

NARRATIVIZING HUMAN RIGHTS: A CRITICAL STUDY OF SHAHNAZ BASHIR'S SCATTERED SOULS

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of a significant corpus of fictional writings in English from Kashmir, especially from the beginning of the 21st century, has been regarded as the result of the political volatility, civil unrest, and active militarization of the valley where literature has evolved as a creative mechanism to critique the onslaught of violence and to map the multifarious modes of conflict the valley has been riddled with. The representation of collective existential crisis, where the spirit of life is constantly crippled by the terror of death, in the literary narratives from Kashmir predominantly echoes the maimed status of human rights. Drawing insight from the traumatic lived experiences of the common multitudes, the fictional writings from Kashmir, therefore, mostly testify to the blatant and inhuman violations of human rights that the common Kashmiris are subjected to and, therefore, may be read as fictional testimonies documenting violations, addressing collective traumatic memories, and voicing the stories of witnessing publics in the human rights campaign. In this context, this paper will attempt to analyze Shahnaz Bashir's collection of interlinked short stories titled Scattered Souls (published in 2016) as a human rights narrative, which appears to be a creative endeavor to narrativize the cultural images of atrocity, violence, abuse, and human rights violation in the Kashmir valley while attempting to situate the claims of human rights in the larger cultural discourses of the nation and beyond.

Keywords: Kashmir, literary narratives, violence, human rights

1. INTRODUCTION

The literary tradition of Kashmir is not a very new phenomenon; instead, its roots extend back to the 14th and 15th centuries with stalwarts like Lala Arifa or Lal Ded, Sheikh-Ul-Alam or Nund Reshi dominating the literary landscape of Kashmir which, in the later period, persisted and thrived through the works of Rupa Bhawani, Ghani Kashmiri, Shamas Faqir, Wahab Khar, and numerous others. Written mostly in the Kashmiri language, the early Kashmiri writings, especially poems, reflect an intense Sufi mystique influence emphasizing the values of pluralism and tolerance that nourished the idea of 'Kashmiriyat' to a great extent. However, in the last four centuries that Kashmir has gone through what the critics term as 'contentious circumstances', the literary discourse in Kashmir has witnessed a 'literary shift' with the literary creations expressing "a greater commitment, engagement, and sensitivity to the immediate reality and conditions" (Shameem, 2016, p. 872). In the mid-decades of the 20th century, essentially through the poems of Ghulam Ahmed Mahjoor, the Kashmiri literary outputs echoed a revolutionary spirit that eventually coupled with the political awakening against the oppressive Dogra regime in the 1940s. This spirit was evident in the works of literary stalwarts like Abdul Ahad Azad and Dina Nath Nadim. However, the literary discourse of Kashmir has undergone a significant transformation since the inception of the armed conflict in the 1990s within the valley, driven by the motif of attaining independent status for the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The narratives from Kashmir, written since then, have never been entirely distant from this issue, addressing the various facets of the conflict. In this respect, the beginning years of the 21st century can be considered a crucial period in the literary tradition of Kashmir since it saw the emergence of numerous Anglophone Kashmiri writings authored by native Kashmiris who are primary witnesses to the conflict. Kashmir has been riddled with, especially from the 1990s. The emergence of a significant corpus of fictional writings in English from Kashmir demands critical attention because it not only challenges the postcolonial nation's monolithic idea about Kashmir as a "fetish of desire" (Kabir, 2009) but illustrates the land as a "unique postcoloniality" (Ghosh, 2018, p. 31) characterized by relentless violence and bloodshed reflecting the metamorphosis of the human into the inhuman being. The emergence of a significant corpus of Anglophone literary narratives from Kashmir may be descriptive of a tendency of the postcolonial strategy of writing back to the mainstream Indian literary and cultural outputs that tend to popularize a state-endorsed 'secular' narrative regarding Kashmir, ignoring the multifaceted problems the Indian state failed to address so far.

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Moreover, often considered as a subset of Indian literature in English that is primarily critical of the governmental policies and measures adopted for the valley, the Anglophone fictional writings from Kashmir have evolved as a collective voice emerging from a conflict zone that forms cultural idioms of protest against widespread violence while also bringing the human rights issues to light by articulating the Kashmiri lived experiences and translating those into narratives. In this regard, it should be noted that the Kashmiri Anglophone literature has mostly been interpreted by scholars from the lens of 'resistance literature' as it essentially puts the political contexts at the centre and propagates a compelling discourse against oppression, repression, inequalities, and violence which, as Barbara Harlow (1987) asserts, are the quintessential characteristics of resistance literature (p. 30). On the other hand, Anglophone Kashmiri narratives have also been labeled with charges of aestheticizing "the ideological moorings of the Kashmiri movement for azadi" (Mridha, 2013, p. 348). However, keeping the contesting claims about Kashmiri narratives aside, it may be argued that the new writers from Kashmir have been able to explore the hitherto unaddressed realities of the Kashmir conflict by taking into cognizance the plight and pains of common Kashmiri dwellers, thereby "drawing attention to a long neglected human story" (Shameem, 2016, p. 875). In this regard, we may refer to Patrick Hogan (2016), who, in his book *Imagining Kashmir: Emplotment and Colonialism*, opines that violence in Kashmir is not only "a matter of state versus militant or state versus Kashmiri sympathizer (or putative sympathizer) but also militant versus Kashmiri civilians with different political views or cultural practices, foreign or Islamist militant versus Kashmiri and semi-secular militant, and so on" (p.5). Developed out of a critical historical reality, the Kashmiri Anglophone narratives thereby attempt to represent the multiple facets of a situation that resulted from the armed conflict in Kashmir and, therefore, cannot simply be categorized only as 'resistance literature' or 'literature of propaganda'. Rather, a nuanced reading of the contemporary fictional writings from Kashmir brings to the fore an alternate picture of the Kashmir situation representing the suppressed aspirations, collective memories of violence, and stories of abuse and trauma experienced by common multitudes whose dreams and hopes are crushed and rights are violated in the crossfire of the state and non-state actors. This also points to the politically motivated claim for a narrative space that provides the writers with the liberty of telling the stories of violence and violation which, Easterine Kire (2021) argues, comes under the category of basic human rights: "every man is a story. Every nation is bristling galaxy of stories. To be able to share one's story- shouldn't that be a basic human right?" (as cited in Longkumer, 2021, p.73). In this context, the fictional narratives from Kashmir, emanated essentially from a conflict and violence-prone territory, may be interpreted as disturbed and disrupted dialogues of humankind amplifying the fundamental interest in freedom and rights, and thus be read as human rights narratives that construct a "cultural archive of suffering" (Nayar, 2016, p.5), and bring the human rights claims of common Kashmiris to the fore.

2. SCATTERED SOULS BY SHAHNAZ BASHIR: A HUMAN RIGHTS NARRATIVE

Goldberg and Moore (2011) argue that the use of human rights norms in the readings of texts helps to "bring the interpretative methodologies of literary criticism to bear on human rights to uncover the stories that normative rights discourses implicitly include and exclude" (p.3). Literature, in this regard, constitutes a cultural discourse that propagates the idea of what it means to be 'human', and also an effective medium to recognize the 'other' whose rights have been denied. Human rights narratives, it may be argued, are essentially the cultural texts representing the tales of torture, suffering, and deprivation from which subjects and persons of a human rights campaign might be discerned. Moreover, cultural texts constitute a strong "affective dimension" which, according to Schaffer and Smith (2004), invites an ethical response from the listeners and readers, therefore, situating the human rights notion in the public imaginary (p.4). The text under discussion, titled *Scattered Souls* (2016) by Shahnaz Bashir, deals with the gripping tales of Kashmiri lives caught in the vortex of violence, torture, and trauma, marked by blatant and inhuman violation of their basic human rights. Set in the tumultuous period of the 1990s, the thirteen interlinked stories together portray a vivid picture of a conflict zone where human lives are under the shadow of guns, dictated by the armed forces and the militants. Bashir introduces his readers to this haunting reality in the very first story of the collection, "The Transistor" (2016). The story is about the brutal killing of Muhammad Yousuf Dar, a farmer, who gets killed by

the militants as his little transistor was mistaken as a communicating device with which he was suspected of reporting the activities of the insurgents to the Indian Army. The death of Yousuf Dar, who even happened to be a good friend of the militants, exposes the absolute uncertainty and vulnerability of human lives in the Kashmir valley who specifically live at the edge of life, or even on its outer edge.

Bashir's stories vividly depict the precariousness of life in Kashmir, where violence has tragically become an everyday occurrence, therefore, pointing towards a "traumatic realism" (Rothberg, 2006), where the everyday is located within the extreme, or the extreme within the everyday. Introduced by Michael Rothberg (2006) as an overarching framework for understanding the representation of holocaust, the notion of 'traumatic realism' "builds on a recognition of the intertwining of everyday and extreme conditions in genocidal situations" (p.72). The brutal killing of the character Yousuf Dar in the story "The Transistor", the arbitrary detainment of Ghulam Mohiuddeen by the Indian Army personnel, followed by his mysterious disappearance from the Army camp in "Ex-Militant", the tragic death of a young man, named Showkat in "Oil and Roses", who lost his life solely because a tire of a load-carrier truck burst near an Army bunker, prompting the troops stationed there to open fire indiscriminately at passersby, and the similar fate of Tariq Zargar in "The Woman Who Became Her Own Husband" underscore the traumatic reality of the valley where the regular life is situated within the extreme, and the basic human rights like 'right to life, liberty, and security of person' (outlined in Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) remain completely suspended. It may further be argued that Bashir's stories represent Kashmir as a 'state of exception' – a condition where, according to Giorgio Agamben (2019), "power (not necessarily state power) continuously refers and appeals to the exception, emergency, and a fictionalized notion of the enemy. It also labors to produce these same exceptions, emergencies, and fictionalized enemies" (p.70). The suspension of law, which is the distinctive trait of an 'exceptional state', jeopardizes the lives of its population, not just as political subjects or citizens, but as human beings. Agamben's theory of the state of exception essentially addresses the indistinction, in the realm of politics, between the external and the internal, between the private life, termed 'zoe', and the public sphere, the one characterizing life as 'bios'. This formulation creates a figure of 'homo sacer' that is reduced to what he defines as 'bare life' – devoid of all legal rights and exposed before the sovereign to the extent where the sovereign holds absolute authority over them, even to the point of depriving them of the right to live. (Agamben, 2019, pp.71-72).

The active militarization of the Kashmir valley with troops empowered by the draconian Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) remarkably manifests the indistinction drawn between the private life and public life, and the stories by Bashir (2016) evocatively represent these blurred notions of 'zoe' and 'bios' with human lives reduced to the status of 'bare life'. The fourth story of the collection, titled "Psychosis", for instance, deals with the predicament of Sakeena, the wife of Ghulam Mohiuddeen, the protagonist of the third story "Ex-Militant", who has been diagnosed with severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after being raped by army personnel at her own house:

She could see that four soldiers and a masked boy had barged into the shanty... The men threw her down to the ground and held her legs and arms. One of them stripped her of her shalwar and stuffed it into her mouth...The men didn't let Sakeena go for an hour. 'Your husband is with us, so take care,' they said while leaving... Sakeena was lying half naked on the floor, unconscious. (Bashir, 2016, p.43)

The character of Sakeena in the story testifies to the collective Kashmiri women's experiences, who have been at the receiving end of rape, sexual abuse, and physical assault since the inception of the conflict and treated as soft weapons by both the army and the militants. The body of women have been blatantly exploited to punish or demasculinize the male members of their households. Through Sakeena's character, Bashir (2016) describes the traumatic experience of a rape victim who, even after being treated for six years, is haunted by the smell of human sperm and experiences frequent nightmares: "but the smell of sperm barely leaves me. Even pleasantly scented things smell dirty to me" (p.39). The story, "Psychosis" is replete with references to the psychological impact of traumatic

violence experienced by a significant portion of ordinary Kashmiris. During the course of her treatment in the Government Psychiatric Diseases' Hospital, Sakeena witnesses the calamitous impact of the same on her fellow patients and their struggle to get out of it – an old woman, for instance, is diagnosed with PTSD whose son has been killed in front of her eyes, an old man has stopped feeling his legs after an Army tanker ran over his only son, a constable in the State Task Force has stopped talking since the day he forgot to lower down a waterboarded prisoner, who was suspended upside down in a police torture cell because of which the man died. The second last story of the collection, titled “The Silent Bullet”, on the other hand, narrates a different account of a man, named Muhammad Ameen who gets pierced by a stray bullet fired by the Army to disperse a crowd. The bullet hit Ameen’s back, touching his spine in such a way that it could not be removed by doctors:

The doctors had decided not to take any chance with the surgery on Ameen’s back. Removing the bullet, they believed, could paralyze his whole body or might even lead to his death. He was prescribed medicines that were expected to dissolve the bullet to an extent. And that would take a long time. Muhammad Ameen has been in bed, lying on his back for a year now...trying to trace the position and size of the bullet. (Bashir, 2016, p.108)

These two stories in particular reveal the catastrophic consequences of violence in a conflict-ridden territory, where the tumultuous and atrocious socio-political conditions not only affect the public life but infiltrate deep into the very personal spheres of individuals, making them compromise with their very existence and dignity. The predicament of characters like Muhammad Yousuf Dar, Ghulam Mohiuddeen, Showkat, Sakeena, Ameen, and the other unnamed characters from Bashir’s collection of stories exhibit the common vulnerability, defined as “a state of constant possibility of harm” (Fineman, 2008, p.11) which, in the context of an ‘exceptional state’, may be equated with being exposed unconditionally to the potential for killing by the state as well as the non-state actors. Moreover, in the thirteen stories of the collection, Bashir foregrounds the contexts in which his characters become ‘abject subjects’ whose bodily integrity and autonomy have been violated, thus rendering them without their subjectivity – an essential condition to claim one’s basic human rights. The infliction of pain and indignities on the abject subjects’ bodies and psyches enable a condition in which it is not possible, to remain an autonomous, coherent, and agentic subject, thereby, pushing the rights’ discourse further away (Nayar, 2016, p.XVI). The characters’ bodies, furthermore, bear witness to a situation where atrocious human rights crimes have occurred. The body as a witness, according to Renshaw (2011), becomes “a trope of the reckonings that follow acts of violence...the body functions as the absent/present witness to acts of violence” (pp.10-14). The characters of Bashir’s stories, through their acts of bearing witness to the modes and methods of violence and trauma, also bear witness to the indifference of the state and the social order to the suffering of the victims.

3. CONCLUSION

Narratives of suffering, the scholars of human rights literature believe, are at the core of human rights campaigns and the ‘rights discourse’. In this context, Anabelle Mooney (2016) argues that human rights discourses and practices should essentially be looked at through the frame of the human body since human embodiment and suffering is central to the human condition (p.2). Corporeal vulnerability and the erosion of corporeal integrity in the narratives of suffering point to the gross violation of human rights norms and directly challenge the very purpose of human rights law and politics which is believed to be crafted for the prevention of “human suffering [especially bodily suffering] of both acute and chronic kinds” (Moore & Goldberg, 2011, p.1). However, the stories compiled in *Scattered Souls* (2016), it may be argued, tend to transcend the corporeal or biological dimensions of vulnerability and shed light on the psychological harm which is the abstract form of human vulnerability. Carved out of the strife-torn situation of suffering and oppression in Kashmir, as Bashir himself mentions in one of his interviews with *The Punch Magazine*, the thirteen stories of the collection cannot be solely interpreted only as fictional portrayals of events. Bashir rather testifies to the collective traumatic experience of a community and attempts to narrativize the same while providing the readers with an insider’s perspective and inviting them to recognize the traumatic reality of Kashmiri lives which

produces a solidarity discourse in the social imaginary. This approach to narrativize or vocalize atrocity and abuses through stories is important because, as James Dawes (2007) asserts, “for people in need of rescue and care, the hope of being able to tell their story is sometimes the only hope” (p.2). Drawing insight from Michael Galchinsky’s (2018) theorization of the modes of human rights literature, Bashir’s narratives may be interpreted as literary reactions to what Galchinsky terms “human rights situation” (p.6), invoking a collective sense of fear, outrage, and desire for solidarity, the urge to witness, remember, narrate and expose the absurdity of life under violation along with the yearnings for mourning and reconciliation. Addressing some key themes of human rights discourse, like vulnerability, witnessing, and trauma, *Scattered Souls* by Shahnaz Bashir (2016), one can argue, intends to carve a literary space on behalf of the contemporary Anglophone Kashmiri narratives, depicting the cultural images (stories) of suffering, violence, abuse, and systematic inequalities leading to the deprivation that enable the construction of a cultural archive of suffering from within which emerges the “rights imaginary” (Nayar, 2016, p.5), therefore, aestheticizing the politics of human rights along with opening the avenues of human rights concerns to find a space in the public debate and discourse.

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