

**Indian Poetry in English**  
**Prof. Binod Mishra**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee**

**Lecture - 38**  
**Jeet Thayil**

Good morning, friends and welcome back to NPTEL online certification course on Indian Poetry in English. My dear friends, we have come a long way and perhaps we are in the last legs of our lectures and in this regard today we are going to talk about a very important and a very contemporary Indian English poet whose name is Jeet Thayil.


Many of you when you hear the name of Jeet Thayil, certainly some of the novels that made Jeet Thayil a famous; you start thinking of-- Was Thayil or is Thayil a poet as well? Because as a novelist he has made a mark he has established himself, but basically Jeet Thayil is a poet and his poetry is quite contemporary, because he raises some of the contemporary problems which actually need to be addressed and answered through Thayil's poetry.

Now, who is Jeet Thayil the man and who is Jeet Thayil the poet? But, before we come to know something about Jeet Thayil, it is actually time that we came to know about the condition about the situation in which Jeet Thayil came to be Jeet Thayil, what actually were these situations, how and or what made Jeet Thayil a contemporary Indian English poet.

(Refer Slide Time: 02:31)

## Socio-Political Conditions

- ❖ Individualism
- ❖ Scepticism
- ❖ Drugs and despair
- ❖ General Disillusionment
- ❖ Alienated from family and religion



Swayam 2

Now, Jeet Thayil, before we come to know about a Jeet Thayil, it is actually time that we knew the socio-political conditions which were prevalent during Jeet Thayil's time. It is already said that the two world wars affected the literary scene too much and in this regard we find that Jeet Thayil's poetry represents the age that he was in. It was actually an age in which majority of the poets started practicing individualism.


They started thinking of the contemporary problems of life. They also started a thinking about where the world was going to and they also were sandwiched between skepticism and rationalism. The contemporary scenario not only in India, but on the global level was full of several problems. And, in this regard there were many youths and many people who often took a retreat to drugs and despair. An air of disillusionment was also prevalent.


And, in earlier days when we talk about poetry, we find poetry was of a different sort of order. There used to be a sort of pattern, there used to be a sort of order, there used to be a sort of attraction for several things, I mean external nature and all. But, then after the two world wars, poetry actually became very inward; brokenness fine, fragmentation, alienation from family and religion, these happened to be the themes of modern contemporary poetry.

(Refer Slide Time: 04:40)

## Introduction

- ❖ Born in 1959..., in a Syrian Christian family, Kerala, India.
- ❖ Masters in Fine Arts from Sarah Lawrence College, New York.
- ❖ Recipient of grants and awards from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the Swiss Arts Council, the British Council and the Rockefeller Foundation.
- ❖ Poet, novelist, librettist and musician.
- ❖ *Narcopolis* (2012): Shortlisted for Man Booker Prize in 2012.
- ❖ Sahitya Akademi Award 2012 for *These Errors are Correct*.
- ❖ Literary cosmopolitan
- ❖ Personal Poems
- ❖ 2012 Libretto: *Babur in London*




3

Now, is the time that we got introduced to the poet, Jeet Thayil. Jeet Thayil was born in 1959, in a Syrian Christian family in the state of Kerala. He had his early education in the nearby towns, but then he switched over to a foreign land, where he did his Masters in Fine Arts from Sarah Lawrence College.

Then he also had the opportunity of studying in Hong Kong and then he was also a recipient of several grants and awards from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the Swiss Arts Council, The British Council and the Rockefeller Foundation. Actually, Jeet Thayil is not a man who can be confined only to one genre of literature, Jeet Thayil is actually a poet, he is also a novelist.

He is a librettist, a person who writes the text for the opera and Jeet Thayil is also a musician, that is why when we come to have a peep in the world of Jeet Thayil's poetry, we can find different sorts of images, we can also come across different sorts of metaphors. We can also find different sorts of illusions in the world of Jeet Thayil.

Actually, for the first time Jeet Thayil became famous when his very first novel *Necropolis* came, that was in the year 2012, it was actually shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and that actually made Jeet Thayil very famous among the new and the contemporary generation.

Jeet Thayil was also awarded Sahitya Akademi Award for one of his collections entitled *These Errors Are Correct*. It would actually be wrong to call it a collection, because that is in the form of a novel. But, when you can also find that there are quite a good a

number of a poems fine, even in his poem poetical works we can find the poems are prosaic at times.

Actually, early poems of Jeet Thayil bear a touch of him being a literary cosmopolitan because he writes of so many American poets, he writes of other poets, he writes of their plights, their miseries and he also writes of their conditions in which they were living. But, then in many of his poems we find a personal voice, the persona of Jeet Thayil also working. In 2012, when he wrote Libretto which became very popular *Babur in London* but, this was not enacted in India because of some reason or the other.

(Refer Slide Time: 07:52)

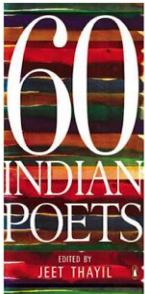
**Poetry Collections**

- ❑ *Gemini* (1992)
- ❑ *Apocalypso* (1997)
- ❑ *English* (2004)
- ❑ *These Errors Are Correct* (2008)

**Edited Works**

- ❖ *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets*, Bloodaxe UK, 2008
- ❖ *60 Indian Poets* (2008)
- ❖ *Give the Sea Change and It Shall Change: 56 Indian Poets*, Fulcrum, 2005

"works his feelings out with care, through colourations of mood rather than through explicit statements." (Dom Moraes)



So, this is about Jeet Thayil and then we come to his poetry collections, fine. In fact, the very first collection that came out was *Gemini*, it came out in the year 1992. Actually, after 1990s the literary scene changed a lot and the poets and the practitioners even of novels who appeared on the literary horizon, they had different sorts of subjects, a sort of brokenness, fragmentation, a sort of disillusionment that we can find.

So, *Gemini* actually had a different sort of emotion, it actually can be said that it has got some new areas of emotion. And, that is why there are certain topics which have been touched upon in *Gemini* and these topics are like drugs, drink, sex and even death. So, these are being delineated in this very first collection entitled *Gemini*.

And, then 1997 came *Apocalypso*. *Apocalypso* is a bit one can call it a bit mature than the previous collection, where one can find Thayil to be wittier, one can also find Thayil to be less dependent. And, in majority of the poems that Thayil writes apart from being some biblical references because, a Thayil himself was from the Christian\_\_\_\_\_ Syrian Christian family.

But, then Thayil believed, Thayil's works give us an inkling of his being a Roman Catholic because, at times, it appears as he himself also because of his writings and the others seem to believe that a sinner is closer, sinner is actually a closer than a saint fine. So, we find that and Thayil himself has also admitted that he used to be an alcoholic fine.

So, then in 2004 came *English* that is again a poetry collection and then came in 2008, *These Errors Are Correct. These Errors Are Correct* that came in 2008. Thayil also edited some other works namely *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets*, which came out in 2008, then his *60 Indian Poets* has become very famous, where he has selected many contemporary poets who could not get more room in anthologies of poetry.

And, then *Give the Sea Change and It Shall Change: 56 Indian Poets*, fine, came out in 2005. Actually, Thayil was very much influenced by Dom Moraes and Dom Moraes himself has said in one of the phases. He says --Thayil "works his feelings out with care, through colorations of mood rather than through explicit statements."

So, Thayil he can be considered to be a poet of moods rather than of explicit statements, because one can find several references to drinks, one can find references to drugs. And, even in his novels we can find the typical scenario of Mumbai as a metro where all these practices are very much prevalent.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:35)

## Characteristics of Poems

- Surreal humour
- Satiric and intense
- Dense texture of sound and echoes
- A widening capacity to embrace the Dionysian.
- Attractions of drug, drink, sex and death.
- Concerns about corruption in life

Poetry is like a very specialized language spoken only by the practitioners of a lost art; poets are priests of a religion who have been washed up on a dead planet. Poets speak only to the converted [those who appreciate poetry]; they make very few new converts. Poetry is also more difficult to write than prose, and you have to deal with things like structure. Even free verse has a certain formality. Each word has to do a lot of work; it is a loaded language.

Now, what are the characteristics of Thayil's poems? There is an element of a surreal humor, then Thayil at times becomes satiric and his satires are very intense. One can find plethora of word plays in the poems of Thayil and Thayil can also be considered to experiment with ghazals and songs. He gave a new outlook to ghazals and songs. There comes a widening capacity to embrace the Dionysian, fine. As we have already said that one can come across the attractions of drug, drink, sex and death.

But, Thayil is not confined only to these areas, Thayil is a poet of passion, Thayil is a poet of persecution. Thayil is a poet of love, Thayil is a poet of loss. One can come across corruptions in human life also very much prevalent in the works of Thayil. Now, one can also find Thayil who became famous as a novelist, but if a Thayil is asked about his attraction or his fascination for poetry, what Thayil said is very important.

And, he says--- "Poetry is like a very specialized language spoken only by the practitioners of lost art; poets are priests of a religion who have been washed up on a dead planet. Poets speak only to the converted, when he says converted what actually he means is those who appreciate poetry, they make very few new converts. Poetry is also more difficult to write than prose and as regards his query about writing novels what he means is that novels can help a person meant money. But, may be poetry cannot and poetry has got a lower strata in this regard. So, even free verse has a certain formality..." That is why Thayil says that poetry writing is a very complex and a difficult writing.

One can find Thayil's poetic world full of small poems, majority of his poems are in the form of sonnets and ghazals. But, then he is not accustomed to writing long poems, but then some of the poems are longer. Let us take some poems from his very first collection that is from *Gemini*, because I want to show you how Thayil's poetic art progressed.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:19)

from *Gemini* (1992)

Growing up in that strange place we learned  
to laugh silently for fear that laughter too loud  
would bring about its own swift end.  
We learned a dread of Sundays. If days had colours,  
we used to say, Sunday's would be black. I learned  
to sing in the dark, quietly, without joy, not  
without fear, modulating my tones so he would not  
hear, the big man sleeping with my mother in  
the back. They sleep there still. Housebroken now,  
I make token sounds in a large unnoticed hand,  
gone to ground, as you said, in a loud and leprous land. ("House of Silence")

What demon stalks this arid  
land,  
how can you live here my poor  
soul?  
Slipping in semen, blotting his  
snot,  
What demon stalks this arid  
land?  
Slip in the slip, slip in the slot,  
Even the sun steps like a thief.  
("A Circular Song")

So, this poem which has "House of Silence" Now, let us see how the poet appears to be in his early days as innocent like any other child and what he says—"Growing up in that strange place we learned/ to laugh silently for fear, that laughter too loud/ would bring about its own swift end./ We learnt a dread of Sundays..." And he says that if there was anything that we dreaded or feared that was Sunday, maybe because of some reasons or the other that he would have to go to the mass; since his faith expected of him.

"If days had colors we used to say Sunday's /would be black. I learned/ to sing in the dark quietly without joy/" not without fear. So, I was frightened because I had to sing and modulating my tones. So, he would not hear, who? The big man sleeping with my mother in the back, perhaps he is also conscious of that those people who have been led to rest may not awaken and may not feel it bad.

"They sleep still there. Housebroken now/ I make token sounds in a large unnoticed hand/ gone to ground, as you said in a loud and leprous land." So, this is actually the beginning of *Gemini* fine, the this is one poem from the beginning of this Gemini.

And, as he progresses towards the end where we can take a different note where in the poem entitled “A Circular Song”, what he says--- “what demon stalks this arid land.../ here now Thayil actually talks of how there has been a decadence. Thayil has also been talking about decadence in religion and decadence to a one faith that he belonged to.

So, here he says—“What demon stalks this arid land,/ how can you leave here my poor soul?/ Slipping in semen, blotting his snot, what demon stalks this arid land?/ Slot in the slip, slip in the slot,/ even the sun steps like a thief.” So, Thayil is very much conscious and when he finds here that they can find a sort of change, change of note, change of reaction, change of emotion in the world of Thayil.

So, we can also take some poems from his other collections namely *Apocalypso*, where he, at times, becomes very realistic, he becomes very metaphoric. He at times becomes existential because, as a poet he is a contemporary thinker. Of course, there may not be that much of musicality, but Thayil was also consistently trying to bring a sort of music in his poem.

But, then he could not do that, he brought musicality in terms of the thoughts. Here we can take some of the lines because, it is very difficult to take majority of his poems at a stretch.

(Refer Slide Time: 17:32)

from *Apocalypso* (1997)

People die in circles. The thing to hate  
Is learning what you'll have to unlearn...  
People die heedlessly. The nuns you like  
Reek of hollow heaven, stubbed or frayed,  
Mentholated in grievance...  
Children die, predeceasing parents. Odd  
That we eat birds and animals growing  
Like us. Look closely at rivers, trees.  
People die, that's what they do. ("Life Lessons")

Swajal 7



Now, take some lines from the poem Apocalypso, the poem is titled Life Lessons. And, this appears to be a sort of experience as the poet says, people die in circles. The thing to hate is learning without what you have to unlearn. I mean there might be a certain practice or a tradition going on, but when you have to because you are of a different land, you are of a different time. People die heedlessly. The nuns you like reek of hollow heaven, stubbed or frayed, mentholated in grievance.

Now, here also he takes a dig at what you see is not reality, reality is something else actually. And, then towards the end what he says is a sort of eye opener where he says children die, predeceasing parents, predeceasing parents, odd that we eat birds and animals growing like us.

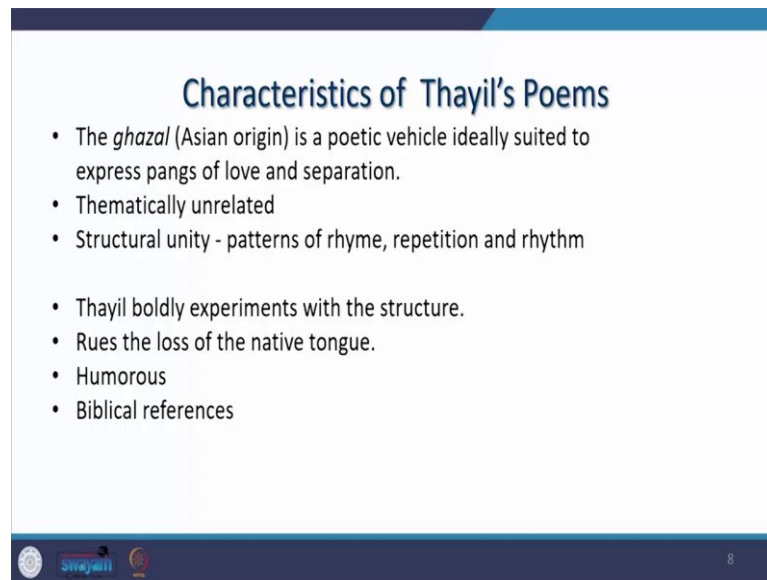
Here he takes a dig also upon those people who eat birds and animals growing like us. Do we have the right to eat them? Because, they are just like us, look closely and then he says look closely at rivers and trees, look at the sort of a benediction that we have got. Look at the sort of welfare that we get from these rivers and trees, but then people die that is what they do, death is a sort of certainty.

But, then do we ever realize what we are doing are we really conscious of though we always talk of big things. We always talk of grievous things, we always talk of faults, we always talk of what we should abide by, but we are not. In one poem after another Thayil actually takes a dig.

There is a poem entitled A Parrot of Happiness and then towards the end again the poet comes to the same, that in this mundane world, the cry or the slogan for happiness is actually futile, you know there are big opinions only, but then there is no rationality.

So, Thayil in a way weeps at this sort of decadence and then if we taken overall picture of what Thayil says through his poems or what he tries to conveys, we can find that Thayil very boldly at times experiments with the structure; if we have a look at the ghazals and the sonnets that Thayil used to practice.

(Refer Slide Time: 20:08)



**Characteristics of Thayil's Poems**

- The *ghazal* (Asian origin) is a poetic vehicle ideally suited to express pangs of love and separation.
- Thematically unrelated
- Structural unity - patterns of rhyme, repetition and rhythm
  
- Thayil boldly experiments with the structure.
- Rues the loss of the native tongue.
- Humorous
- Biblical references

8

The ghazal as we all know that it is from Asian origin. it is a poetic vehicle and in ghazals we either talk of love or we talk of the loss of love and Thayil's world is a world of suffering. So, this genre is ideally suited to express pangs of love and separation. And, there is no wonder that we come across many of the poems by Thayil which actually denote not only the frustration in love but also the separation in love.

There are at times the themes are not properly related, at times he becomes humorous, but then you can find in plenty Biblical references. Because, Thayil right from the beginning are the way he might have been brought up, he might have learned many things which actually relate to his own religion. But, then was he really faithful to it? That is again a question that poetry lovers like us have to explore in detail.

Now, Thayil had also the opportunity of learning through his uncle who had actually translated Baudelaire and you know that was a great inspiration to Thayil. So, in one poem entitle "Malayalam's Ghazal", Thayil like many other predecessors of him, I mean, some of the poets who have talked about the loss of the tongue, Thayil also in this poem talks about the loss of the tongue.

(Refer Slide Time: 21:52)

**“Malyalam’s Ghazal”**

Listen! Someone’s saying a prayer in Malayalam He says there’s no word for ‘despair’ in Malayalam	Visitors are welcome in <u>The School of Lost Tongues.</u> Someone’s endowed a high chair in Malayalam
Sometimes at daybreak you sing a Gujrati garba. At night you open your hair in Malayalam.	I greet you my ancestors, O scholars and linguists. <u>My father who recites Baudelaire in Malayalam.</u>
To understand <u>symmetry, understand Kerala.</u> <u>The longest palindrome is there, in Malayalam.</u>	<u>Jeet, such drama with the scrapes you know.</u> Write a couplet, if you dare, in Malayalam.
When you’ve been too long in the room of English, Open your windows to the fresh air of Malayalam	

9

We can take some of the lines; “Listen, someone saying a prayer in Malayalam./ He says there is no word for ‘despair’ in Malayalam./ Sometimes at daybreak you sing a Gujrati garba./ At night you open your hair in Malayalam./ To understand symmetry, understand Kerala. /The longest palindrome is there, in Malayalam.” So, if we look at the word Malayalam, it is a sort of palindrome even if you reverse it, it will again become Malayalam./When you have been too long in the room of English, open your windows to the fresh air of Malayalam. /So, he talks about how people should revere a language like Malayalam. “Visitors are welcome in The School of Lost Tongues./ Someone has endured a high chair in Malayalam./ I greet you oh my ancestors, O scholars and linguists./ My father who recites Baudelaire in Malayalam?”.


And you know Thayil has a tendency to mention his own name in every song or ghazal. And, here he says—“Jeet such drama with the scrapes you know./ Write a couplet, if you dare, in Malayalam.” It is better because, you know here Thayil talks about the loss of the tongue and that is why he says—“ If you can dare write a couplet in Malayalam.”

(Refer Slide Time: 23:17)

**“Spiritus Mundi”**

I was born in the Christian South  
of a subcontinent mad for religion.  
Warriors and zealots tried to rule it.  
A minor discipline carried his doubt  
like a torch to temple and shrine.  
I longed for vision and couldn't tell it.

The cities I grew up in were landlocked.  
One, a capital, buff with architecture,  
the other lost for months in monsoon.  
One was old, one poor, both were hot.  
The heat vaporized thought and order,  
drained the will, obliterated reason.



Swajati 10

Now, there is another poem, this poem is a longer one and the poem is titled “Spiritus Mundi.” The meaning is now it is a Latin word, the meaning is the world is spirit. Many of you who have read W B Yeats, might have come across this in his famous poem The Second Coming fine. Here, Thayil also talks about how he lived, where he lived, which places and that he gives in the form of a poem.


“I was born in the Christian South/ of a subcontinent mad for religion./ Warriors and zealots tried to rule it./ A minor discipline carried his doubt/ like a torch to temple and shrine./ I longed for vision and could not tell it./ The cities I grew up in were landlocked./ One, a capital buff with architecture,/ the other lost for months in monsoon./ One was old, one poor, both were hot/. The heat vaporized thought and order/ drained the will, obliterated reason.”

(Refer Slide Time: 24:18)

Contd...

I settled, 20 and morose, is a town  
 built by a patricidal emperor  
 whose fratricidal son imprisoned him,  
for eight years, with a view of the tomb  
he built for his wife, to remember her.  
I was over conscious of my rhyme,

and of the houses, three, inside my head.  
In the streets, death, in saffron or green,  
Rode a cycle rickshaw slung  
with megaphones. On the kitchen step.  
 A chilli plant grew dusty in the wind.  
In that climate nothing survived the sun



11

I mean my dear friends, it is very difficult to talk about each and every line. “I settled, 20 and morose...” I became sad at “20, is a town/ built by a patricidal emperor/ whose fratricidal son imprisoned him/ for eight years, with a view of the tomb/ he built for his wife to remember her./ I was ever conscious of my rhyme./

Now, here he actually talks of or he refers to some of the historical references where some of the emperors built a sort of memoriam in honour of their beloved and, “of the houses three inside my head./ In the streets, death in saffron or green,/ rode a cycle rickshaw slung. with megaphones. On the kitchen step,/ a chilly plant grew dusty in the wind./ In that climate nothing survived the sun.”

(Refer Slide Time: 25:13)

Contd...

Or a pickaxe, not even a stone dome  
 that withstood 400 years of voices  
 raised in prayer or argument. The train  
 pulled in each day at an empty platform  
 Where a tea stall that served passers-  
 By became a famous fire shrine.

I made a change: I travelled west  
 In time to see a century end  
 And begin. I don't recall the summer  
 Of 2001. Did it exist?  
 There would have been sun and rain.  
 I was there, I don't remember

12

So, at times, he also talks about the environment and the poem proceeds. I made a change and when he says—"I made a change: I travelled west,/ I went to the western countries in time to see a century end/ and begin." What was that year? And, then he says "I do not recall the summer/ of 2001./ Did it exist? There would have been sun and rain. /I was there, I do not remember."

(Refer Slide Time: 25:43)

Contd...

a time before autumn of that year.  
Now 45, my hair gone sparse,  
I'm a poet of small buildings:  
the brownstone, the townhouse, the cold water  
walkup, the tenement of two or three floors.  
I cherish the short ones still standing.

I recognize each cornice and still,  
the sky's familiar cast, the window  
I spend my day walking to and from,  
as if I were a baffled Mughal in his cell.  
I call the days by their Hindu  
names and myself by my Christian one.

So, at times he unfolds his own memory, "a time before autumn of that year./ Now 45, I have turned 45, my hair gone sparse./ I am a poet of small buildings/ the brownstone, the townhouse, the cold water/ walk up, the tenement of two or three floors./ I cherish the short ones still standing."

So, I am a simple poet only of small buildings and all and then he says—"I recognize each cornice and still/ the sky's familiar cast, the window/ I spend my day walking to and from/ as if I were a baffled Mughal in his cell." There is a reference to the Mughal emperor all of us know. "I call the days by their Hindu/ names, but myself by Christian one", fine and the poem referred.

(Refer Slide Time: 26:29)

Contd...

The Atlantic's stately breakers mine  
the shore for kelp, mussels, bits of glasses.  
They move in measured iambs, tidy  
as the towns that rise from sign to neon sign.  
Night rubs its feet. A mouse deer starts across  
the grass. The sky drains to a distant eddy.

Badshah, I say to no one there.  
I hear a koel in the call of a barn owl.  
All things combine and recombine,  
the sky streams in ribbons of colour.  
I'm my father and my son grown old.  
Everything that lives, lives on.



14

Now, what are the characteristics of this poem?

(Refer Slide Time: 26:32)

### Characteristics of the Poem

- ❖ "Writes about how he lived and with whom, where he went and what he ate, how he spent his childhood and so on."- Mishra
- ❖ Autobiographical poem –places he visited
- ❖ Structured
- ❖ Urban life and nature



15

The poet in this poem talks about where he lived, how he lived, where he went and what with the things that he watched in his childhood and so on, fine. The poem may appear to be autobiographical, but there is a beautiful structure and the poet time and again talks about the urban life and nature.

(Refer Slide Time: 26:56)

### “Premonition” (for Shakti)

Gone and *gone* doesn't mean a thing-  
The world and we continue to be.  
Happy to eat our pig and live, we sing  
their names against the shame. We know  
Someone waits where the sky and sea  
are tilted. She leans on light as on a floor.

They reach to us, lost among the lost,  
Their shared minds stretched to the past,

The bridge between *is* and *was* descends  
too soon, sweeps them up like chimney  
dust,  
whose lips we loved, who were friends  
when hands were hands that held us fast.

Inconsolable mouths slack with loss,  
Not able, not yet, to let go of us.



Now, Thayil’s wife, Shakti Bhatt fine, Shakti Bhatt who actually left Thayil and that had actually a very profound and very sad effect on him. So, there is a poem entitled “Premonition for Shakti.”

“Premonition for Shakti”. Let us a look at this because this is a poem of loss, gone and gone does not mean a thing, look at the word play that Thayil does. There is no change in the spelling, only in caps and small. “The world and we continue to be/ happy to eat our pig and live, we sing/ their names against the shame. We know/ someone waits where the sky and the sea/ tilted. She leans on light on a floor./ The bridge between is and was descends./ Now, there is a gap, “the bridge between is and was”, the present and the past too soon “sweeps them up like chimney dust,/ whose lips we loved, who were friends/ when hands were hands that held us fast/ a time of union. They reach to us, lost among the lost/ now, their shared minds stretched to the past/ Inconsolable mouths slack with loss/ not able, not yet to let go of us”. Can we really? But, then it is only a sort of premonition, but then this premonition actually turned to be a reality because, Thayil’s wife left him fine. She left fine for another journey.

(Refer Slide Time: 28:55)



## “The Heroin Sestina”

What was the point of it? The stoned  
life, the chased, snorted, shot life. Some low  
comedy with a cast of strangers. Time  
squashed flat. The 1001 names of heroin  
chewed like language. Nothing now to know  
or remember but the dirty taste

of it, and the names: snuff, Death, a little taste,  
H—pronounce it etch—, sugar, brownstone,  
scag, the SHIT, ghoda gaadi, #4 china, You-Know,  
garad, god, the gear, junk, monkey blow,  
the law, the habit, material, cheez, heroin.  
The point? It was the wasted time,

There is another poem entitled “Heroin Sestina”, where the poet talks about heroin and as I have been saying that the poet was also a sort of alcoholic. And, here in this poem he talks about the various names that the heroin, the drug has got. “What was the point of it? The stoned/ life, the chased, snorted, shot life. Some low/ comedy with a cast of strangers. Time/ is squashed flat. The 1001 names of heroin/ chewed like a language. Nothing now to know/ or remember, but the dirty taste.”

So, it is in a sort of, you know, it is a sort of experience of what “and the names snuff, death, a little taste/ pronounce it etch, sugar, brownstone, scag, the SHIT, ghoda gaadi, china, You-Know/ garad, god, the gear;” I mean these are all the names and then the poem comes.

(Refer Slide Time: 29:40)

Contd...

which comes back lovely sometimes,  
 a ghost sense say, say that hard ache taste  
 back in your throat, the warm heroin  
 drip, the hit, the rush, the whack, the stone.  
 You want it now, the way it lays you low,  
 flattens everything you know

to a thin white line. I'm saying, I know  
 the pull of it: the skull rings time  
 so beautiful, so low  
 you barely hear it. Itch this blind toad taste.  
 When you said, 'I mean it, we live like stones,'  
 you broke something in me only heroin


18

“Which comes back lovely sometimes/ a ghost sense say, say that hard ache taste/ back in your throat, the warm heroin/ drip, the hit, the rush, the whack, the stone”. Look at the way the description of this I mean the effect of it ‘to a thin white line I am saying, I know/ the pull of it: the skull rings time/ so beautiful, so low/ you barely hear it. Itch this blind toad taste./ When you said, ‘I meant it, we live like stones,’/ you broke something in me only heroin”. Every now and then I retreat to it and every now and then I fine.

(Refer Slide Time: 30:19)

Contd...

sober, unknowing, the happiness chemical  
 blown from your system, unable to taste  
 the word heroin without wanting its stone  
 one last time.




20

And then finally, says—“sober, unknowing, the happiness chemical/ blown from your system, unable to taste/ the word heroin without wanting its stone/ one last time”.

(Refer Slide Time: 30:36)

**“Separation’s Sonnet”**

What are you doing, what improvised thing	To want is to wait, as I do in the place I know,
In a borrowed room your cell phone rings	my breathing loud and single as the room,
each ring measures the floor, the rungs	its smell of spider dust and old perfume.
of your dream. Holding, I ask how you sing,	Each small thing lasts longer than the shiver
and for whom. To imagine the bed you’re in,	that is life. I fix the remembered instant:
the vertiginous smile that will break him,	you on your feet, singing, shaking a river
the man whose roses bleed at your window.	of salt from our shared overheating skin. (1-14)

 21

I mean as I have been saying that Thayil was such a poet who was not only a poet of love, who is rather a poet of loss fine. And, then poem after poem sometimes in the name of love sometimes in the name of separation.

So, here is one poem where one sonnet which is entitled “Separation’s Sonnet”. What are you doing, what improvised thing in a borrowed room your cell phone rings. It appears as if it is a sort of unfolding of the memory because, these are some of the poems which have been taken from *These Errors Are Correct* fine.

I mean symbolically it may mean that what these poems say, are correct, “In a borrowed room”, Look at the expression borrowed. “room your cell phone rings/ each ring measures the floor, the rungs./ The way a lover thinks about ‘of your dream, holding I ask how you sing/ and for whom, but for whom are you singing? Whom are you composing? “To imagine the bed you are in/ the vertiginous smile that will break him/ the man whose roses bleed at your window.”

The man whose roses bleed at the window, at times the poet exaggerates also fine, in a very exaggerated style. And, then he says- “To want is to wait, to want is to wait as I do in the place I know/ my breathing loud and single as the room/ it is a smell of spider dust and old perfume./ Each small thing lasts longer than the shiver/ that is life. I fix the remembered instant/ you on your feet, singing, shaking a river/ of salt from our shared overheating skin.”

So, a very beautiful poem and that is why I was tempted to take it as one for a discussion. So, there each a sense of loss, there is a sense of dream, there is an unfolding of the memory, there is an unfolding of the past days-- of two lovers who were united, but when they are gone, still they have not been separated, but then this is a separation sonnet.

(Refer Slide Time: 32:55)

*from The Book of Chocolate Saints*

**“Saint Gandhi”**  
of Porbunder, in darker South Africa,  
saw ~~the~~ light when travelling by train;  
wore only homespun;  
gave up salt & sex; so tragic a man,  
  
who would split a nation  
in two; befriended apocalypse;  
died with the name of God on his lips;  
shot by a man with God in name.

**“Saint Antony”**  
of Egypt; born in Coma  
to Christians; at twenty,  
his parents died & left him plenty;  
he gave it away; summered  
  
two decades alone in the desert;  
then; followers, a garden, baskets;  
patron of weavers, domestic animals, pets;  
healer of those poisoned by the ergot.

22

We can take some of the poems from *The Book of Chocolate Saints*, where he has composed poems on many saints and through that what he wants to say is that these names have to be revered, these names have to be adored. At times, the poet takes a dig no doubt, but then in a way it is actually a sort of tribute and one of the poems entitled “Saint Gandhi”, you see Saint Gandhi, Gandhi he reveres Gandhi as a saint.

And, he says—“Of Porbunder in darker South Africa/ saw the light when travelling by train/ wore only homespun/ gave up salt and sex so, tragic a man/ who would split a nation/. I mean there the poet takes a dig, but the poet also talks about what many of us at times think that this was a saint who split the nation “in two; befriended apocalypse.” I mean that was actually a sort of damage, a great damage and such a saint died with the name of God on his lips by whom shot by a man with God in name.

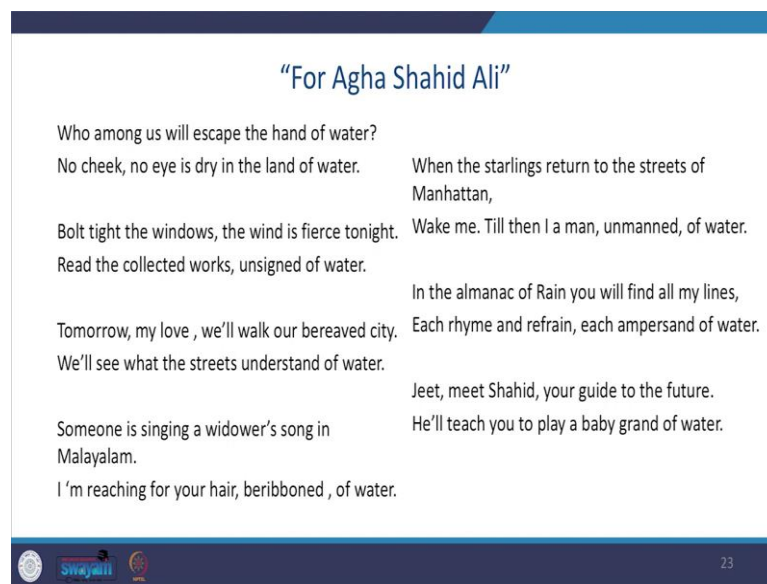
Now, see he here provides two contrary pictures that one man whom we consider saint died with the name of God on his lips and then who shot him was also a man, a man with God in a name. So, reality has been portrayed, but in a very satiric manner. Then there is

another poem that is also on the name of a “Saint Anthony,” Saint Anthony of Padua fine.

And, there he gives a representation of what this Saint Anthony was—“Of Egypt born in Coma/ to Christians; at twenty/ his parents died and left him plenty/ he gave it away. Summered”. So, such is the nature of a saint that even though born in a wealthy family and even when his when his parents left a lot, he gave everything. And, then what he did? “Two decades alone in the desert/ and then followers, a garden, baskets/ patron of weavers, domestic animals, pets/ healer of those poisoned by ergot; poisoned by ergot”.


So, those people who had a fungal disease, even they were embraced by the saint and they actually had a new lease of life. Now, there is one poem which again I am very much tempted to discuss here.

(Refer Slide Time: 35:40)



**“For Agha Shahid Ali”**

Who among us will escape the hand of water? No cheek, no eye is dry in the land of water.	When the starlings return to the streets of Manhattan,
Bolt tight the windows, the wind is fierce tonight. Read the collected works, unsigned of water.	Wake me. Till then I a man, unmanned, of water.
Tomorrow, my love , we'll walk our bereaved city. We'll see what the streets understand of water.	In the almanac of Rain you will find all my lines, Each rhyme and refrain, each ampersand of water.
Someone is singing a widower's song in Malayalam.	Jeet, meet Shahid, your guide to the future. He'll teach you to play a baby grand of water.
I 'm reaching for your hair, beribboned , of water.	

 23

And, this poem is in a way a tribute to Agha Shahid Ali, we have already discussed his poetic oeuvre and then look as let us have a look at this beautiful song--- “Who among us will escape the hand of water?/” Now, why I have taken this poem is that Jeet Thayil very beautifully makes a word play on the word water, water which has been used as the metaphor and every now and then when he uses water he has a different meaning.

“Who among us will escape the hand of water?/” Because, water is truth, water is life, water is death, water is destruction, water is respiration, water is life giving, water is life

taking. “No cheek, no eye is dry in the land of water./ Bolt tight the windows, the wind is fierce tonight./Read the collected works” and all these collected words, “unsigned of water./ All these collected words are unsigned of water and he says that the wind is fierce tonight; so, bolt your doors. “Tomorrow my love, we will walk our bereaved city.” We will walk our bereaved city. “We will see what the streets understand of water” and then tomorrow we can think of what our streets understand for water understand of water.

“Someone is singing a widower’s song in Malayalam./ I am reaching for your hair, beribboned of water.” Water is death, water has taken you in its own grip. So, I am reaching for your hair which is beribboned of water. “When the starlings return to the streets of Manhattan, wake me.” And, there is actually an address to Agha Khan, when the starlings return to the streets of Manhattan wake me. “Till then I a man, unmanned of water”. Because, till then I am a man who is unmanned of water.

“In the almanac of rain you will find all my lines,/ each rhyme and refrain, each ampersand of water.” All these lines that I am creating, composing one day or the other it will become only a part of water. “Jeet, meet Shahid,” Shahid actually means beloved love, meet Shahid, “your guide to the future. /He will teach you to play a baby grand of water.” So, in this entire poem you can find how Jeet Thayil gives a new meaning and tries every now and then to make use of the word water in a very metaphoric sense.

Having discussed the poetic oeuvre of Jeet Thayil my dear friends, because it is very difficult to discuss a poet of Thayil’s nature in only in these 30 minutes, but then time as I have always been saying is a sort of constraint. So, let us very quickly take some of the critical comments about Jeet Thayil as one of the fellow poets.

(Refer Slide Time: 39:13)

### Critical Comments

- ❖ Thayil's poetry leaves the readers with a sense of danger, of language teetering wildly on the edge of some precipice, between centuries, between continents, between fleetingly improvised realms, suspended somewhere between history and invention, reality and nowhere-ness." (Arundhati Subramaniam)
- ❖ Thayil writes with a powerful voice and density of language and makes me think, even work, to understand his poetry. (Bruce King)
- ❖ Thayil writes controlled verse, well-crafted, never obscure.. (Keki Daruwalla)
- ❖ Thayil's poems refract his vibrant, unique and far-flung experience through the prism of a tremendous lyric intellect. (Philip Nikolayev)

And, the another contemporary poet Arundhati Subramaniam says, "Thayil's poetry leaves the readers with a sense of danger, of language teetering wildly on the edge of some precipice, between centuries, between continents, between fleetingly improvised realms, suspended somewhere between history and invention, reality and nowhere-ness."

At the same time, Bruce King finds in Thayil 'a very powerful voice and the language being very dense, because it is full of allusions, it makes me think even work to understand his poetry.' So, many people consider Thayil's poetry to be very difficult, but Thayil's language is very simple, even though it might contain so many allusions.

Keki Daruwalla, one of the major voices of Indian English poetry says- "Thayil writes controlled verse, well-crafted, never obscure." And, towards the end we can take one more comment that is of Philip Nikolayev, who says- "Thayil's poems refract his vibrant, unique and far-flung experience through the prism of tremendous lyric intellect." My dear friends, Thayil's world is vast, Thayil's world has different sorts of poetic tinges.


(Refer Slide Time: 40:35)



## Summing up

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.	of the <u>shadow of death I shall fear no evil. He</u>
He makes me lie down	comforts me with staff and rod,
in still waters.	provides me with wine and bread.
He leads me to green pastures.	In the presence of mine enemy
He restores my soul and helps me walk	goodness and mercy enter me.
in the path of righteousness, for his own sake.	You anoint me with oil, my cup
And, yea, though I walk in the valley	overflows. You lift me up. ("Found Poem")

Thank You


25

But, then there are times when one feels one's faith shaken and it is actually time that we summed up Thayil's world with some of the beautiful lines which Thayil actually wrote in one of the poems entitled "Found Poem." And, this shows that despite all the hurdles, despite all sorts of obstacles there is at least one faith that always keeps you intact. And, what is it?

"The lord is my shepherd, I shall not want./ He makes me lie down/ in still waters,/ he leads me to green pastures./ He restores my soul and helps me walk/ in the path of righteousness, for his own sake/ and yea though I walk in the valley/ of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil. He /comforts me with staff and rod,/ provides me with wine and bread./ In the presence of mine enemy/ goodness and mercy enter me./ You anoint me with oil, my cup/ overflows, you lift me up."

And through this, it appears Thayil also was constantly struggling to find a sort of faith and ultimately he has been able to find a faith and that is the faith of the lord which always keeps him intact. My dear friends! I think a poet when writes, writes all sorts of things, but ultimately a poet always struggles with a sort of language.

And, in this case Thayil did not have to struggle for language, Thayil had actually sort of spontaneity, Thayil had actually a sort of musicality and the sort of natural flow that Thayil created in his poems will go a long way. With this let me come to the end of today's talk.

Thank you very much, I wish you all a very good day ahead.