

## **11th Standard- English**

### **Snapshots-The Ghat of The OnlyWorld Summary**

On 25 April 2001, for the first time Agha Shahid Ali spoke to Amitav Ghosh about his impending death although he had been getting treatment for cancer for about fourteen months. Amitav had telephoned to remind him of a friend's invitation to lunch. He was to pick Shahid from his apartment. Despite treatment he seemed healthy except for irregular momentary failures of memory. That day, the writer heard him going through his engagement book when suddenly he said that he could not see anything. After a short silence he added that he hoped this was not an indication of his death.

Although they had talked a great deal but Shahid had never before talked of death. At first Amitav Ghosh thought that he was joking and he tried to tell him that he would be well. But Shahid went on to say that he hoped that Amitav Ghosh would write something about him, after his death.

From the window of his study Amitav Ghosh could see the building in which he had shifted just a few months back. Earlier he had been living a few miles away, in Manhattan, when his malignant brain tumour was detected.

He then decided to move to Brooklyn, to be close to his youngest sister, Sameeta, who taught at the Pratt Institute. Shahid ignored Amitav's reassurances. It was only when he began to laugh that he realised that Shahid was very serious. He wanted to be remembered through the written word.

Shahid knew that for some writers things become real only in the process of writing. With them there is an inherent battle for dealing with loss and grief. He knew that Amitav would look for reasons to avoid writing about his death. Hence he had made sure that he would write about him. Therefore, Amitav noted all he remembered of his conversations with him. It was this that made it possible to write an article on him.

Amitav was influenced by Shahid's work long before he met him. His voice was incomparable. It was highly lyrical and disciplined. It was engaged and yet deeply inward. His was a voice not ashamed to speak in a poetic style. None other than him could have written a line like: 'Mad heart, be brave.'

In 1998, Amitav quoted a line from *The Country Without a Post Office* in an article that had a brief mention about Kashmir. Then all that he knew about Shahid was that he was from Srinagar and had studied in Delhi. The writer had been at Delhi University at about the same time but they had never met. Later, some common friend had got him to meet Shahid. In 1998 and 1999 they talked several time on the phone and even met a few times.

It was only after Shahid shifted to Brooklyn, the next year, that they found that they had a great deal in common. By this time Shahid's condition was already serious, but their friendship grew. They shared common friends, and passions. Because of Shahid's illness even the most ordinary talks were sharply perceptive.

One day, the writer Suketu Mehta, who also lives in Brooklyn, joined them for lunch. They decided to meet regularly.

Often other writers would also join them. Once when a team arrived with a television camera, Shahid said: 'I'm so shameless; I just love the camera.'

Shahid had a magical skill to change the ordinary into the enchanting. The writer recalls when on May 21, he accompanied Iqbal and Hena, Shahid's brother and his sister to get him home from hospital. He was in hospital again, after several unsuccessful operations, for an operation of a tumour, to ease the pressure on his brain. His head was shaved and the tumour was visible with its edges outlined by metal stitches. When he was discharged he said that he was strong enough to walk but he was weak and dizzy and could not take more than a few steps.

Iqbal went to bring the wheelchair while the rest of them held him upright. Even at that moment his spirit had not deserted him. Shahid asked the hospital orderly with the wheelchair where he was from. When the man said 'Ecuador', Shahid clapped his hands cheerfully and said that he always wanted to learn Spanish to read the Spanish poet and dramatist Lorca.

A sociable person, Shahid, had a party in his living room everyday. He loved people, food and the spirit of festivity. The journey from the lobby of Shahid's building to his door was a voyage between continents. The aroma of roganjosh and haale against the background of the songs and voices that were echoed out of his apartment, coupled with his delighted welcome was unforgettable. His apartment was always full of people. He also loved the view of the Brooklyn waterfront slipping, like a ghat, into the East River, under the glittering lights of Manhattan from his seventh floor apartment.

Almost to the very end he was the centre of everlasting celebration—of talk, laughter, food and poetry. Shahid relished his food. Even when his eyesight was failing, he could tell from the smell exactly the stage of the food being cooked and also the taste. Shahid was well known for his ability in the kitchen. He would plan for days planning and preparing for a dinner party.

It was through one such party, in Arizona, that he met James Merrill, the poet who completely changed the direction of his poetry. Shahid then began to try out strict, metrical patterns and verse forms. So great was the influence on Shahid's poetry that in the poem in which he most clearly anticipated his own death, 'I Dream I Am At the Ghat of the Only World,' he honoured the evocative to Merrill: 'SHAHID, HUSH. THIS IS ME, JAMES. THE LOVED ONE ALWAYS LEAVES.'

Shahid had a special passion for the food of his region, one variant of it in particular: 'Kashmiri food in the Pandit style'. He said it was very important to him because of a repeated dream, in which all the Pandits had vanished from the valley of Kashmir and their food had become extinct. This was a nightmare that disturbed him and he mentioned it repeatedly both in his conversation and his poetry.

However, he also mentioned his love for Bengali food. He had never been to Calcutta but was introduced to it through his friends. He felt when you ate it you could see that there were so many things that you didn't know about the country. It was because of various kinds of food, clothes and music we have been able to make a place where we can all come together because of the good things.

To him one of the many 'good things' was the music of Begum Akhtar. He had met her as a teenager and she had become a long-lasting presence and influence in his life. He also admired her for her ready wit. He was himself a very witty person. Once at Barcelona airport, he was asked by a security guard what he did. He said he was a poet. The guard woman asked him again what he was doing in Spain. Writing poetry, he replied. Finally, the frustrated woman asked if he was carrying anything that could be dangerous to the other passengers. To this Shahid said: 'Only my heart.'

These moments were precious to Shahid. He longed for people to give him an opportunity to answer questions.

He was a brilliant teacher. On May 7, the writer attended Shahid's class when he was teaching at Manhattan's Baruch College in 2000. Unfortunately, this was his last class that he ever taught. The class was to be a brief one for he had an appointment at the hospital immediately afterwards. It was apparent from the moment they walked

in that the students adored him. They had printed a magazine and dedicated the issue to him. But Shahid was not in the least downcast by the sadness of the occasion. He was sparkling with life and brimming with joy. When an Indian student walked in late he greeted her saying that his Tittle sub-continental' had arrived. He pretended to faint with pleasure. He felt meeting another South Asian evoked in him patriotic feelings.

He felt that the time he spent at Penn State was sheer pleasure as there he grew as a reader, as a poet, and as a lover.

He became close to a lively group of graduate students, many of whom were Indian. Later he shifted to Arizona for a degree in creative writing. After this he worked in various colleges and universities. After 1975, Shahid lived mainly in America. His brother was already there and their two sisters later joined them. However, Shahid's parents continued to live in Srinagar where he spent the summer months every year. He was pained to see the increasing violence in Kashmir from the late 1980s onwards. This had such an impact on him that it became one of the fundamental subjects of his work. It was in his writing of Kashmir that he produced his finest work. Ironically Shahid was not a political poet by choice.

The suffering in Kashmir tormented him but he was determined not to accept the role of victim. If he had he done so, he would have benefited by becoming a regular feature on talk shows and news programmes. But he never failed in his sense of duty. He respected religion but advocated the separation of politics and religious practice. He did not seek political answers in terms of policy and solutions. On the contrary he was all for the all-encompassing and universal betterment. This secular attitude could be attributed to his upbringing. In his childhood when he wanted to create a small Hindu temple in his room in Srinagar, his parents showed equal enthusiasm. His mother bought him murtis (idols) and other things to help him make a temple in his room.

He wanted to be remembered as a national poet but not a nationalist poet. In the title poem of The Country Without a Post Office, a poet returns to Kashmir to find the keeper of a fallen minaret.

In this representation of his homeland, he himself became one of the images that were revolving around the dark point of stillness. He saw himself both as the witness and the martyr with his destiny tied with Kashmir's.

On May 5, he had a telephonic conversation with the writer. This was a day before an important test (a scan) that would reveal the course of treatment. The scan was scheduled for 2.30 in the afternoon. The writer could get in touch with him only the next morning. Shahid told him clearly that his end was near and he would like to go back to Kashmir to die. His voice was calm and peaceful. He had planned everything. He said he would get his passport; settle his will as he didn't want his family to go through any trouble after his death. And after settling his affairs he would go to Kashmir. He wanted to go back as because of the feudal system in Kashmir there would be so much support. Moreover his father was there. He did not want his family to have to make the journey after his death, like they had to with his mother.

However later, because of logistical and other reasons, he changed his mind about returning to Kashmir. He was content to be buried in Northampton. But his poetry underlined his desire to die and be buried in Kashmir.

The last time the writer saw Shahid was on 27 October, at his brother's house in Amherst. He could talk erratically. He had come to terms with his approaching end. There were no signs of suffering or conflict. He was surrounded by the love of his family and friends and was calm, satisfied and at peace. He had once expressed his desire to meet his mother in the afterlife, if there was one. This was his supreme comfort. He died peacefully, in his sleep, at 2 a.m. on December 8.

Although his friendship with the writer spanned over a short duration, it left in him a huge void. He recalls his presence in his living room particularly when he read to them his farewell to the world: 'I Dream I Am At the Ghat of the Only World...'

