)

Belsen is a Nazi concentration camp that evokes the memory of mythical Hell. The first section of the collection is set in the American southwest, and

the poems—five poems of unequal length—gradually move from personal history through myth to anthropology:

When the desert refused my history,
refused to acknowledge that I had lived
there, with you, among a vanished tribe,

two, three thousand years ago, you parted
the dawn rain, its thickest monsoon curtains,

and beckoned me to the northern canyons . . . (“Beyond the
Ash Rains,” 1–6)

From recollection of “A Rehearsal of Loss,” the poems trace the rituals of the Penitentes in New Mexico, “nomads of the Sangre de Cristos who / crucify, each Easter, one of their own,” (“Crucifixion”), and the prehistoric culture of the Hohokam that centered along the hot Sonoran desert of Southern Arizona around 300 BC. Emily Dickinson’s poem “A Route of Evanescence” serves as an epigraph for the title poem, which creates a city called “Evanescence” for the poet:

I live in Evanescence
(I had to build it, for America
was without one). (“A Nostalgist’s Map of America”)

The poem employs Dickinson’s language, images, and ideas to build a narrative of friendship that recalls a shared drive from Pennsylvania to Philadelphia. The second section, “In Search of Evanescence,” consists of a sequence of eleven poems, all of which dwell on the poet’s relationship with a friend named Phil who died of AIDS. He invents a hometown named Evanescence for this companion and puts it in his map of America:

But even
when I pass—in Ohio—the one exit
to Calcutta, I don’t know I’ve begun
mapping America, the city limits
of Evanescence now everywhere. (“In Search of Evanescence,”
20–24)

The sequence follows a journey on a road through the deserts of southwestern United States and Georgia O’Keeffe crossing Howrah and Calcutta in Ohio to southern California. The sequence exemplifies Shahid’s use of repetition and echo to intensify lyrical impact. The ninth poem in the sequence with its epigraph from Emily Dickinson imitates the slow motion of halting train wheels by using repeated dashes that are often found in her poems:

The way she had—in her rushes—of resonance—
I too—so want to eat—Evanescence—slowly—
in the near—faraways—of the heart. Like O’Keeffe
also—in her Faraway Nearby—that painting. (1–4)

The third section—“From Another Desert”—carries on the motifs of loss and desert, though now the locale is the Arabian desert, to re-create the legendary love story of Laila and Majnoon. In Shahid’s retelling, Majnoon—literally the mad or the possessed one who sacrifices everything for love—is presented as a rebel and the loved one (Laila) as the revolutionary ideal that the rebel aspires to attain. The fourth section, containing eight poems, employs the earlier motifs of deserts, myths, sea, and water. Shahid imaginatively weaves past and present, myth and reality, American and Arabian deserts with their different histories and cultures, contemporary U.S. cities and extinct American Indian tribes and prehistoric oceans. As Bruce King rightly observes, “The poetry presents a world of mirrors in which each experience, object, person, place, time has reflections in the past and present, the here and there, the near and faraway.”¹³ Thus, when the poet looks at the sky, he sees the past because “Each ray of sunshine is seven minutes old” (“Snow on the Desert”). All existence becomes subjects of nostalgia just as former oceans turn into deserts and American towns in Ohio resemble the names of Indian cities. But the nostalgist, engaged in cultural cartography, does not ignore human suffering and loss. During his journey in search of Evanescence he sees “a woman climbed the steps to Acoma, / vanished into the sky. / In the ghost towns / of Arizona, there were charcoal tribes / with desert voices, among their faces / always the last speaker of a language” (“In Search of Evanescence”). “The Keeper of the Dead Hotel” describes in moving details the labor strike in the copper town of Bisbee in 1917 and the consequential human tragedy:

The copper mountains echo with rifle shots:
men on strike are being killed

in the mines, the survivors forced
 into boxcars and left in the desert
 without water. Their women are leaving
 the city. (22–27)

The anthology ends with a poignant recollection of loss:

. . . 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,” 74–80)

The ending of this book foreshadows the beginning of his next work, which deals with his devastated homeland, Kashmir, and his most overpowering personal loss.

The Beloved Witness: Selected Poems appeared in 1992, and was followed in 1997 by *The Country without a Post Office*, Agha Shahid Ali’s “signature collection.”¹³ Written in response to the destruction, by fire, of one of Kashmir’s most famous Muslim shrines, the mausoleum of Sheikh Nooruddin Wali, considered Kashmir’s patron saint, along with an adjoining mosque, during the armed insurgency against the Indian state in May 1995, this volume uses letters as its key metaphor of communication—or rather a lack thereof—in politically troubled Kashmir, which is its central subject. There is a prologue, followed by five sections, each with a small group of poems followed by a few notes. The poems build up a loose narrative with seeming digressions that coalesce with the main theme through some recurring words, phrases, and images. Shahid here gives vent with a note of urgency and immediacy of impact to the feelings of loss, exile, and heartbreak that torment the people of Kashmir. Claire Chambers in her essay “‘It Is This’: Agha Shahid Ali’s Representation of Kashmir in *The Country without a Post Office*” has discussed the recurrent themes delineated by Shahid in this collection. What needs to be added is that the poet’s intense emotional involvement with Kashmir’s agony has led him to experiment with a variety of forms as attempts at depersonalizing his feelings, forms that include prose poems, letters, villanelle, sestina, pastoral, terza rima, ghazal, rhyming couplets and quatrains, sestets and octaves—some with regular rhyme schemes and

some mixed—techniques that help him convey his convoluted emotions in a complex narrative structure. The prose poem “The Blessed Word: A Prologue” quotes the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam—“We shall meet again, in Petersburg”—to imagine a time when Kashmir, Shahid’s homeland, will be free, although the “blessed word,” presumably “azadi,” is not mentioned anywhere in the poem. But the poet believes that “one day the Kashmiris will pronounce that word truly for the first time.” In the Prologue, Shahid writes the name of Kashmir in all its variations of spelling, as a lover writes and rewrites his beloved’s name. The history of Kashmir’s subjugation by Mughal Emperor Akbar, which still lives in the songs of Habba Khatun that the rustic women sing together while gathering dry chinar leaves in autumn to use as fuels, commingles with descriptions of an army crackdown in search of “terrorists”:

Srinagar was under curfew. The identity pass may or may not have helped in the crackdown.

Son after son—never to return from the night of torture—was taken away. (Section III)

The poem is replete with gruesome pictures of Kashmir burning in the fire of freedom struggle:

But the reports are true, and without song: mass rapes in the villages, towns left in cinders, neighbourhoods torched. (Section IV)

“Farewell,” the opening poem of the first section, which is described by Shahid in the note as “a plaintive love letter from a Kashmiri Muslim to a Kashmiri Pandit,” deals with the issue of mutual intercommunal suspicion and fear of animosity, which was not as real as it was imagined, that led to the near total exodus of the native minority Hindu population from the valley.¹⁴ It ends with the poet’s longing for a “return to harmony” and a faint hope of a possible rapprochement in future:

If only somehow you could have been mine, what wouldn’t have happened in this world? (38–39)

But, with the revocation of civil rights, enforcement of martial law, and mass-scale police killings, the legendary paradise on earth is turned into hell. In poem after poem, Agha Shahid Ali narrates the horrific, inhuman

torture perpetrated on the Kashmiris by men in the Indian army, reducing them to objects robbed of all hopes of life:¹⁵

Drippings from a suspended burning tire
are falling on the back of a prisoner,
the naked boy screaming, "I know nothing."
("I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight")

I beg for haven: Prisons, let open your gates—
A refugee from Belief seeks a cell tonight. ("Ghazal")

Hope extinguished, now nothing else remains—
only nights of anguish, these ochre dawns.
("Ghazal," *adapted from Makhdoom Mohiuddin*)

The Country without a Post Office amply testifies to Shahid's reverence for Emily Dickinson, for whom "Cashmere" implied the nostalgia for the exotic, the strange, and the distant. In "Some Vision of the World Cashmere," he quotes Dickinson's lines as epigraph:

If I could bribe them by a Rose
I'd bring them every flower that grows
From Amherst to Cashmere!

Shahid names another poem with a line from Dickinson: "Lo, A Tint Cashmere! / Lo, A Rose!" The poem describes Shahid's return to Kashmir from Amherst with his grandmother by way of "her dream within a dream within a dream." There is an autobiographical strain in many poems of the collection that include references to Amherst, to Begum Akhtar, and to his familial house in Srinagar, which had been forcibly converted into an army camp.

Events are presented in the poems of *The Country* from various perspectives in order to throw light on the grim situation in Kashmir. For instance, the cold-blooded murder of a Kashmiri youth named Rizwan by the Indian security forces is narrated from the point of view of friends, acquaintances, family members, and the narrator himself:

You must have heard Rizwan was killed. Rizwan: Guardian of
the Gates of Paradise. Only eighteen years old. ("Dear Shahid")

From Zero Bridge
 a shadow chased by searchlights is running
 away to find its body. ("I See Kashmir from New Delhi at
 Midnight")

I won't tell your father you have died, Rizwan,
 but where has your shadow fallen, like cloth
 on the tomb of which saint, or the body
 of which unburied boy in the mountains,
 bullet-torn, like you, his blood sheer rubies
 on Himalayan snow? ("I See Kashmir from New Delhi at
 Midnight")

Shahid repeatedly employs two synecdochal images for Kashmir as a paradise on earth: "saffron" and "paisley." These images appear in poems like "Farewell," "The Last Saffron," and "The Country without a Post Office." Again, there are recurrent evocations of a return to a devastated and lost paradise in the lines of many poems:

"They make a desolation and call it peace.
 Who is the guardian tonight of the Gates of Paradise?" ("Farewell")

"Kashmir is burning." ("I See Kashmir from New Delhi at
 Midnight")

"See how your world has cracked.
 Why aren't you here? Where are you? Come back." ("A Pastoral")

Another important issue that Shahid takes up in this anthology is the poetic agenda of giving an international perspective to the struggle of the Kashmiris for *Azadi* (independence). He seeks to achieve this by comparing Kashmir to similar parts of the world such as Bosnia, Chechnya, Deir Yassein, Palestine, and Sarajevo. In "A Villanelle," for example, Shahid mourns the devastation of Chechnya ("Chechnya is gone") and Armenia ("Armenia . . . vanished"), linking their tragedy to that of Kashmir. Again, in "The City of Daughters," a four-part sequence of quatrains, his awareness harks back to centuries as he cries: "Say farewell, say farewell to the city / (O Sarajevo! O Srinagar!), / the Alexandria that is forever leaving." Although the places compared with Kashmir are predominantly Islamic countries,

Agha Shahid Ali's worldview is essentially humanist and internationalist, as is evident in the opening lines of the poem "First Day of Spring":

"On this perfect day, perfect for forgetting God,
why are they—Hindu or Muslim, Gentile or Jew—
shouting again some godforsaken word of God?" (1–3)

Shahid's humanism is also expressed when he laments the gruesome murder of the twenty-seven-year-old Norwegian youth Hans Christian Ostro in Kashmir in August 1995 by Al-Faran militants with the same empathic intensity as he grieves the mass exodus of Hindu Pandits from the valley:

By that dazzling light
we see men removing statues from temples.
We beg them, "Who will protect us if you leave?"
They don't answer, they just disappear
on the road to the plains, clutching the gods.
("I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight," 41–45)

"The Correspondent" situates this cosmopolitan spirit amidst the disturbance in Sarajevo. The title character, a war correspondent, arrives in Srinagar to cover the conflict in Kashmir with video footage of Sarajevo:

"I've just come—with videos—from Sarajevo."
His footage is priceless with sympathy,
close-ups in slow motion: from bombed sites
to the dissolve of mosques in colonnades. (14–17)

The Sarajevo scene in "The Correspondent" presents not only the horror of war but also the problematic of war's representation by the media. The darkness of Kashmir throughout the poem, in contrast with the high-voltage coverage of the Sarajevo war, due to the Western powers' involvement in the politics of Bosnia, evinces Shahid's deep concern as a Kashmiri-American poet about the terror of war in the valley and its lack of proper representation in Western media. Delineating Kashmir's pain with a subtle, implicitly discriminatory contrast that reinforces its intensity, he seeks to draw the world's attention to the situations in other conflict-ravaged places in the East that are often overlooked. Kashmir, for most Western readers, is only

an exotic, idyllic place, rarely represented in literary scenes. In “A Pastoral,” Shahid gives vent to his grievance about this through a letter addressed to him by a friend in Kashmir:

See how your world has cracked.
 Why aren't you here? Where are you? Come back.
 Is history deaf there, across the oceans? (41–43)

In his essay, “The Greatest Sorrow: Times of Joy Recalled in Wretchedness,” Amitav Ghosh remarks: “If the twin terrors of insurgency and repression could be said to have engendered any single literary motif, it is surely the narrative of the loss of Paradise . . . The reason why there is no greater sorrow than the recalling of the times of joy, is . . . that this is grief beyond consolation.”¹⁶ Ghosh identifies Agha Shahid Ali as one of the writers who employ this trope of a lost paradise in their writings. The title poem of *The Country without a Post Office* is itself a disconsolate lament for the lost utopia. In section two of the poem, Shahid writes: “Everything is finished, nothing remains,” which sounds like the wail of one who has returned to Kashmir in search of the keeper of an “entombed minaret.” The line returns like a “mad refrain” in his narrative of the sad country:

“Nothing will remain, everything’s finished,”
 I see his voice again: “This is a shrine
 of words. You’ll find your letters to me. And mine
 to you. Come soon and tear open these vanished
 envelopes.” And I reach the minaret:
 I’m inside the fire. I have found the dark.
 This is your pain. You must feel it. Feel it. . . .
 This is an archive. I’ve found the remains
 of his voice, that map of longings with no limit. (Section 3)

Deeply buried within the “shrine of words” lies a “map of longing without limit.” It is not the fall of the minaret but the loss of the map which, according to Shahid, is the real catastrophe, because with the map lost a future for “the country without a post office” has become inconceivable, and Kashmir is heading inexorably toward a new holocaust.

“The Country without a Post Office” employs letter as the central form that takes the volume to its emotional crescendo. The poem is the heart of the collection and it registers the poet’s abysmal despair at the ruination of

his paradisiacal homeland. “It’s raining as I write this,” he reminds the reader, and the rain pours throughout the poem as the objective correlative of the poet’s own tears. Dedicated to James Merrill, his literary mentor and friend, the poem is divided into four sections, each part having three octaves with a rhyme scheme of ABCD DCBA. The speaker—a poet, probably Shahid himself—returns to Kashmir in a painful and futile search for the keeper of a destroyed minaret. He laments the dead muezzin, the crier who called the faithful for prayer five times a day, and the keeper of the minaret who appears as a disembodied voice desperately calling to the world outside Kashmir. The unconventional rhyme scheme echoes the movement of the speaker in and out of darkness and up and down the minaret. Each line in the poem has roughly ten syllables that impose a formal restriction on the poet. This self-imposed syntactical constraint generates a tight linguistic frame that parallels the asphyxiating emotional condition of the poet-speaker, who struggles hard to make sense of the war raging in his homeland for liberation along with its glory and the indefinable agony its consequences give rise to in his own heart:

In this dark rain, be faithful, Phantom heart,
 this is your pain. Feel it. You must feel it.
 Nothing will remain, everything’s finished. (Section 3)

or

I guide myself up the steps. Mad silhouette,
 I throw paisleys to clouds. The lost are like this:
 They bribe the air for dawn, this their dark purpose.
 But there’s no sun here. There is no sun here. (Section 4)

Away from the world’s attention, Kashmir in this poem is a ruined place where the communication system has completely collapsed. Each post office is boarded up, the letters rendered dead and left in piles, unable to reach their intended address, so that communication becomes impossible.

Again, no communication occurs between the Hindus and the Muslims, between the militants and the Indian state, between India and Pakistan—the two main parties in the whole controversy. Despite its focus on the local, the here and now, the poem achieves a universal dimension through reference to a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Quoted from one of Hopkins’s “terrible sonnets”—“I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day”—the lines are used as an epigraph and are also adapted in the final section of the poem: “And my lament / Is cries countless, cries like dead

letters sent / To dearest him that lives alas! away.” These lines depict an image of spiritual void as the speaker waits despondently for a reply from God. The unanswered prayers of a Jesuit priest are compared to the dead/undelivered letters that Shahid selects as the key metaphor in the poem. The poet’s grief over the loss of the Muslim shrine—which is a deeply religious loss—and his longing for answers to his inconsolable lament find an echo in the profound anguish and despair which Hopkins’s speaker feels for an ostensibly failed communication with God.

This overriding tone of loss and despair notwithstanding, the collection ends on a different note, if not explicitly of hope at least of a new possibility for a beleaguered homeland. In “The Prologue,” Osip Mandelstam does not give any clue to the “blessed word”:

What is the blessed word? Mandelstam gives no clue.
One day the Kashmiris will pronounce that word
truly for the first time. (57–58)

In the concluding poem, “After the August Wedding in Lahore, Pakistan,” which brings three strands—Islamic, Christian, and Jewish—of Shahid’s cultural inheritance together through the reference to the loss of Eden, however, the poet utters the “blessed word”—*Azadi*—loudly and unequivocally:

Freedom’s terrible thirst, flooding Kashmir,
is bringing love to its tormented glass.
Stranger, who will inherit the last night
of the past? Of what shall I not sing, and sing? (62–65)

Rooms Are Never Finished is Shahid’s last book of poems published in his lifetime, a few months before his death in 2001. This book is divided into four parts. But, both thematically and structurally, central to this collection are two deeply moving elegies, each consisting of a sequence of poems. The first, “From Amherst to Kashmir,” about the poet’s mother, who died in an Amherst hospital after prolonged treatment for brain cancer and was buried in Srinagar, is structured around the tragic story of Karbala and moves in and out of time to knit past and present, personal and historical, into a unique narrative that transcends time. The second, “Eleven Stars over Andalusia,” is an adaptation of Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish’s original ode (*quasida*)—published in 1992—about the expulsion of the Moors from fifteenth-century Spain. The first poem of the collection, “Lenox