

Writing as Resistance to Abjection: A Study of Select Narratives from Kashmir

Gayathri. S.S

*Assistant Professor I, Department of English, Mar Ivanios College,
Thiruvananthapuram*

Abstract

*Jammu and Kashmir has always been a bone of contention between India and Pakistan since partition. Insurgency which began during the early 1990s as a movement demanding complete autonomy to the state, later attained its bloody face with the over involvement of Pakistan in motivating the Kashmiri youths in the name of religion. India's refusal to grant autonomous status to the state further facilitated the use of arms by the militants against the Indian state. Pakistan extended its support to the violent youths by instigating aggressive religious feelings and financially assisting the militant youths. As a result the whole population living in the Kashmir valley began to be regarded as terrorists and a huge threat to India's security by the outsiders of the valley. The native writers thus began to produce a handful of literature resisting the abjection of the natives by the outsiders of the valley. The act of writing thus modified into a way of resisting the homogenization of the natives as religious extremists by the outsiders. The three primary texts taken for the study including, *In the Valley of Shadows* (2011) by Abhay Narayan Sapru, *The Collaborator* (2011) by Mirza Waheed and *Curfewed Night* (2009) by Basharat Peer clearly exhibit this tendency of resisting the homogenization of the natives as religious fundamentalists.*

Key Words: Kashmir, Resistance, Abjection, Homogenization, Nationalism, Religion
Ethnicity, Violence, Terrorism



In his presidential address to the Muslim League in 1940, the veteran leader Muhammad Ali Jinnah showed his interest in constructing a separate Islamic state in South Asia by saying that Hinduism and Islam,

... are not religions in the strict sense of the word, but are, in fact, different and distinct social orders... Hindus and Muslims belong to two different religious philosophies, social customs, and literatures. They neither inter-marry nor inter-dine together, and indeed, they belong to two different civilizations which are based on conflicting ideas and conception (*Religious Politics and Communal Violence* 131).

This idea of viewing India's Muslims as a religious collectivity foreshadows the on-going dispute in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Indeed this idea enhanced the involvement of Pakistan in the dispute over Kashmir after the partition. It supported Pakistan's claim over Kashmir which resulted in the acceleration of militant movements in India. The absence of considering the whole of Kashmiris as separate monolithic entity is the reason for all these violent developments in the valley. The political situation described in the three primary texts taken for the present study implies little deviations from the contemporary situation in the Kashmir valley.

Looking from a multiperspectival point of view, the current regional alienation, political turmoil and communal polarisation existing in the valley can be clearly seen as reflected in these works. In a way, the political opportunism and electoral politics has shifted the harmonious valley to a terror afflicted war zone. Initially the relationship between the Central government and the state is different from that of the other states in India. The inclusion of the article 370 in the Indian constitution itself substantiates the particularity offered to this state by the Centre. So as to say, Kashmir is the only state in India which became the sole reason for the two major wars that happened in independent India.

However the role of National Conference party in bringing the idea of sovereignty for the state is not debatable. It is impossible to discuss about the internal politics of the state without mentioning the various religious fundamentalist organizations existing in the valley. Among these organizations, JKLF was more influential during the initial stages of the conflict. Later many number of religious organizations established its empires in the valley as a part of the religious mobilization process taking place in the state. It was hard to resist such transformations that had taken place in the valley during the onset of insurgency. Many boys from the valley crossed to Pakistan Occupied Kashmir and their reasons for embracing the arms were different. The primary texts taken for the study exhibit and justify these reasons. As all the three authors are from Kashmir, the works demand an objective evaluation of the information prescribed in these texts. Moreover pre-suppositions and knowledge about the outside world determine the way in which these three writers respond towards the internal turmoil occurring in the state.

The secessionist movement in Kashmir is viewed as 'proxy war' by the Indian government while Pakistan considers it as an uprising or 'freedom struggle' by the Kashmiris. It is to be noted that neither of these two perspectives provides a gap for the Kashmiri natives to justify their side. They are left as submissive and the two giant nations express their views as the opinions of the natives. The homogenization of the natives as either pro- Indians or pro- Pakistanis tends to overshadow the plurality of the state. The diverse communities are divided as two separate entities

by the two dominions that destroy the monolithic existence of Kashmiris as a whole. The Gujjars, Bakkarwals, Kashmiri Pandits, Dogras are recognized as on the Indian side. On the other hand, Balti, Shina, Khowar, Burushashki, Wakhi and Pahari are considered to be supporters of Pakistan. Writing is a form of resistance against these homogenization and separation process done by the outsiders for the native authors. It helps them to construct a political space on which they can debate about their right for self-determination.

The failure of democratic institutions in providing the opportunity to express their feelings for the natives is also exposed through these narrations. While narrating the self, they are recording the experiences of a whole community which is under victimization. Therefore the native writers extensively describe the harsh realities exposing the darker side of the dispute through their writings. The systematic subversion and the denial of democratic assistances to the natives lead to the abjection of the population by the outsiders of Kashmir. As a result alienation of the ethnic communities happens and demand for self-determination attains more strength. Later the idea of a modern nation-state is derived from this. However this idea is little bit problematic in the sense that it tends to be identified with the dominant majority. As in the case of Kashmir, the dominant majority is none other than Muslims of the valley. Therefore Pakistan tries to attract the Muslim population in the valley in the religious mobilization process through many ways. This tendency to form a modern nation-state is destructive as it creates further secessions among the natives destroying the religious harmony which they experienced before.

Abhay Narayan Sapru in his work *In the Valley of Shadows* narrates the tragic life story of three persons caught in between the imaginary boundaries which separates people. Sahira's the leading female character in this work clearly exhibits the mind set of natives who are choiceless at the hands of brutal violence. Hariharan, who is the narrator of the story, describes Sahira as a beautiful and submissive girl. But later, her courageous act of sacrificing the life for the terrorist leader Sher Khan implies the resistive power that was in her mind. Hariharan has never expressed his affection for her but always tried to criticize her actions. On the other hand, Sher Khan tries to protect her as much as he can. Therefore she felt it as her responsibility to protect him and thus embraced death for him. However Sher Khan always considered her as his possession and exercised his authority over her without giving a space to express her feelings and opinions. Hence it is possible to say that Sahira was silenced by both Sher Khan and Hariharan. Metaphorically Sahira's helplessness can be compared to the real condition of Kashmiris torn between two major dominions.

Sahira's mental condition is also similar to the condition of those natives who demands self-determination in the valley. Pakistan acquires the role of protector for them, as Indian government alienates them. But in reality, the condition of the native militants fighting for *Jihad* exposes that these natives are never free from abjection. Pakistani militants treat them as objects and did not allow a space to express their anguish. The plight of the characters like Javed substantiates this fact. In this way Sapru justifies the actions of the natives and tries to evoke empathy for these people. He demands the recognition of these people as the real victims of conflict through his writing.

Sapru gives elaborate descriptions about the past history of each major character in the novel. This can be considered as a way of resisting any kind of pre-determinations about the actions of these characters while the novel progresses in the minds of the readers. He vehemently describes the causes that lead the youth of Kashmir towards militancy. The economic seclusion, religious polarization and regional alienation are explained as the major reasons which drag these people to embrace arms. Rational thinking is absent because of the lack of employment opportunity and poor educational background. Still these issues are never addressed seriously by the authorities.

Unlike the other works, Sapru's novel does not provide elaborate details about the curfews, interrogation centres, involuntary disappearances, violent murders etc. which are part and parcel of the life of the war inflicted zone. Indian military violence against Kashmiri civilians are not addressed in detail in the work. Furthermore the characterization of every army officer is clever. His descriptions about the security officers revive the idea of chivalric and patriotic army officers into the minds of the readers. Being a Kashmiri and military officer at the same time, Sapru brilliantly presents the condition of both the natives and the army officers from a different perspective. His justifications of the cruel actions done by the military officers make them more humane. Although descriptions about organised criminal gangs, assassination of suspected informers, revenge tale, rape violence and other form of tortures are mentioned in the novel, it does not include much about the brutality of security officers upon the innocent victims.

Sahira's helpless actions, Sher Khan's sense of authority over her and Hariharan's abusive words remind the pathetic condition of the Kashmiri natives caught in between two nations. The on-going dispute between the two major powers of the world excludes them socially. Their opinions are treated as valueless and therefore forcefully suppressed using the high handedness of political power and physical strength. They are claimed to be a part of their societies by the two countries. While at the same time they are denied of their basic rights as civilians by both the countries. They are treated as abjects in their own homeland. Hence through these writings, the native authors are trying to resist the abjection of their people by the outsiders.

Waheed's novel *The Collaborator* narrates the life of village youths in a war zone. The unnamed narrator not only narrates his own experiences living in the conflict ridden zone but also the condition of every Kashmiri youth who lives under pressure in the border villages. The attempts made by the natives to normalize the conditions in the village are highlighted through the character of village headman. This normalization tendency of the villagers can be considered as an effort to re-establish their authority over the homeland. It is true that the villagers have lost their complete authority over the land after insurgency broke out in the valley.

The social, religious and political lives of the villagers are examined in detail in the novel by Waheed in order to substantiate his arguments. Nowgam is a border village in Kashmir and the Gujjar community living in this area is homogenized as informers of the Indian army by the outsiders. Captain Kadian's trust over the narrator is because of this fact that he belongs to the Gujjar community. They are considered as the collaborators who traitorously cooperate with the enemies. For the militants, the enemies are none other than the Indian army officers who destroy the peaceful life of the villagers. But some of the natives also blame those boys who

crossed to Pakistan Occupied Kashmir as collaborators. In a way Waheed's narration never criticizes the decisions taken by the central character. His responsibility as a son is pointed out so as to justify his decision to accompany Captain Kadian during his last operation in the valley. Thus it questions the homogenization of Gujjar communities as the supporters of army by both the army officers and the militants. In reality they are not supporting any of these groups. Rather it tries to clarify the mental condition faced by this community in times of crisis. But they are choiceless when both the groups force them to act immediately.

However Sapru and Waheed talks about the systematic seclusion of the Kashmiris from different perspectives. As writers, both of them record the tale of their homeland subjectively. Even though both the novel seems to be informative in the first sense, it is rather emotional. The identity crisis which these characters experience is revealed in both the novels. It is also true that the available discourses fail to define their identities. Some of them like Hussain's father in *The Collaborator* and Javed in Sapru's story resort to religious ways in order to find themselves. But religion could not provide the answers which they seek as their tragic deaths prove this. Economic inequality and power hierarchy existing in Kashmir society are analysed in both of the novels. While trying to justify the actions of the natives, both the authors have pointed out the poor economic backgrounds of the majority of the militants as a reason which forces them to join militancy.

Accordingly, Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night* documents the past experiences of victims of the conflict in Kashmir. The journalistic way of narrating the history of the victims makes the work more informative rather than emotional. The present work clearly exhibits the cultural gap that existed between the natives and the outsiders of the valley including militants and security officers. Peer discusses several instances at which these outsiders destroyed the cultural and historical monuments of the valley. They did not even try to understand the values associated with these monuments. The work shares several ethnic symbols and cultural myths which are interesting and helpful in knowing about the ethnic consciousness of the native Kashmiris.

Unlike the other two works, Peer also talks about the experiences of Kashmiris outside of the state. The abjectification of Kashmiris by the Indian society existing outside of Kashmir is exposed in this narrative. The conditions of Kashmiri migrants and students living in the large cities of India experience cruel marginalization. Most of them are attacked in the name of religion and the surviving victims are stereotyped as terrorists. Peer argues against these practices and demands justice for these people. By recording the tragic plight of these people, he criticizes the authority that is incapable of providing security to this population.

Peer's narration also reveals that the people of Kashmir could not identify themselves as Indians. Their struggle for self-determination is a result of this. India became the cultural 'other' for these people far before the dawn of insurgency in the state. India's struggle for independence and the freedom fighters, did not value much to them while compared to the cultural myths. Thus they remain as a separate ethnic community with their own social and cultural values. The idea of sovereignty for the state and ethno nationalism which they prefer derives its source from the consciousness of being a monolithic entity despite of the religious diversities. They

could neither identify themselves with India nor support Pakistan's move to separate the community into different religious factions.

According to the opinion of Ashutosh Varshney Kashmir's ethno national conflicts derives its source from three sets of competing ideological forces and their resultant contradictions. The first one is Pakistan's support for the militants come from the foundational national ideology that Hindus and Muslims of the Indian subcontinent cannot unify to form a single nation. The second one is that they needed compensation from the Indians as they failed in the Indo-Pak war in 1971 which led to the creation of Bangladesh. Thirdly, as for India, Kashmir is connected with its historical past and is a product of the partition movement in 1947. Kashmir is the only Muslim-majority state in India and is identified as the ultimate test of the victory of the country's secular nationalist project. The ethno nationalism that animates the Kashmiri aspiration for independence has its contradictions. However it appeals to the Muslims in the Kashmir valley, but not to the Hindus in Jammu or Buddhists in Ladakh. The Kashmir crisis is a result of all these contradictions which result in tragic proportion.

Nevertheless the argument made by Sumit Ganguly states that the failure of political institutionalization in India along with the political mobilization that was happening in Kashmir is the one of reasons for the crisis in Kashmir. The three primary text of this study reveals this idea very cleverly. Along with the human right violations in the state, deterioration of morality and rational thinking has made its contributions to the present crisis in the state. Failure in the enhancement of a proper educational system in the state has made the situation favourable for the rebels to flourish. Eventually this sowed the seeds of anti-nationalistic feelings in the minds of separatists.

Conceptualizing the nationalistic feelings of Kashmir is a problematic endeavour. Initially it is possible to consider the Kashmiri political leaders' decision to stay in India despite of its religious affinity towards Pakistan shows that Kashmiri nationalism is a subset of Indian nationalism. But Kashmiri nationalism expressed by both the militants and the neutral population living there is incompatible with the Indian nationalism. For the natives who are not a part of militant movement in the valley bases their nationalistic ideas on an ethno-regional basis. Thus they support the autonomy of the valley as a solution to all the tensions. But they are not bothered about the challenges that a newly formed independent Kashmir state locating between two great dominions, faces in the future. While the extremist population living there support Pakistan's views and their nationalism is based on religious feelings. Both these nationalisms expressed by the community cannot be regarded as the subset of Indian nationalism. That is why; the other religious communities living in different parts of the state find it difficult to identify themselves with the ideas of autonomy generated by the religious fundamentalists in the valley. Peer provides substantive evidence to this statement by tracing the hatred of Kashmiri Pandits towards the Muslims of Kashmir. On his way to a friend's home, Peer accidentally meets a Kashmiri Pandit boy living in Jammu. This boy clearly states his angst towards the Kashmiri nationalist tendencies to break away from India as he considers it as the sole reason which led to this pathetic condition. It is true that they are more practical and were satisfied with their earlier life in Kashmir. In this person there is no such kind of aggressive religious tendencies that are exhibited usually by the Muslim militants of the state.

However ethno-religious nationalism expressed by Kashmiri militants is contested by the democratic ideologies of the Indian government. The religious nationalistic feeling also created interparty rival in Hindu nationalism at the same time the other group holding secular principles opposed the Hindu nationalistic ideals. Nevertheless the Hindu nationalistic faction could not win the dispute for state formation. Hence, this faction and its allies formed a separate party called Jan Sangh which later became the Bharatiya Janata Party. Finally the voluntary determination of the Muslim-majority state to join the Indian union bolstered the secular ideals. It is to be noted that Kashmir's decision to break away from the Indian union, if taken, will eventually empower Hindu nationalism in the country. Therefore in order to avoid such threats to the secular ideals of the nation, Kashmir must stay in India if necessary by force for the Indian government.

During the onset of insurgency, demonstrations done by the militants attracted large number of people towards the demand for 'Azadi'. This feeling got intensified when thousands of men and women took to streets on daily. But during the mid-nineties such kind of efforts from the part of public began to decline. With the increase in criminalization, militancy started losing popular support. The urge for peace and normalcy opened a new era of resistance to violent movements. Writers recognized their responsibility to talk about the issues. One of the events that led to these developments was the destruction of the Ziarat of Sheikh Nooruddin Wali, the Charar-e-Sharief shrine. The building was a cultural symbol of the Sufi Kashmiri identity. As a result, the native population gradually withdraw their support over the violent movements. Writers started to speak for this community. Some of them chose writing as a form of resistance against the growing marginalization of the natives by the outsiders. Their wrings were born out of the awareness of exploitation of the community to attain political control over it by the two dominions. Writing thus became the most powerful mode of resistance. Although official records show that the levels of violence happening in the state have been reducing in Kashmir valley since 2004, the conflict remains unresolved. In such a situation, the native writers are trying to redefine their identity as Kashmiris and not as terrorists. Accordingly their writings try to resist the abjection and the homogenization of the natives by the outsiders of the valley. Therefore the writers demand heterogeneity in terms of resistances happening in the state against the federal government and the militant violence. All of them did not resort to violent activities. Population in the valley is now heterogeneous in the sense that everybody does not support violence and demand for a separate state is not a uniform demand by the natives. Kashmiri nationalism is not a homogeneous one purely based on religion. It has various diversions and these works portray those differences in attitudes of the natives towards their home land.

References

- [1] Baruah, Sanjib, ed. "Kashmir: Ethnonational Conflict and the Legacy of Partition".
Ethnonationalism in India; A Reader. New York: Oxford UP (2010)
- [2] Chowdhary, Rekha, and V. Nagendra Rao. "Jammu and Kashmir: Political Alienation,
Regional Divergence and Communal Polarisation. *Journal of Indian School of*

Political Economy (2003) pp. 189-200 Web. 10 Oct. 2018.

[3] Kristeva, Julia. "Approaching Abjection". *Powers of Horror*. New York: Columbia UP

(1982)

[4] Peer, Basharat. *Curfewed Night*. Haryana: Penguin (2009)

[5] Sapru, Abhay Narayan. *In the Valley of Shadows*. New Delhi: Wisdom Tree (2011)

[6] Waheed, Mirza. *The Collaborator*. New Delhi: Penguin (2012)

[7] Wilkinson, Steven I., ed. *Religious Politics and Communal Violence*. New York: Oxford UP (2005)

Biosketch



Gayathri S.S is currently working as a guest lecturer at the Department English in Mar Ivanios College, Thiruvananthapuram. Being a research aspirant and good scholar, she has presented about 7 Scholarly papers on various topics in National and International Conferences. She had also published a scholarly paper on the representational politics of water in the media in ACSR journal. Her major interesting areas include Cultural Studies, Post-colonial Studies and Dalit Literature.