The Country Without a Post Office Study Guide

The Country Without a Post Office by Agha Shahid Ali

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"The Country without a Post Office" was originally published as "Kashmir without a Post Office" in the *Graham House Review*. Agha Shahid Ali revised it, doubling its length and changing its name when he included it in the collection *The Country Without a Post Office* in 1997. The title of the poem derives from an incident that occurred in 1990, when Kashmir rebelled against Indian rule, resulting in hundreds of gruesome and violent deaths, fires, and mass rapes. For seven months, there was no mail delivered in Kashmir, because of political turmoil gripping the land. A friend of the poet's father watched the post office from his house, as mountains of letters piled up. One day, he walked over to the piles and picked a letter from the top of one, discovering that it was from Shahid's father and addressed to him. The poem, dedicated to Ali's friend and fellow poet James Merrill, is long, often complicated, with a rhyme scheme that doubles back on itself and a structure that works through accumulation and association rather than narrative logic. The poem is filled with recurring phrases and words and with haunting images of longing and desire, which evoke the pain of one who struggles to understand what is happening in his own land and heart.

Author Biography

Born February 4, 1949, in New Delhi, India, Agha Shahid Ali was raised in Kashmir in a sophisticated, enlightened, and culturally rich Muslim household. His father, Agha Ashraf Ali, was a well-known educator in Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir. Ali, who grew up speaking Urdu, Kashmiri, and English, attended an Irish Catholic school in Kashmir and later earned his undergraduate degree at the University of Kashmir, in Srinagar. He took his master's degree in English from the University of Delhi and, after immigrating to the United States in 1976, took a Ph.D. in English from Pennsylvania State University in 1984. In 1985, he received a master of fine arts degree in creative writing from the University of Arizona.

Ali wrote his first poem, in English, at the age of twelve, though he claims Urdu as his mother tongue. Because the British colonized India, he considers English a South Asian language. While in India, Ali sent out poems regularly to American publications, which regularly rejected them. His breakthrough in poetry came in 1991 with the publication of *A Nostalgist's Map of America*, which critics hailed for its lyric imagery and haunting voice. Exile, longing, and a global perspective inform much of Ali's poetry, and the poet's sense of both loss and belonging is abundantly evident in his collection *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997), which portrays the conflict between Muslim Indian militants and the Indian government over control of Kashmir. The title poem from the collection "The Country Without a Post Office," layers history and apocalyptic imagery to depict a nightmarishly beautiful landscape.

Ali taught at a number of universities, including the University of Delhi, Pennsylvania State University, the State University of New York at Binghamton, Princeton University, Hamilton College, Baruch College, University of Utah, and Warren Wilson College. Ali has received numerous awards for his work, including fellowships from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, the Ingram-Merrill Foundation, the New York Foundation for the Arts, and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.

In addition to penning eight collections of poems, Ali also edited *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English* (2000) and translated *The Rebel's Silhouette: Selected Poems by Faiz Ahmed Faiz* (1992). He was director of the creative writing program at the University of Massachusetts- Amherst when he died of brain cancer on December 8, 2001. His last book, *Rooms Are Never Finished*, was a finalist for the National Book Award.

Poem Text

1

Again I've returned to this country
where a minaret has been entombed.
Someone soaks the wicks of clay lamps
in mustard oil, each night climbs its steps
to read messages scratched on planets.
His fingerprints cancel bank stamps
in that archive for letters with doomed
addresses, each house buried or empty.

Empty? Because so many fled, ran away,
and became refugees there, in the plains,
where they must now will a final dewfall
to turn the mountains to glass. They'll see
us through them□see us frantically bury
houses to save them from fire that, like a wall
caves in. The soldiers light it, hone the flames,
burn our world to sudden papier-mâché

inlaid with gold, then ash. When the muezzin
died, the city was robbed of every Call.
The houses were swept about like leaves
for burning. Now every night we bury
our houses□theirs, the ones left empty.
We are faithful. On their doors we hang wreaths.
More faithful each night fire again is a wall
and we look for the dark as it caves in.

2

"We're inside the fire, looking for the dark,"
one card lying on the street says, "I want
to be he who pours blood. To soak your hands.
Or I'll leave mine in the cold till the rain
is ink, and my fingers, at the edge of pain,
are seals all night to cancel the stamps."
The mad guide! The lost speak like this. They haunt
a country when it is ash. Phantom heart,

pray he's alive. I have returned in rain
to find him, to learn why he never wrote.
I've brought cash, a currency of paisleys

to buy the new stamps, rare already, blank,
no nation named on them. Without a lamp
I look for him in houses buried, empty□
He may be alive, opening doors of smoke,
breathing in the dark his ash-refrain:

"Everything is finished, nothing remains."
I must force silence to be a mirror
to see his voice again for directions.
Fire runs in waves. Should I cross that river?
Each post office is boarded up. Who will deliver
parchment cut in paisleys, my news to prisons?
Only silence can now trace my letters
to him. Or in a dead office the dark panes.

3

"The entire map of the lost will be candled.
I'm keeper of the minaret since the muezzin died.
Come soon, I'm alive. There's almost a paisley
against the light, sometimes white, then black.
The glutinous wash is wet on its back
as it blossoms into autumn's final country□
Buy it, I issue it only once, at night.
Come before I'm killed, my voice canceled."

In this dark rain, be faithful, Phantom heart,

this is your pain. Feel it. You must feel it.
"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 reach the minaret:
I'm inside the fire. I have found the dark.
This is your pain. You must feel it. Feel it,
Heart, be faithful to his mad refrain□
For he soaked the wicks of clay lamps,
lit them each night as he climbed these steps
to read messages scratched on planets.
His hands were seals to cancel the stamps.
This is an archive. I've found the remains
of his voice, that map of longings with no limit.

4

I read them, letters of lovers, the mad ones,
and mine to him from whom no answers came.
I light lamps, send my answers, Calls to Prayer
to deaf worlds across continents. And my lament
is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent
to this world whose end was near, always near.
My words go out in huge packages of rain,
go there, to addresses, across the oceans.

It's raining as I write this. I have no prayer.
It's just a shout, held in, It's Us! It's Us!
whose letters are cries that break like bodies
in prisons. Now each night in the minaret
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.

Then be pitiless you whom I could not save□
Send your cries to me, if only in this way:
I've found a prisoner's letters to a lover□
One begins: "These words may never reach you."
Another ends: "The skin dissolves in dew
without your touch." And I want to answer:
I want to live forever. What else can I say?
It rains as I write this. Mad heart, be brave.

Plot Summary

Section 1

It should be noted that "The Country Without a Post Office" is very complex and allusive and is not "representative" of the empirical world in any direct way. A commonly held tenet of New Critical theory is that poems should not be summarized or paraphrased, because doing so distorts the meaning of the poem. Attempts to summarize Ali's poem, then, or any poem worth its salt, inevitably are guilty of what New Critics called the heresy of the paraphrase.

The epigraph of Ali's poem is from one of poet Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Terrible Sonnets," which begins, "I WAKE and feel the fell of dark, not day." Ali's poem echoes many of the themes and images in Hopkins's. In the first section of "The Country Without a Post Office," the narrator returns to a country (Kashmir) where a "minaret has been entombed." A minaret is a tower, used in Islamic architecture, from which a muezzin calls the faithful to prayer. Minarets are usually located at the corners of the mosque. The person climbing the stairs and reading "messages scratched on planets" also evokes the image of an astrologer. When he begins canceling stamps, he evokes the image of a postal inspector.

The second stanza might refer to any of the numerous battles in Kashmir. The conflict in the 1990s involved Muslim militants rousting more than one hundred thousand Pandits (Hindus) from Kashmir Valley, also known as "Paradise" for its beauty, in an effort to secure control of the valley and state. The "us" and "them" the speaker refers to in the fifth line are the Hindus and Muslims, the two dominant groups of the region. The soldiers are Indian, many of whom burned homes and entire villages during the unrest.

The call of the muezzin is the call to prayer, called *salat*, which is performed at dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and night. With no muezzin, there is no prayer in the city. However, the speaker maintains, "We are faithful," suggesting that they, like the other side, are fighting back, burning houses.

Section 2

In this section, images are repeated but used in different contexts. The fire and the dark of the first section are now words on a card found in the street, appropriate for a poem about a country that has ceased postal delivery. The speaker offers his own hands to "cancel stamps" and open the lines of communication. The second stanza introduces a character the speaker obviously wants to communicate with, but cannot. There is no nation named on the stamps because Kashmir is a disputed territory, fought over by India and Pakistan, and is not independent. The speaker looks for this person through

the smolder and ruins of burned houses. In the last stanza, the speaker uses silence and fires as symbolic images that may give him a clue to the direction he should take.

Section 3

In this section the speaker takes on the role of the muezzin, exhorting people to come to him and buy stamps before he dies. The "glutinous wash" refers to the backs of the stamps. In the second stanza, the speaker addresses his own heart. He is having discourse with different sides of himself. The fire he is inside is the fire of being, the various identities that Ali has cultivated as an Indianborn Kashmiri. Ali was torn apart by the fighting between the Muslims and Hindus in Kashmir, empathizing with both sides. In the last stanza, the speaker has found his own voice by discovering "the remains" of the voices of others, specifically the muezzin who has died.

Section 4

In this final section, the speaker reads letters that have piled up, the communication of lovers. In his role as muezzin, he likens his cries to "dead letters sent / to this world whose end was near." In the second stanza, there is a shift from "we" to "us," signaling the recognition that those sending the letters and those receiving them are the same person. The speaker has now descended into a realm of madness, of undifferentiated identity. He is lost, seeing only his own "Mad silhouette." In the final stanza, he uses the letters of a prisoner to figuratively comment on his own desperation and situation. The poem takes a more obvious personal turn in the last few lines when the speaker admits, "I want to live forever," suggesting that his own death is imminent.

Themes

Exile

The twentieth century was a century of wars, when old countries dissolved and new ones sprang up. As a result, cultural and national identity was often in flux, products of shifts in population and changing borders. The image of exile permeates much twentieth-century poetry and is a primary motif in Ali's poem. To be lost is to be in exile, not only from one's country but from oneself as well. Ali's speaker is both lost to himself and lost to his land. However, he seems to have found himself, at least temporarily, in the third section, when he says, "The entire map of the lost will be candled," suggesting that self-knowledge will be possible for a short time, as he issues stamps at night. In the penultimate stanza of the last section, the speaker finally understands that he has "no prayer" that can save him and shouts, "It's Us! It's Us!" This shout illustrates the fact that the speaker has accepted the contradictions of his own heart, which are also the contradictions of his country, which, like the speaker, has no name.

Communication

Communicating is more than merely exchanging words. For Ali, it is an act of emotional understanding of the other and of self-knowledge as well. By using letters, stamps, and the post office as central symbolic images in his poem, Ali underscores both the need for communication and the impossibility of communicating. Not only is it literally impossible to communicate (at least by letter) in a country without a post office, but also it is difficult for the warring factions of Kashmir to communicate with one another, blinded as they are by their own passions and self-righteousness. The speaker's identity and desires are comprised of contradictory elements, just as his homeland of Kashmir is. The more he can understand himself, the more he can understand the turmoil that is ravaging his country. The speaker moves from returning to the country at the beginning of the poem to acknowledging that he cannot save himself or, by extension, his country, at the end of the poem. Like Kashmir, the speaker's heart is damaged, but also like Kashmir, it continues, fueled by its own courage and the need to go on.

Postcolonialism

The term "postcolonialism" refers broadly to the ways in which race, ethnicity, culture, and human identity are represented in the modern era, after many colonized countries gained their independence. However, some critics use the term to refer to *all* culture and cultural products influenced by imperialism from the moment of colonization until today. Ali and his poetry are such cultural products. Ali was born in 1949, two years after Indian independence, in New Delhi, India, and raised in Kashmir, a territory claimed by both India and Pakistan. His family was Shia, a minority among the Muslims of Kashmir. In addition, he spent his mid-teens in Muncie, Indiana, before returning to India. The

sheer fact of so much moving and so many cultural affiliations plays into the composition of Ali's poems, especially "The Country Without a Post Office." Here, the speaker is fraught with contradictions and competing desires, so much so that he seems to long for annihilation, if only to free him from the pain of so much confusion. "Everything is finished, nothing remains," the poet says at one point and "I want to live forever" at another point. The change in the poet's role from observer of the minaret to its keeper marks Ali's attempt, through his poetry, to inhabit the contradictions rather than to keep them at bay. In doing so, however, he risks his own sanity.

Style

Form

"The Country Without a Post Office" is written in four sections, each composed of three eightline stanzas (octaves) rhymed ABCDDCBA. This unconventional, yet symmetrical, rhyme scheme mirrors the movement of the speaker, who moves in and out of darkness, up and down the minaret. Each line contains roughly ten syllables, which provides one more restriction on the poet. The restrictions of the poem create a tight linguistic environment, which parallels the suffocating emotional state of the speaker, who struggles to understand himself and to make sense of the war raging in his homeland.

Address

Who is the "he" the speaker returns to find? There is no definitive answer. The person the speaker seeks can be *both* a lover or a loved one *and* a part of himself with whom he is seeking to make contact. The latter point makes sense when one considers the third section in which the speaker addresses his own heart a number of times, encouraging it to "feel." The assumption must be, then, that the speaker has had a difficult time feeling before he returned.

Imagery

Concrete imagery appeals to the senses. Ali uses concrete images that are also symbolic and universal to evoke ideas and emotions familiar to most readers. Some of these include "fire," signifying purification *and* ruin; "lamp," signifying insight; and "heart," signifying passion and emotional turmoil. Taken as a whole, Ali's imagery suggests powerful yet conflicting emotions, which underline his speaker's state of mind.

Historical Context

Ali's poem describes the destruction of his homeland, Kashmir, and the endless battles fought by Hindus and Muslims to control it. Located north of India and bordered by Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China from the west to the east, Kashmir was one of more than five hundred states of India that Britain controlled when power was transferred to the people in 1947. After Pakistan sent troops into the region to annex the states, the ruler of Kashmir, Maharaja Hari Singh, signed the Instrument of Accession on October 26, 1947, making Kashmir part of India. This did not stop the bloodshed or fighting, however, as various Muslim and Kashmiri independence groups continued to battle Indian forces for control of the region. Pakistan tried to annex Kashmir in 1965 and 1971 but failed, and in 1990 a new outbreak erupted between Pakistan and India over Pakistani support of Muslim militants in Kashmir. More than a hundred thousand Hindus fled Kashmir Valley, fearing for their lives, and India moved more troops into the region to stop cross-border infiltration from Pakistan. Insurgents assassinated Hindu officials, and in return the Indian military routinely harassed, and often shot, peaceful unarmed demonstrators. Pakistani leader Benazir Bhutto traveled to Pakistan in 1990 promising a "thousand-year war" to support the militants, and Pakistan threatened to use nuclear weapons if Indian forces crossed the Line of Control. In an effort to control the growing tension, the Bush administration imposed economic and military sanctions on Pakistan and won assurances from the Pakistani government that Pakistan would stop supporting training camps for Kashmiri insurgents.

In the late 1990s when Ali published his poem, the United States had focused its overseas attention on Eastern Europe. In 1996, America sent twenty thousand troops to Bosnia as part of a NATO peacekeeping force, and in 1999 they joined NATO in conducting air strikes against Yugoslavia in an attempt to halt ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. Domestically, the United States economy was booming, due in large part to the popularity of the Internet. While Ali was composing a poem using the symbol of a country without a post office to express his grief over the relentless strife in his homeland, millions of other people were sending electronic mail with telephone wires, cable lines, and satellite dishes. Some of the most gripping stories coming out of the wars in Yugoslavia involved residents of Sarajevo, which had been bombed into rubble, emailing outsiders during the war. Industry analysts estimate that email messages sent daily will exceed 60 billion worldwide by 2006, compared with 31 billion email messages sent daily during 2002. More than half of such messages will be person to person. The emergence of email as the preferred form of communication for millions of people worldwide means that postal services will have to begin to find new ways to compete.

Critical Overview

Reviewers of *The Country Without a Post Office* universally praised the collection. Writing for *Publishers Weekly*, for example, Dulcy Brainard and Sybil Steinberg note Ali's precarious emotional predicament in having to endure his native country's turmoil from afar, writing, "We find lyric strained to its limit" in his poems. Daniel Guillory agrees. In his review of the collection for *Library Journal*, Guillory observes, "The book is a poignant, nostalgic evocation of Kashmir, Ali's homeland. . . . Kashmiri myth and culture hang like a tapestry around the poems." Eric Bryant also reviewed the book for *Library Journal*. Bryant calls the collection a "poignant, nostalgic evocation of Kashmir" and claims, "With the population decimated and the post office destroyed, Ali's poems become 'cries like dead letters,' and the poet becomes 'keeper of the minaret.'" When Ali died, a number of Indian media carried his obituary, noting the popularity of the collection. Rukun Advani, for example, writing for *telhelca.com*, said, "The violence . . . [in Kashmir] affected him deeply, personally and as an artist." It shaped him, ironically, to write some of his finest poems, such as the title poem in *The Country Without a Post Office*.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of literature whose writing appears regularly in literary journals. In this essay, Semansky considers the significance of the imagery in Ali's poem.

By threading key phrases and words throughout "The Country Without a Post Office," Ali creates a fabric of loss in which the speaker mourns not only his homeland but also his own heart, both casualties of the conflict in Kashmir. Ali uses images associated with the post office and with Kashmiri culture to highlight the tremendous damage he and his land have suffered.

In creating a character that is hybrid muezzin, postal worker, and astrologer in the first section, Ali makes the connection between prayer and social communication. Prayer expresses the relationship between the individual and God. Letters reflect the relationships between individuals. The person in the first stanza who "cancel[s] blank stamps" does so because there is no longer any place to deliver them: "each house [is] burned or empty." The "archive for letters with doomed / addresses" is literally the place where mountains of letters are stored in closed post offices. They cannot be delivered because of the increased danger resulting from intensified fighting between Hindus and Muslims and because many of the people to whom the letters are addressed are either dead or have fled. When the muezzin dies, the land is left without prayer, "robbed of every Call." A land bereft of the symbol of its spirituality is a land in chaos.

Ali evokes the spiritual emptiness of the land and its emotional volatility by repeating the words "dark," "wall," "fire," "flames," and "ash." Literally, these words describe the details of attacks of the Indian army against Muslims in Kashmir, when they would burn down houses and sometimes entire towns, frequently under the cover of night. The Indians were responding to attacks by militant Muslim groups against "Pandits," or Hindus, in Kashmir and India. However, Ali also uses these words in a different context in the poem, when they become metaphors for his own emotional isolation and emptiness. The speaker wanders in darkness, the world lit only by the "wicks of clay lamps," and at other times he is lampless, "opening doors of smoke, / breathing in the dark." Indecisive, the speaker is imprisoned in the darkness of his own heart, repeating himself, babbling: "The lost speak like this. They haunt / a country when it is ash."

The images of being lost and of destruction such as those enumerated above stand in stark contrast to the image of paisley, which Ali uses to evoke Kashmiri culture and its multi-ethnic complexities. Paisley refers to a shawl, made typically of soft wool or silk and woven or printed with colorful curved abstract figures, and it can also refer to the design itself, which began as a flowering plant and evolved into a teardrop shape. The word "shawl" derives from the Persian *shal*, and the history of the modern shawl dates to the late sixteenth century when shawls were woven for the great Mughal emperor Akbar, in Kashmir. As such, many Kashmiris consider paisley a national icon. Ali uses it to describe letters ("parchment cut in paisleys"), a form of capital ("a currency of paisleys"), and a prism of sorts ("a paisley / against the light"). In the penultimate

stanza, the speaker, walking up the minaret, "throw[s] paisleys to the clouds," celebrating his madness.

Like paisley, rain also appears throughout the poem, which holds significance for Kashmiris and particularly for Ali, who considers it a harbinger of change. Rain also obscures vision, making it difficult for both friends and enemies to see one another. When the speaker returns to the country, he returns "in rain," and when he exhorts his heart to be faithful, he does so "In this dark rain." Rain is also the figurative container for the speaker's message: "My words go out in huge packages of rain, / go there, to addresses, across the oceans." Rain, especially during monsoon season in Southeast Asia, is relentless and destructive, yet it also brings relief from oppressive heat and helps extinguish the fires raging through Kashmir. Like most of Ali's images, the image of rain is complex.

Much of the poem is set inside a minaret, the tower at the corner of a mosque and from which the muezzin makes his calls to prayer. The minaret, "entombed" in the opening lines of the poem, also doubles at points as a kind of spiritual post office from which stamps are cancelled and messages read, and as a grave. Like the minaret, the speaker also stands out from the larger "thing" to which he is attached. In the speaker's case, the thing is his country, which he watches from afar. It is only when he returns that he can fully witness its destruction. (Although Ali taught in the states, he went home every summer to Kashmir.) The minaret functions in the poem as a sacred place from which the returning speaker, in the persona of poet, can help save his people by opening up lines of communication. He does this once he takes over for the muezzin in the third section of the poem. Those lines of communication, however, are also within the poet. Over and over, he exhorts his heart to have faith, to feel: "This is your pain, Feel it. You must feel it," he says. Once he makes communication with himself, the speaker can act as a conduit for others. In the minaret, he has "found the remains / of his voice, that map of longings with no limit."

By using lines from one of Hopkins's sonnets as an epigraph, Ali foreshadows that the speaker's relationship to himself in the poem is a metaphor for his relationship to his country. Like Hopkins, Ali uses the image of the heart and the metaphor of "dead letters" to describe the idea of being lost and the pain of being a stranger to one's emotional life. However, whereas Hopkins's speaker needs to clear his heart to feel God's love, Ali's speaker needs arouse his heart to feel his love for his land and people: "Heart, be faithful to his mad refrain," he implores it. Ali also learned from Hopkins the idea of "inscaping," a way to represent (and to read) the world by marking the relationship between the individual thing and the pattern and context to which it belongs. "Paisley," "fire," "heart," "dark," "house," "letters," "rain," "stamps" are like dots throughout Ali's poem that readers need to connect to see the whole picture. Only, it is not a picture readers are left with, but rather a symphony of feeling, contradictory and irreducible, like the poet himself.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "The Country Without a Post Office," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Potter, a writer of fiction and screenplays, teaches writing at the University of San Francisco. In this essay, Potter discusses the use of narrative in Ali's poem.

"Nothing seems more natural and universal to human beings than telling stories," J. Hillis Miller, Yale literary theorist, writes in "Narrative." Starting from this premise, he reasons that because humans have so deep a need for narrative, they also have struggled, since Aristotle did in his *Poetics*, with their meaning. Miller draws from all narrative forms□novels, stories, and poems alike□three basic elements: a change in a situation; three persons, a protagonist, an antagonist, and a witness; and a patterning of key elements. From the simplest ghost story told at the campfire's edge to *War and Peace*, Miller holds that all narratives contain these elements. For the more inaccessible works of literature, they can easily□and especially□be used to decipher meaning.

"The Country Without a Post Office" is a poem that blends the many influences in the poet's background and presents a complex narrative. In the first line, a first-person narrator, a witness to the Kashmiri rebellion, is identified. This narrator is the "I," who has returned to the region of India that in 1990, as Ali writes in a preface to a later volume of his poetry, *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2002), was "the cause of hostility between India and Pakistan since their creation in 1947" that "erupted into a full scale uprising for self-determination." Seventy thousand people died in the atrocities, and, as he continues, "Because both countries are nuclear powers now, international anxiety has increased: Kashmir, it is feared, may be the flashpoint of nuclear war." The "I" who was in exile returns to a country where "a minaret has been entombed. / Someone . . . each night climbs its steps / to read messages scratched on planets." In these opening lines, the minaret, the slim tower that tops a Muslim mosque, harks to the Muslim dilemma in Ali's and India's pasts; and an anonymous "someone" looks to the stars for astrological meaning, as historically it has been practiced in India and by some in Islam. "Someone" also identifies another person in the poem. Yet, the "someone" cancels stamps in a post office that is already an "archive" "for letters with doomed/addresses, each house buried or empty," and the final line encapsulates the mass destruction of the Kashmiri catastrophe.

In the second stanza, the first-person narrator describes even more anonymous persons, Kashmiri refugees, who "see / us through them□see us frantically bury / houses to save them from fire that / like a wall / caves in. The soldiers light it, hone the flames, / burn our world to sudden papier-mâché." The first-person singular becomes plural in these lines, first with "us," then with "our," marrying the first-person subjective case with the objective, the "they" in the poem, so that "our world" resonates and achieves political significance. It is not "them" versus "us" when there is genocide, in such incidences of ethnic wars, Ali's conflated narrators seem to say. In the third stanza, Ali's enlarged narrator continues, "we bury / our houses," and the poet alternates between "theirs" and "we" as a "wall" of "fire" leaves everyone with nothing left to do but "look for the dark as it caves in." Completing the first three stanzas and first half of his poem, Ali concludes his portrayal of his destroyed homeland and the futility of conflict.

The exile returned home has become "everyone," witnessing the offenses against humanity. In an interview titled "Poems Are Never Finished," which he gave before he died, Ali remarked upon his name, Shahid, which means "beloved" in Persian and "witness" in Arabic: "I like the fact that it has two meanings and that I've been able to use them in my poetry in one way or the other. . . . Some people say that the act of witnessing seems to be central to my poetry." Through the shifting perspectives in the poem, Ali's narrator witnesses the destruction in Kashmir.

Ali's narration shifts at the beginning of the fourth stanza. A postcard personified, or given human characteristics, speaks in direct quotation: "'We're inside the fire, looking for the dark,' / one card lying on the street says. 'I want / to be he who pours blood.'" The point of view is a jumble as it considers the destruction and the guilty individuals with bloody hands. From this chaos, the narrative voice exclaims, "The mad guide! The lost speak like this. They haunt / a country when it is ash." The narrative represents those lost when Kashmir rebelled against Indian rule.

With an emphatic shift at the end of the fourth stanza, Ali addresses a "Phantom heart" to "pray he's alive" at the beginning of the fifth. "I have returned in rain / to find him, to learn why he never wrote." His narrative point of view is suddenly direct, the narrator in exile who seeks a lost friend. In the rest of the poem, the "him" whom he is seeking is clearly named: "He may be alive, opening doors of smoke, / Breathing in the dark his ash-refrain." From the confused point of view arises the narrator's purpose and a clarification of the narrative situation. The narrator never finds the one lost in the destruction. Through the use of a poetic device called synesthesia, a blending of the senses appealed to, (in this case vision and hearing), the narrator expresses the difficulty of looking for him: "I must force silence to be a mirror / to see his voice again for directions."

In addition to the persons in the poem, Ali uses the narrative situation to attempt to name a country with "doomed / addresses, each house buried or empty." Yet, because the situation really does not change and Kashmir is not freed, the "new stamps, rare already, blank, / no nation named on them" do not represent an independent Kashmir. The poet also repeats certain key elements throughout his stanzas, houses that are "buried" and "empty," for example, to show that the situation has not changed. "Fire," "burn" and "dark" are recurrent words as villages burn throughout; and a world on fire is forever impassible. "Each post office is boarded up" is the declarative sentence near the end of the poem, and the narrator has lost touch with his friend. Even paisleys, which, as Daniel Guillory writes in his review of *The Country Without a Post Office*, are important in Kashmiri myth, cannot be delivered to his friend.

Bruce King, in his review of "The Country Without a Post Office," remarks that perhaps Ali's "intense emotional involvement with Kashmir has led him to experiment with so many forms. . . . The poems create an evolving loose narrative with seeming digressions harmonizing with the main themes through repeating images and phrases." In "Country Without a Post Office," it is not only through the repetition of images of destruction in Kashmir, key elements that Miller names, but also through shifting narrative personages that Ali makes his reader a witness of the chaos in a region that is

as yet unresolved. His use of these forms evokes memories of Kashmir's past as they call up its present unrest. The evolution of his many narrators dramatizes the journey of an exile in search of brothers so that the reader enters a dismal journey with global significance.

Source: Mary Potter, Critical Essay on "The Country Without a Post Office," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Adaptations

Asia Pacific Forum has produced an audiocassette tribute to Ali, which includes the poet reading from his work. A copy can be received by writing to Asia Pacific Forum, WBAI 99.5 FM, 120 Wall Street, 10th Floor, New York, NY 10005.

Topics for Further Study

Write a letter to a classmate describing the qualities you admire about him or her. Do not sign it. Put the letter in a box at the front of the class. Each person in the class picks a letter from the box and reads it aloud to the rest of the class.

In what ways does the form of Ali's poem restrict what he can say? In what ways does it give him more freedom in what he can say? Discuss as a class.

Make a timeline of the significant historical events of Kashmir, and post it in your class.

After the terrorist attacks that happened in the United States on September 11, 2001, many Americans began asking questions about the Islamic faith. Compile an FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) list from your class, and then research the answers to these questions, sharing them with your class. Do the same for Hinduism.

Keeping in mind what you learned from the FAQ assignment above, discuss how Ali's poem can be read as a prayer. Discuss this idea in groups and then as a class.

How important is the postal service to your daily life? How important is email and the telephone? Assume all of these communication options have been taken from you; how would you respond? Discuss as a class.

What Do I Read Next?

Ali's last collection of poems *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2002) was nominated for a National Book Award just a month before he died.

Ali edited the groundbreaking anthology *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English* (2000), which features Arabic, Indian, and English poets writing in this traditional and challenging Arabic form.

Mystery writer M. Kaye sets her novel *Death in Kashmir: A Mystery* (2000) in Ali's homeland. Kaye's story evokes the haunting beauty of Kashmir's landscape and the inscrutable quality of its residents.

In *Painted Mountains: Two Expeditions to Kashmir* (1987), a collection of essays and stories, mountain climber Stephen Venables recounts his treks in Kashmir and other exotic locales.

Further Study

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Routledge, 1995.

This anthology provides the most comprehensive selection of texts in postcolonial theory and criticism to date, featuring ninety of the discipline's most widely read works. Well-known theorists, such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhaba, are represented, and their essays have been edited for clarity and accessibility.

Ganguly, Sumit, *Conflict Unending*, Columbia University Press, 2002.

Ganguly presents a concise, dispassionate summary of each Indo-Pakistani conflict since 1947, foregrounding the two countries' claims to Kashmir.

Kak, Subhash, *Secrets of Ishbar: Poems on Kashmir and Other Landscapes*, Manohar Publishers, 2000.

The first part of this book details the author's memories of Kashmir, and the second part describes landscapes of his imagination. Critics claim Kak is one of India's finest poets.

Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, Vintage Books, 1978.

Said's study of how the West has historically represented the "Arab" world ranks as one of the most important works of postcolonial theory.

Bibliography

Advani, Rukun, "Agha Shahid Ali: A Few Memories," *telhelca.com*, http://www.tehelka.com/channels/literary/2001/ dec/8/lr120801agha.htm (last accessed January 2003), December 8, 2001.

Ali, Agha Shahid, "The Country Without a Post Office," in *The Country Without a Post Office*, W. W. Norton, 1997, pp. 48-51.

Brainard, Dulcy, and Sybil S. Steinberg, Review of *The Country Without a Post Office*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 244, Issue 8, February 24, 1997, pp. 86-87.

Bryant, Eric, Review of *The Country Without a Post Office*, in *Library Journal*, Vol. 117, No. 12, July 1997, p. 102.

Gamalinda, Eric, "Poems Are Never Finished: A Final Interview with Agha Shahid Ali," in *Poets & Writers*, Vol. 30, No. 2, March-April 2002, pp. 44-51.

Guillory, Daniel L., Review of *The Country Without a Post Office*, in *Library Journal*, Vol. 122, No. 13, August 1997, p. 92.

Hopkins, Gerard Manley, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th ed., edited by William H. Gardner and Norman H. MacKenzie, Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 101.

King, Bruce, Review of *The Country Without a Post Office*, in *World Literature Today*, Vol. 71, No. 3, Summer 1997, p. 590. Miller, J. Hillis, "Narrative," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, edited by Frank Letricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, University of Chicago Press, 1990.

BOOKRAGS

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Poetry for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Poetry for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535