UNIT 39 ARUN KOLATKAR AND AGHA SHAHID ALI

Structure
39.0 Objectives
39.1 Introduction
39.2 Arun Kolatkar (1932-2004)
39.3 Suicide of Rama
39.3.1 Introduction
39.3.2 The Text
39.3.3 Interpretation
39.3.4 A Note on the Form
39.4 Chaitanya
39.4.1 The Text
39.4.2 Background to the Poem
39.4.3 Interpretation
39.5 Ajamil and the Tigers
39.5.1 Introduction
39.5.2 The Text
39.5.3 Interpretation
39.5.4 Form and Style
39.6 Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001)
39.7 Postcard from Kashmir
39.7.1 Introduction
39.7.2 The Text
39.7.3 Interpretation
39.7.4 Style
39.8 Let Us Sum Up
39.9 Answers to Self-check Exercises
39.10 Suggested Readings

39.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

• write about Arun Kolatkar and Agha Shahid Ali and their poetry;
• discuss the content of the poems prescribed for you;
• be able to comment on the form and style of the poems discussed in this unit.

39.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we shall take up three poems by Arun Kolatkar and one by Agha Shahid Ali. First of all, we shall briefly introduce you to these Indian poets in English who, though almost contemporaries, came from different backgrounds and have written different kinds of poetry. Kolatkar was a bilingual poet writing both in Marathi and English while Agha Shahid Ali, a Kashmiri, was a professor
of English and creative writing in the U.S.A. After that we shall take up the
discussion of the prescribed poems.

All the three prescribed poems of Kolatkar require some background knowledge.
We shall therefore try to understand the mythological and historical background
to these poems.

Many poems can be interpreted in more than one way. We shall try to find out
whether the poems prescribed for us can have more than one meaning.

You know that the study of language used in a text is extremely important but
when we are reading a poem it is essential that we are sensitive to the pictorial
quality as well as to the music of the poem. In this unit we shall also take a look
at the language used in the prescribed poems.

39.2 ARUN KOLATKAR (1932-2004)

Arun Balkrishna Kolatkar was born in Kolhapur in Maharashtra. He was trained
as an artist at the J. J. School of Art, Mumbai. He took his diploma in painting in
1957 and began to work as an advertiser in Mumbai. He lived in that city all his
life.

When you know more about Arun Kolatkar you will find that he is different from
most other Indian poets in English. He is different because he was a bilingual
poet who could write poetry in English as well as in his mother tongue Marathi.

Kolatkar’s early poems, both English and Marathi, were published in various
magazines. Dilip Chitre, whose poem you will read in Unit 42, included
Kolatkar’s Marathi poetry translated into English in his Anthology of Marathi
Poetry 1945-1965 published in 1967. 1976 was an important year for Kolatkar
because that year two collections of his poems, one in English and another in
Marathi, were published. The book of English poems was called Jejuri and his
Marathi poems were published under the title of Arun Kolatkarchya Kaviita
(‘Arun Kolatkar’s Poetry’). The very next year he won the Commonwealth
Poetry Prize for his Jejuri. Poets and critics, including Nissim Ezekiel and
Salman Rushdie, have praised Jejuri highly and in 1977 when Prisith Nandy
published Strangertime, a major anthology of Indian poems in English, he
included Kolatkar’s poetry in it.

In 2004, the year Kolatkar died, two collections of his poems, Kala Ghoda
Poems and Sarpasatra appeared. Kolatkar also translated the poems of Marathi
saint-poet Tukaram into English. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award for his
Marathi poems entitled Bhiuki Vahi (‘A Soaked Notebook’)

Kolatkar’s Jejuri is named after a place in Maharashtra. Jejuri is a temple town
near Pune in Western Maharashtra where devotees go on a pilgrimage to worship
the deity Khandoba, an incarnation of Shiva. In 1963, Kolatkar visited Jejuri with
his brother and a friend. He composed a few poems about the place immediately
after he returned from there. Before he actually saw the place he had read about it
in a book on temples and legends of Maharashtra. Kolatkar says in an interview
that he became interested in Jejuri because ‘It seemed an interesting place’.

Although Kolatkar draws many of his images from the temple town of Jejuri, we
cannot say that these poems are religious or devotional. He himself said in an
interview that he was not sure whether he believed in God. He said, ‘I leave the
question alone. I don’t think I have to take a position about God one way or the other.’ Many of the poems in Jejuri are about non-religious subjects. Some of them express the poet’s understanding of the problems of living. Many others are about contradictions in contemporary life in India.

Kolatkar’s poems are often oblique and sometimes difficult to understand. This is because his poetry is radically experimental and is influenced by the European and American modernist poets like Eliot, Auden, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams and many others like them. These qualities of obliqueness and obscurity are seen in both his English and Marathi poems. He often uses myth to comment on the contemporary reality in India. You will find that ‘Ajamil and the Tigers’, a poem you are going to read, does exactly that. There is also a touch of humour and satire in his poetry.

39.3 SUICIDE OF RAMA

39.3.1 Introduction

This poem is about Rama, the seventh incarnation of Vishnu and the hero of Valmiki’s Ramayana. Valmiki’s epic describes how Rama of Ayodhya defeated Ravana, the demon king of Lanka, and rescued his wife Sita who had been abducted by Ravana. After that Rama returned to Ayodhya and ruled as a model king for many years. Rama is said to have died by drowning himself in the river Saryu which flows past Ayodhya.

Now read the poem.

39.3.2 The Text

Suicide of Rama

winding verses stir him up
the turreted epic shrugs him off
the river resumes him
from legend’s ledge the hero falls

the crescent cuts a rope of fables
we cloud the skeleton with folklore
from valmiki’s roof top rama jumps
disturbing a tile or two

his flesh of myth saponified
his arse turned up toward the moon
rama drifts like a gourd
far from sap or shore

man leaves his legend standing
one wave bears the other out
the river refers his bones
to the salt judgement of the sea

Glossary:

winding : having a curved and twisted shape.
turreted : having small towers atop a wall or building, especially a castle.
ledge : a narrow flat shelf fixed to a wall, especially one below a window.
crescent : a curved shape.
saponified : turned into soap when oil or fat reacts with alkali.
gourd : a type of large vegetable with a hard skin and soft flesh.

39.3.3 Interpretation

Arun Kolatkar, as you know, wrote poems both in English and Marathi. Sometimes he wrote a poem in Marathi and then translated it into English himself. ‘Suicide of Rama’ was first written in Marathi and then translated into English by the poet himself. It is about the death of Rama.

The opening lines refer to the ‘winding verses’ of Valmiki’s *Ramayana*. The verses are compared to an ascending flight of stairs that created the hero named Rama. Then Rama commits suicide and falls from his heroic height that Valmiki gave him. It is like the epic shrugging him off. Valmiki’s epic has been called ‘turreted’ which suggests the metaphor of the epic as a grand palace. It also tells you that Rama lived in a palace and he jumped into the river from one of its windows. By juxtaposing the epic and Rama’s palace the poet suggests that it is not only the epic *Ramayana* that is grand like a palace but also that the epic has created the grand image of Rama the hero. But when Rama commits suicide he becomes a common mortal. The word ‘ledge’ in the fourth line continues the metaphor of the palace. It is the ledge, literally that of a window from which Rama jumped into the Saryu, and metaphorically that of the legend of Rama from which Rama falls when he commits suicide.

The ‘crescent’ in the next four lines makes you visualize the curved path that Rama’s body took when he jumped into the river. Fables (here meaning legendary tales) about Rama are imagined to be a rope that kept him secure at a high point as a hero. The poet tells us how heroes are created. When we turn a human being into someone divine it is like surrounding an ordinary person of flesh and blood (‘skeleton’) with the aura of a superhuman being (that is, clouding him with folklore). But when Rama committed suicide he fell from the high rooftop of Valmiki’s poetic imagination to the level of an ordinary mortal.

To commit suicide is to admit defeat and the poet seems to suggest that a defeated man cannot be an epic hero. The poem presents a striking contrast between the two images of Rama: one of the hero of *Ramayana*, faultless and immortal in popular imagination, and the other of an ordinary man who commits suicide.

Rama’s image of a great hero and king in mythology is seen turning into soap, something that will eventually disappear in the river. The use of the word ‘arse’ suggests that now the great hero has been reduced to a corpse that is drifting in the river like ‘a gourd’. Thus, in death the hero is far removed from that living creeper of legend (‘sap’) that once bore him high.

The final lines express a general truth. The man leaves only his legend behind. He will die but his great deeds will be remembered even after he is gone. It is like one wave proving that there was another before it. This is the cycle of nature; death always follows life. The river symbolizing change carries his corpse to the salty sea. This is the final judgement of time (objectified here as the sea) that every life, however illustrious, has to come to an end.
The artistic tension in the poem has been built on the contrast between the two images of Rama: the one of an epic hero who is a timeless part of popular imagination and the other of a mortal who dies when he jumps into the river. His leaping into the river and getting drowned symbolizes his transformation from a legend into a mortal being. After death he becomes a part of this phenomenal world of the elements. The river represents that physical world that is bound by the laws of nature which say that anything born has to die. In another words, Rama’s suicide suggests his leaving the world of cultural imagination and passing into that of ordinary existence.

This poem will remind you of another poem in Hindi written on the same subject. That poem is ‘Ram Ki Jal Samadhi’ by Bharat Bhushan but there is fundamental difference between the two. In the Hindi poem, death does not diminish Rama’s greatness. The images that Bharat Bhushan employs in the poem relate to Rama’s great deeds which he remembers at the time of his death such as his breaking the bow of Shiva. Unlike the Hindi poem, Kolatkar’s poem has an unmistakable note of irony.

39.3.4 A Note on the Form

When you read the poem you will find something unusual about it. You will notice that there are no capital letters or punctuation marks in the poem. If you read the poems of the American poet E.E. Cummings (1894-1962) you will notice that he too does not use capital letters or punctuation marks. But can we offer another explanation for it? We all know that proper nouns are written with a capital letter therefore ‘valmiki’ and ‘rama’ should have been spelt with capital letters. Can we say that Kolatkar does not write these names with capital letters because he wants to suggest that death makes everyone equal and takes away a person’s individuality? Note that in the third stanza, Kolatkar compares Rama’s body to a gourd drifting in the river suggesting that after death there is no difference between the body of Rama and that of a nameless gourd. Similarly, we can say that the absence of punctuation marks tries to recapture in verse the unrestricted flow of the river Saryu in which Rama was drowned.

You will also notice that in this poem the river is the central metaphor. It stands for the principle of change. This image of the river is contrasted with that of the solidly standing royal palace that represents the legend of Rama fixed immutably in our imagination.

Self-check Exercise I

1) Select words in the first four lines that suggest the image of a palace.

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39.4 CHAITANYA

39.4.1 The Text

Chaitanya

come off it
said chaitanya to a stone
in stone language

wipe the red paint off your face
i don’t think the colour suits you
i mean what’s wrong
with being just a plain stone
i’ll still bring you flowers
you like the flowers of zendo

don’t you
i like them too

Glossary:

Zendu : a kind of flower

39.4.2 Background to the Poem

Let us know something about Chaitanya. Chaitanya, or Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1534), as he is often called, was born in Bengal. He believed that we should ignore religious rituals and worship the Supreme Being in the form of Lord Krishna. He also believed that a devotee should lose his individual self into Lord Krishna and experience the presence of God in his life. One of the ways of destroying the ego is to recite the name of the lord in great ecstasy and to feel boundless compassion and love for God’s entire creation.
39.4.3 Interpretation

Arun Kolatkar’s Jejuri, as you know, is a collection of poems dealing ostensibly with the poet’s experience of visiting that place but actually it has poems on many important questions related to living. The poem you have just read has been taken from Jejuri and is one of the three ‘Chaitanya’ sections in the book. How is Chaitanya related to Jejuri? It is said that in 1510-11 he visited Jejuri where he tried to reform the people.

The opening lines of the poem tell you that the speaker is Chaitanya. He seems to be talking to a stone that is painted red. The first line (‘come off it’) tells you that the speaker’s tone is informal as if he is talking to an equal and not to a deity. He speaks in ‘stone language’. Can you say what ‘stone language’ means? First, it can mean language that the deity did not understand. It can also mean that people did not understand what Chaitanya was trying to tell them about devotion. When you read the rest of the poem, you will realize that ‘stone language’ suggests that the people of Jejuri did not agree to what Chaitanya was asking them to do. Therefore we can say that Chaitanya’s language was ineffective; it was ‘stone language’.

Let us return to the poem now. The speaker asks the stone to wipe the red paint off its face. If the stone mentioned in the poem is worshipped as a deity, we can safely say that the ‘red paint’ mentioned in the poem is obviously vermillion that devotees put on the stone images they worship. When we explore the image as a symbol, we understand that the ‘red paint’ stands for all kinds of rituals that are merely actions without any real feelings of devotion.

The last four lines mention ‘flowers’ that the speaker will offer to the deity. This word may be contrasted with the ‘red paint’ mentioned earlier. If ‘red paint’ stands for empty rituals, flowers represent real and natural feeling of devotion. The last two lines of the poem tell us that the speaker does not see himself and God to be separate. This is indicated by his saying that both he and God like the zendu flowers.

It appears from the poem that Chaitanya wanted to teach true devotion to the people of Jejuri but they preferred to continue using their old religious rituals. This you will realize when you read another Chaitanya section in Jejuri which says that the hills (meaning the people living there) remained unmoved.

the hills remained still
when Chaitanya
was passing by
a cowbell tinkled
when he disappeared from view
and the herd of legends
returned to its grazing.

Can we call this a religious poem? In a Youth Times interview Arun Kolatkar was asked if he was a religious poet. He replied, ‘A religious poet? No. Or may be religious in the sense that any experience can be religious if experienced deeply enough...’ This poem is religious in the sense that it expresses the poet’s idea of true religious feeling.
Self-check Exercise II

1) Why does Chaitanya ask the stone to wipe the red paint off its face?

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2) Comment on ‘red paint’ and ‘flowers’ as symbols.

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39.5 AJAMIL AND THE TIGERS

39.5.1 Introduction
In this poem Arun Kolatkar uses the mythical tale of Ajamil in a new context. According to the legend, Ajamil was an evil man who was a drunkard and neglected his family. He also gambled and sold off his wife’s ornaments. He became a thief and looted wayfarers. As a result of his evil ways his wife suffered and found it very difficult to look after her children. The story tells us that he was saved from the messenger of death by God. After that he became a different man. He left his sinful ways. He decided to spend the rest of his life helping others.

39.5.2 The Text

Ajamil and the Tigers

The tiger people went to their king
and said, ‘We’re starving.
We’ve had nothing to eat,
not a bite,
for 15 days and 16 nights.
Ajamil has got
a new sheep dog.
He cramps our style
and won’t let us get within a mile
of meat.’

‘That’s shocking,’
said the tiger king.
‘Why don’t you come to see me before?
Make preparations for a banquet.
I’m gonna teach that sheep dog a lesson he’ll never forget.’
‘Hear, hear’, said the tigers.
‘Careful,’ said the queen.
But he was already gone.
Alone
Into the darkness before the dawn.

In an hour he was back,
the good king.
A black patch on his eye.
His tail in a sling.
And said, ‘I’ve got it all planned
now that I know the lie of the land.
All of us will have to try.
We’ll outnumber the son of a bitch.
And this time there will be no hitch.
Because this time I shall be leading the attack.’

Quick as lightning
the sheep dog was.
He took them all in as prisoners of war,
the 50 tigers and the tiger king,
before they could get their paws
on a single sheep.
They never had a chance.
The dog was in 51 places all at once.
He strung them all out in a daisy chain
and flung them in front of his boss in one big leap.

‘Nice dog you got there, Ajamil,’
said the tiger king.
Looking a little ill
and spitting out a tooth.
‘But there’s been a bit of a misunderstanding.
We could’ve wiped out your herd in one clean sweep.
But we were not trying to creep up on your sheep.
We feel that means are more important than ends.
We were coming to see you as friends.
And that’s the truth.’

The sheep dog was the type
who had never told a lie in his life.
He was built along simpler lines
and he was simply disgusted.
He kept on making frantic signs.
But Ajamil, the good shepherd
refused to meet their eyes
and pretended to believe every single word
of what the tiger king said.
And seemed to be taken in by all the lies.

Ajamil cut them loose
and asked them all to stay for dinner.
It was an offer the tigers couldn’t refuse.
And after the lamb chops and the roast,
when Ajamil proposed
they sign a long term friendship treaty,
all the tigers roared,
‘We couldn’t agree with you more.’
And swore they would be good friends all their lives
as they put down the forks and the knives.

Ajamil signed a pact
with the tiger people and sent them back.
Laden with gifts of sheep, leather jackets and balls of wool.
Ajamil wasn’t a fool.
Like all good shepherds he knew
that even tigers have got to eat some time.
A good shepherd sees to it they do.
He is free to play a flute all day
as well fed tigers and fat sheep drink from the same pond
with a full stomach for a common bond.

Glossary:
cramps our style : does not allow us to hunt sheep.
black patch : wearing a patch of black cloth on his eye as it is injured.
hitch : problem.
daisy : a kind of flower.
roast : roast meat.

39.5.3 Interpretation

The poem, as you must have noticed, tells a story in which animals too are characters. It is therefore a fable. A fable is a fictional story in which there are animals as well as mythical characters. The animals are given human qualities such as verbal communication. The story ends with a moral lesson. You must know that a fable is different from a parable in the sense that in the latter there are no animal characters or inanimate things presented as characters.

‘Ajamil and the Tigers’ is a story about how a compromise was reached between Ajamil and the king of tigers. Here in this story Ajamil is presented as a shepherd whose sheep are protected by a brave and honest sheep dog. The tigers cannot hunt sheep and are therefore hungry. They go to their king and complain that the ‘new sheep dog’ has does not let them hunt sheep. The king of tigers goes to fight the sheep dog but is defeated. Then once again he attacks the sheep dog taking every tiger with him but is again defeated. Then the king of tigers uses diplomacy and falsehood and tells the simple Ajamil that there has been some misunderstanding. He claims that the tigers could have killed all the sheep in ‘one clean sweep’ but he feels that ‘means are more important than ends’. So he has come to him as a friend.

The sheep dog tries to tell Ajamil by making ‘frantic signs’ that the tiger king is not telling the truth but Ajamil pretends not to understand the sheep dog. Ajamil invites the king and his tigers to a grand banquet. After that a pact is signed between Ajamil and the tiger king according to which Ajamil offers the tigers some sheep in return for peace. Now there is no fight between the sheep dog and the tigers and both the sheep and the tigers are happy and drink from the same pond. Ajamil is free from worry and can ‘play a flute all day.’
You must have noted that the story has been narrated in the idiom of a Hollywood movie about gangsters. Notice the Americanism in the line ‘I’m gonna teach that sheep dog a lesson he’ll never forget.’ Then you realize that the sheep may represent the common people who are at the mercy of mafia dons. The only way they can save themselves is by offering the criminals some protection money so that they may live in peace. You thus see that the story becomes a cynical comment on the present day situation in which a compromise has to be reached with criminals because the leaders (represented by Ajamil in the poem) do not have the will to punish them. This poem has been interpreted in many ways. M.K. Naik, for instance, says that the story highlights the need for harmony in a life full of conflict. But you could also say that the poem has a philosophical dimension and illustrates with the help of a fable how evil can corrupt the good. Again, you can also interpret the poem as a political satire on the contemporary situation in India in which criminal gangs are able to form a nexus with corrupt political leaders. The sheep dog may represent good and honest people in the system but they are overruled by those in power who have compromised their principles for the sake of convenience. As the protector of his sheep, Ajamil should have listened to what the sheep dog was trying to tell him.

Like a story the poem has dialogue and narration. You will notice how characters in the poem have been developed. The tigers are shown as full of confidence while Ajamil comes across as a weak individual. You also see that the central conflict in the poem is between good and evil in which, unlike in a fable, the good reaches a compromise with evil.

### 39.5.4 Form and Style

In form ‘Ajamil and the Tigers’ is a satire. In her *The Anatomy of Poetry* Marjorie Boulton says that a satire is ‘intended to arouse laughter by its witty and severe criticism of abuses.’ Can you identify elements in the poem that arouse laughter? You can, if you look carefully. For instance, when the poet describes the tiger king returning from the battle with a black patch over his eye and his ‘tail in a sling’ we find it funny. We do not expect the majestic tiger looking like a patient in the orthopaedic ward of a hospital. This unexpected turn in description creates humour.

We can also say that the poem fits into the form of a fable. You see that specific numbers have been used in the poem. For instance, the tigers have been hungry for ‘15 days and 16 nights’ or the dog was in ‘51 places all at once’. In fables and fairy tales you often find specific numbers used. For instance, in a fable you will find expressions such as ‘the prince rode through the forest for seven days and seven nights’, ‘the ascetic meditated for twelve years’, and so on.

This poem has dialogue but it is spoken only by the tigers. Most of the dialogue in the poem is what the tiger king says. What Ajamil says is given in the reported speech. Why is it like this? One of the reasons may be that the poet wants to focus only on the tigers and so reports directly what they say. Another reason that goes deeper than this can be that in the kind of world the poet has described symbolically, only the evil has a voice and therefore, it is only the tigers who speak.

The style of the poem is almost bare with hardly any figures of speech used. You will find a simile in ‘Quick as lightning’ and a metaphor in ‘a daisy chain’ but most of the time the poet uses concrete, pictorial words in their literal sense.
Self-check Exercise III

1) What according to you is the moral of ‘Ajamil and the Tigers’?
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2) Pick out expressions in the poem that suggest that the tiger king has been described as a mafia don.
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3) Why does Ajamil refuse to meet the eyes of the sheep dog who is trying to say with ‘frantic signs’ that the tiger king is not telling the truth?
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39.6 AGHA SHAHID ALI (1949-2001)

Agha Shahid Ali belonged to Kashmir and was educated in Kashmir, New Delhi and the U.S.A. earning a Ph.D. from the Pennsylvania State University in 1984. Next year, he also did a Masters in Fine Arts from the University of Arizona. He taught English literature and creative writing in colleges and universities in India and the U.S.A. On December 8, 2001 he died of brain cancer at the young age of fifty-two.

In 1972, when Agha Shahid Ali was twenty-three he published his first collection of poems called Bone Sculpture. This was followed in 1979 by In Memory of Begum Akhtar. But some of his finest poems are to be found in his The Half-Inch Himalayas published in 1987.

Ali’s poetry is markedly different from Arun Kolatkar’s. In his best poetry there is much tenderness and longing for his homeland. You will also find a prominent romantic streak in his poetry. Memory and nostalgia are important elements in his work. He even called one of his collections A Nostalgist’s Map of America which he published in 1991. Although there are major differences between the two, Ali’s poetry will remind you more of the poems of Jayanta Mahapatra than
Indian English Poets

those of Kolatkar or Nissim Ezekiel. Ali’s last book was *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* which he described as a collection of English *ghazals*. The *ghazal*, as you know, is an important genre in Urdu poetry.

Ali not only wrote poetry but was also an accomplished translator. He translated into English the poetry of Faiz Ahmad Faiz, the famous Urdu poet. His translation of Faiz’s poetry is titled *A Rebel’s Silouhette*.

### 39.7 POSTCARD FROM KASHMIR

#### 39.7.1 Introduction

‘Postcard from Kashmir’ is the prologue poem in Agha Shahid Ali’s collection of poems called *The Half-Inch Himalayas* published in 1987. It shows how he was moved when he received a picture postcard from Kashmir in America. The poem shows the poet’s deep love for his homeland and nostalgia for it and sets the theme of the volume. The poems in this volume are about the longing for his homeland, memories of it and also about being in exile.

#### 39.7.2 The Text

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

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

This is home. And this the closest
I’ll ever be to home. When I return,
the colours won’t be so brilliant,
the Jhelum waters so clean,
sorultramarine. My love
so overexposed.

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

(for Pavan Sahgal)

**Glossary:**

*shrinks* : is reduced to the size of a postcard.

*ultramarine* : bright blue.

*negative* : the negative of a photograph.

#### 39.7.3 Interpretation

‘Postcard from Kashmir’ brings to us the poet’s feelings about his homeland Kashmir. It juxtaposes the memory of the poet’s home with the picture of some scenery in Kashmir. When he receives the postcard he is reminded of his home in India. Obviously, he is away from home in some foreign land.

Did you find the first two lines of the poem difficult to understand? How can Kashmir be contained in a mailbox? But when you realize that ‘Kashmir’ here
does not mean the place but a picture postcard showing a view in Kashmir you understand that the word has been used in a different sense. In the second line we are told that the postcard is four inches by six. Why does he use the adjective ‘neat’ in the second line? It is probably to suggest that though the scene from Kashmir is printed on a well-defined, rectangular piece of paper, the poet’s memory of that place is not so clearly outlined. It is hazy and overlapping and is mixed with ambivalent emotions.

In the next two lines the poet tells us something about himself. He likes things that are neat and well-ordered. But we also hear a note of wry regret in his voice. You will see that the lines have irony. They mean the opposite of what they say. The poet appears to be saying that he who prided himself on being clear-headed about things is now confused about what his home means to him. Now he is looking at the picture of the Himalayas on a half-inch stamp affixed to the postcard but he cannot express clearly what the mountains mean to him now, or what memories that picture brings to him.

When you read further you realize that what the poet experiences is complex. For example, we can interpret ‘home’ in more than one sense. Does ‘home’ mean Kashmir or does it mean the place in America where he is living now? If the place where he is living now is home, why does he feel homesick for Kashmir where he was born and spent his early years? Continuing the inherent ambivalence and dichotomy of the poem, the poet says that when he actually visits Kashmir, the place will not have such bright colours that the picture postcard has. Similarly, the water of Jhelum will not be so brightly blue. The postcard then becomes a metaphor for his memories of his homeland. He has a romanticised picture of his homeland in his mind. It is said that distance makes things look more beautiful than they actually are. The Kashmir of his memories has brighter colours than the real Kashmir.

Why does the speaker say that his love will not be so ‘overexposed’ in Kashmir? Here ‘overexposed’ has been used in the sense the word is used in photography. A negative is said to have been overexposed when more light is allowed to fall on it than what is needed. When it happens, the positive that is printed from the negative plate becomes hazy. Here in America his love for his motherland is overexposed because there is too much longing and nostalgia mixed with it making it difficult to understand.

The concluding lines of the poem continue the metaphor of a photograph. When he visits Kashmir his memory will be a little out of ‘focus’ suggesting that the reality of the place will not match the memory of it. His memory will be a large negative photographic plate which is still undeveloped. You will readily see that the poet is talking about how imagination works. It transforms everything. He is suggesting here that there are two kinds of reality: one that is out there, and the other the memory of it.

39.7.4 Style

The poem is spoken in a tone that suggests that the poet is talking to himself. You will notice that the poet builds up on the images of light and dark. The ‘ultramarine’ in line 9 is contrasted with the ‘black/and white’ in lines 13 and 14. We can therefore say that the poet expresses his longing for his homeland with the help of visual imagery. You will also notice that when the poet describes the actual place he uses expressions such as ‘four by six inches’, ‘half-inch Himalayas’, ‘Jhelum’, ‘waters’ all of which have a definite meaning and can be
clearly visualised. But when he talks about his feelings he uses words like ‘home’ and ‘love’, words that cannot be visualized so easily. He achieves this contrasting effect in the poem by balancing concrete words against those that are abstract.

Self-check Exercise IV

1) Pick out two words in the poem which you think have been used ironically.

2) What is the central metaphor in the poem?

3) Point out two things in the poem that have been contrasted.

39.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you read three poems by Arun Kolatkar and one by Agha Shahid Ali. The text of the poems was explained and their implied meaning was also discussed. You also learnt how to point out stylistic devices used in these poems.

39.9 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercise I


2) The river may stand for the flux of time that makes everything eventually transient.

3) The words suggest how legends are made. We invent stories about a man which are passed on from generation to generation turning that man into a hero.
Self-check Exercise II

1) Chaitanya asks the stone to wipe the red paint off its face because he does not want rituals to be a part of devotion to God.

2) Symbolically, red paint represents empty rituals and flowers stand for the real and natural feeling of devotion.

Self-check Exercise III

1) If a leader makes a compromise with evil, his followers have to pay the price for it.

2) ‘I’m gonna teach that sheep dog a lesson he’ll never forget.’ ‘We’ll outnumber the son of a bitch’.

3) It shows that Ajamil knows he is making a mistake and so is feeling guilty.

Self-check Exercise IV

1) ‘Neat’, ‘home’.

2) A photograph.

3) The actual Kashmir and the poet’s memory of it.

39.10 SUGGESTED READINGS


