

Contemporary Kashmiri English Prose Writing As a Recent Development

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ABSTRACT

The period from late 1980s and early 1990s till now remains to be a very sensitive socio-political period in the history of Jammu and Kashmir. This was the time when a full-fledged resistance and freedom struggle evolved. Kashmir Valley has by-now produced commendable English prose narratives during just a few past couple of years that has the reflection and expression of real wounded journeys of its people. Using English language and literature both as a medium, Valley's modern English writers have attempted to paint the experiences of living under the conflict which they and their brethren have experienced. This paper attempts to consider how recently developed Kashmiri English narratives represent Kashmir and document the real dilemma and traumatic situations of people.

Keywords: 1990s, Alienation, Conflict, Kashmiri English Writing, Resistance.

1. DISCUSSION

The era of 90's in the history of Kashmir Valley was of an armed engagement between the Indian state and Kashmiris. On the one hand, was the majority of the state's Muslim population struggling and demanding the democratic assertion of the right to self-determination and on the other hand, was the Occupational force brutally suppressing them. There was political un-stability, custodial killings, torture, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances and much more. It is estimated that there are at least seven lakh Indian military personnel in Kashmir, which makes it the highest militarized zone in the world. All this turned Kashmir, which was once famous as 'Paradise on Earth' to suddenly infamous for the resulted bloodshed and conflict.

However the smudged and smeared plight of Kashmiris has not gone undocumented. Kashmir had earlier to its credit rich literatures written in local languages (mostly Kashmiri, Urdu) that attempted to give voice to the individual and social sufferings caused by the 90s conflict. But since English being a universal language, it has lately been adopted by many indigenous writers who in their own creative ways reflect on the situation of Kashmir in 90s and highlight the sufferings of Kashmiris before a worldwide audience. Our mark in English writing begins with Agha Shahid Ali's (1949-2001) poetry that narrates the loss of his homeland (*The Country Without a Post Office* 1997 or *Rooms Are Never Finished* 2001) with undertones of anger and protest like in one of his poem Shahid describes the scenario of the 1990s in the following words:

From windows we hear
Grieving mothers, and snow begins to fall
On us like ash. Black on us of flames
It cannot extinguish the neighborhoods
The homes set ablaze by midnight soldiers
Kashmir is burning (*I See Kashmir From New Delhi* 179)

Kashmiri English Prose Writing is a recent development in our literary map that has responded to the contemporaneous terror and its continuing reverberations. We now have plethora of literary narratives like fiction and non-fiction that are marked by the expression of grief, pathos and alienation which its people underwent all along these violent years. Sumantra Bose writes, “Life in a society under daily siege is powerfully expressed in the tortured works of a new generation of Kashmir’s writers” (Bose, *Kashmir* 4). Among these narratives published in the recent years, many important works which have caught readers’ attention worldwide are Basharat Peer’s *Curfewed Night* (2008), Mirza Waheed’s *The Collaborator* (2011) and *The Book of Gold Leaves* (2014), Shahnaz Bashir’s *The Half Mother* (2014) and *Scattered Souls* (2016), Siddhartha Gigoo’s *The Garden of Solitude* (2011) and *A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories* (2015), Sanjay Kak’s *Until My Freedom Has Come* (2011), Rahul Pandita’s *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* (2013), Shafi Ahmed’s *The Half Widow* (2012) and *Shadow Beyond Ghost Town* (2014) to mention a few. The number is still increasing.

The Kashmiri English prose trend was started by Basharat Peer’s memoir, *Curfewed Night*. In the book itself Peer acknowledges that there were books written by people from almost every conflict zone but there were none from his own homeland in terms of English prose narrative. The absence of English narratives about Kashmir conflict haunted his conscience and made him to come up with this brilliant masterpiece.

I felt the absence of our own telling, the unwritten books about the Kashmiri experience, from the bookshelves, as vividly as the absence of a beloved—the empty chair staring at you across the table in a coffee shop ... I knew I had to write. (*Curfewed Night* 95-96)

Curfewed Night, is the author’s first-hand account wherein he tells us episodes and events from his growing years in Kashmir during the peak of the early 1990s insurgency. The book is the representation of the loss and lamentation that haunts and disheartens the reader. Basharat Peer highlights real events like Gawkadal Massacre, Kunanposh Pura, army camps, formation of insurgent groups, custodial killings and mass exodus of Kashmiri Pandits in his book. The book is a true narration of damaged lives and lost homes. Peer writes:

By 1990 Kashmir was in the midst of a full-blown rebellion against India. News on the radio became the news of defiance and death. Protests followed killings, and killings followed protests. (*Curfewed Night* 16)

Basharat Peer was followed by Mirza Waheed with his debut novel, *The Collaborator* (2011). It is the first novel in English written by a Kashmiri writer. It is a powerful narrative which has an unnamed protagonist narrator who is a 19-year-old Kashmiri *Gujjar* bloke, hailing from a border village of the valley (Nowgam). He

is reluctantly employed under an Indian army captain (Captain Kadian) and his job is to count the dead bodies of the militants and collect their identity cards. All of his friends have joined the uprising leaving the narrator as the only boy left in his village. The story of the narrator in the novel echoes the story of his people and his voice relates their voices. Waheed writes in the novel:

There were people dying everywhere getting massacred in every town and village, there were people being picked up and thrown into dark jails in unknown parts, ... there were thousands who had disappeared leaving behind women with photographs and perennial waiting, there were multitudes of dead bodies on the roads, in hospital beds, in fresh martyrs' graveyards. (*The Collaborator* 250)

There are some narrative examples by Kashmiri Pandit writers as well. Siddhartha Gigoo's *The Garden of Solitude* (2011) is one such. It is the first novel in English by a Kashmiri Pandit that deals with the political turmoil in Kashmir and the resulting mass migration of Pandits. The novel encompasses the painful migration of Kashmiri Pandits from their homeland and their plight thereafter. The author agrees that both Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims have been victimized, "Both communities lost a generation. Muslims lost many children and Pandits lost their elders" writes Gigoo (179).

Rahul Pandita is another modern Kashmiri Pandit writer whose memoir, *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* (2013) is set in the dawn of 90s. The book takes the readers through those alarming times when there were bomb blasts, killings, fear and oppression on both the communities which led to his community's mass exodus and thereafter the adversities that befell upon them. Pandita writes in the book, "In truck after truck, there were Pandit families escaping to Jammu" (98). Among other details the author laments over the fact that how the significant bond between the two communities got shaken.

But this word, Azadi, it frightens me. Images of those days return to haunt me. People out on the roads. People peering out of their windows. People on the rooftops of buses. In shikaras. And in mosques (*Our Moon Has Blood Clots* 9).

II. CONCLUSION

Contemporary Kashmiri English narratives bring fore the harsh realities of armed struggle and conflict, thereby drawing attention to a long-neglected human story. All these writers commemorate over the pluralistic culture shared in the state that allowed tolerance and co-existence in Kashmir. Literature is used as one of the strategies that enable the writers to voice the grievances / resistance of the public through their write-ups and thereby forward strong reservations against the power. In this regard, Ngugi Wa Thiong' O in his pioneering work *Writers in Politics* asserts:

Literature cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life. Here a writer has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society. What he can choose is ... the side of the people, or the side of those social forces and classes that try to

keep the people down. What he or she cannot do is to remain neutral. Every writer is a writer in politics. (preface)

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