'My favourites embrace sorrow, wrap words around heartbreak'

By Express Features | Published: 30th July 2016 06:50 AM Last Updated: 30th July 2016 06:56 AM

BENGALURU: Your favourite love poem:

After the August Wedding in Lahore, Pakistan by Agha Shahid Ali

A poem / poet you keep going back to:

Poet: The Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali, for his searing embrace of sorrow, Dorothy Parker for her pathos and self-deprecatation, Mangalesh Dabral for his gentle inventiveness and bringing alive mountains for me, Uday Prakash for his hope in the darkest of times and insight, Rene Shararanya Verma for her joy and resistance, Aditi Rao for her vulnerability. Anannya Dasgupta for letting pain know rhyme, Vikramaditya Sahai for wrapping words around heartbreak, Dushyant Kumar for letting me know what places of love Hindi can find, Gorakh Pandey for his imagism that is possible only in the welter of the political, Parveen Shakir, for letting me stake a claim on Urdu, and finally, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, for telling me that there is a vocabulary in which one's desires can speak to the desires of one's time.

Poem: I'll mention two. Agha Shahid Ali's two canzones Lenox Hill and After the August Wedding in Lahore, Pakistan. Lenox Hill is a poem he wrote after the death of his mother. It is one of the most powerful poems of the last century. It is the poem in which the death of his mother is spoken of as if in the same breath as the depredations in Kashmir, as if the mourning for the mother is also the mourning for Kashmir. In fact, in both these poems, Shahid has reached the acme of what he said could be a 'good' political poem, where the apparently impersonal, large, public subject matter—what India was doing to Kashmir in the 1990s—is appasioned so intensely to one's heart, that to speak of the loss of Kashmir becomes indistinguishable to speaking of the loss of a lover, or one's mother. They are both canzones—a very difficult form, but difficult also in its root sense, in that it engages the deepest of our faculties— they are both 65 lines with only five end words for these lines so that a spell is cast by the repetitions. Between these two words in the two poems—pain, mother, elephant, sin, die, universe, glass, night, and Kashmir (in both poems)—repeating and repeating, Shahid mounts such an elaborate net of loss and beauty that I'm left reeling every time I read them.

The first poem you remember reading:

Machli jal ki rani hai / jeewan uska pani hai / haath lagaoge toh dar jayegi / bahar nikaaloge toh mar jayegi

Written word or slam? Or songs?

Different things on different days but sometimes they come together in the best of ways, such as in the work of the Palestinian poet Rafeef Ziadah.