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Literary Responses to the Catastrophic 90s in the Un-Silent Valley: The Comparative Study of Agha Shahid Ali, Basharat Peer, and Mirza Waheed

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In 1990s there was demoralization and atrophy in the valley giving rise to total anarchy. A turmoil had started in the earthly paradise, with turbulent political as well as social activity taking place, devastating a common man's life pushing the youths to take up arms and turning the whole State upside down in the upheaval. Every now and then, Kashmir and its prolonged insurgency make headlines and talk about the tragedy as if it were mere statistics but since 2008, the literary response to the catastrophic tragedy has gone through a process of renaissance. Although this literary reaction was well started by Agha Shahid Ali, the genius who made the literary world take note of Kashmiri's ability to create startling English Literature. Since 2008, both Basharat Peer and Mirza Waheed wrote about brutalized Kashmir, of turbulent times and the unfaltering hope in spite of the void that has been created. They gave the poignant tale of 1990s sufferings a literary expression and wove tales together that portray the reaction of people to this cataclysm. I believe that every human tragedy has a literary reaction and my focus is on the literary response to the catastrophic annihilation of the earthly paradise into gruesome, barricaded, and repugnant garrison

Agha Shahid Ali began the English era of Kashmir with his writings that include his translations of Faiz Ahmad Faiz's Urdu ghazals. Agha Shahid Ali (Feb 4, 1949- 8 Dec, 2001) was a Kashmiri American poet. His poetry collections include *A Walk Through Yellow Pages*, *Half- Inch Himalayas*, *A Nostalgist's Map of America*, *The Country Without a Post Office*, *Rooms are Never Finished* (finalist for the National Book Award, 2001). His last book *Call me Ishmael Tonight* is a collection of English ghazals. His *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* (1987) has been characterized as "a surreal world of nightmare, fantasy, incongruity, wild humor and the grotesque." He wrote of pain, sufferings, and hope. He talks about torture, disappearances, killings, and whatever happened in the dead silence of nights across Gupkar- the posh military area in Srinagar or in the cold mountain valleys. He speaks of pain, anguish, longing, internal conflict, frustration but also of optimism and hope. Ali's poem *The Country Without a Post Office*, originally called as "Kashmir without Post Office," takes its impetus from the 1990 Kashmir uprising against India, which led to political violence and closed all the country's post offices for seven months. This poem is considered as one of the masterpieces in the literary world. In this book, Donahue explained, "the poet envisions the devastation of his homeland, moving from the realm of a personal to an expansive poetry that maintains integrity of feeling in the midst of political violence and tragedy. Kashmir is vividly evoked, all the more so for retaining an element of the fantastic".

The Country Without Post Office is replete with images of shadows, mirrors, and doubles. The shadow is noticeable in discussion of death of an 18-year old Rizwan, who is mentioned in many of his poems. His death is seen as being emblematic of Kashmiri deaths at large. In *I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight*, Rizwan is depicted as a shadow, roaming the streets of

Srinagar, searching for his body. The boy's troubled ghost witnesses atrocities done on people especially prisoners.

Don't tell my father I have died," he says,
and I follow him through blood on the road
and hundreds of pairs of shoes the mourners
left behind, as they ran from the funeral,
victims of the firing.

(*I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight.*)

Agha Shahid Ali is known for his art, the majesty, the dexterity of his poetry that showcase his genius as a writer of post-colonial era who portrayed the horrific human tragedy of 1990s in Kashmir that saw the rise of guerilla warfare. The beauty of his lyrics holds the voice of anguish, the terror, the unsaid pain, the formidable haunting of the Kashmiris. Known particularly for his dexterous allusions to European, Urdu, Arabic and Persian literary traditions, Ali's poetry collections revolve around both thematic and cultural poles. The scholar Amardeep Singh has described Ali's style as "ghazalesque," referring to Ali's frequent use of the form as well as his blending of the "rhythms and forms of the Indo-Islamic tradition with a distinctly American approach to storytelling. Most of his poems are not abstract considerations of love and longing," Singh noted, "but rather concrete accounts of events of personal importance (and sometimes political importance)." Though Ali began publishing in the early 1970s, it was not until *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* (1987) that he received widespread recognition. *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001) yarn together political and personal tragedy, again with a long poem as its focal point. Ali used a line from Emily Dickinson as the title for "Amherst to Kashmir," a poem that explores his grief at his mother's death and his own continued sense of exile from his home and culture. Noting how Ali continually sews his work from cultural, political, and personal events, Donahue described the poem as "a cultural inquiry as well as a personal lament. Ali threads the story of the martyrdom of the Shia hero Hussain throughout his elegy, keeping the history and hope of transcendental violence always before us, drawing strength from the strain of esoteric Islam that runs through his work." Ali's poetry is known as an elegiac tribute to Kashmir as a 'Paradise Lost'- lost, ravaged, consumed homeland. His own exile from his homeland adds to his poetic technique that may well be his signature style. It is this beautiful yet poignant way of concocting the notions of blood stained innocence and brutal beauty and the blending of past and present that results in 'hallucinatory simultaneity experience.' The community that has been stupefied is induced in a matchless poetic technique and Amitav Ghosh pays the following tribute:

"If the twin terrors of insurgency and repression could be said to have engendered any single literary leitmotif, it is surely the narrative of the loss of Paradise. [...] [T]he reason why there is no greater sorrow than the recalling of times of joy, is [...] that this is a grief beyond consolation (Ghosh 308, 313)."

What has created ripples in the literary world lately, are Basharat Peer's memoir *Curfewed Night* in 2008 and Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator* in 2011. Both have crafted the anguish of Kashmiris in a profound way, making world open their eyes to Kashmir's intense human stories. These books are bold, do not mind making people angry, and come with an emotionally charged personal relation to their narratives.

Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night* is cry, on behalf of the people of Kashmir valley who have been caught for nearly two decades in the crossfire between Pakistan-backed militants, indigenous as well as foreign, on one hand and the security forces of India on the other. Peer writes *Curfewed Night* in the form of a memoir of his childhood, his village, his days in school, his family, and the people at large for whom life has been hell because of violence, crackdown, and relatively frequent oppression. *Curfewed Night* is an exceptional personal account of the conflict. Peer has a superb feel for language and incident. Words such as "frisking, crackdown, bunker, search, identity card, arrest, and torture," he tells us, formed the lexicon of his childhood. Peer was born in a small village near Anantnag, later to become one of the most militant areas in the valley. Peer tells how a series of horrific rapes and atrocities by Indian troops radicalized a population who were vaguely pro-Pakistani, but whose activism had previously never gone beyond cheering for Pakistani fast bowlers. The massacres of the early 1990s changed Kashmir forever: militant groups sprung up in every village, initially armed with only homemade weapons, and the Kashmiri Hindu population fled the valley where their ancestors had lived for thousands of years, cohabiting peacefully with the Sufi Muslim Kashmiris for centuries. Peer returned to school in the spring to see his village schoolroom half empty: the desks of the Hindus were now vacant.

Curfewed Night is a brave and remarkable piece of literary reporting that reveals the personal stories behind one of the most brutal conflicts in modern times. Since 1989, when the separatist movement exploded, more than seventy thousand people have been killed in the battle between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. Born and raised in the war-torn region, Basharat Peer brings this little-known part of the world to life in lingering, vivid detail. Peer tells stories from his youth and gives gut-wrenching accounts of the many Kashmiris he met years later as a reporter. He chronicles a bewitching tale about insurgency and the effects it had on the 'Paradise', captivates his readers into pondering over the devastation, and coerces them to ask a question whether this desolation was necessary? *Curfewed Night* is a fierce and moving piece of reportage from an intrepid young journalist. The unwritten books of the Kashmir experience in the English language bookstores in Delhi prompted Peer to write the *Curfewed Night*. He started with borrowing the title for his book from a poem by Agha Shahid Ali. Mirza Waheed wrote because he wanted to erase the suspected intangible image of the Kashmiris that has been evoked by media and others since the turmoil in the valley began in 1990s. There is a war in Kashmir and there is every reason at the literary front to write about that, tell the poignant stories, write of the people who die during the events that are undocumented and to tell the world of the atrocities that people face. Kashmiris are trying to represent people who either do not live to tell their tales or those who do not have facilities to write them. They are voicing the stories of their battered brethren and the survival of their 'endangered community.'

Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator* is a critically acclaimed novel that is fictionalized account of the ground reality of Kashmir conflict. The novel is set in Nowgam, a village near Line of Control (LOC), the de facto border between India and Pakistan. It is woven around a

nameless protagonist. Author narrates anecdotes that gives shape to what has been going in Kashmir for decades now and continues. He writes about militants and informers, curfews and crackdowns, pain and trouble. He puts in real-live incidents that have occurred in the history. Captain Kadian is an Indian army man for whom the nameless protagonist works. The protagonist's friends vanished away from the village into 'sarhad paar' and he always fears that he will find their corpses among others that he fishes out in the 'meadow of daisies'. Novel is in lucid language, lyrical and has descriptive expressions. It is a collective picture of Kashmir in times of conflict of 90s. Like Shahid, Waheed makes demands on his readers, presenting them with a challenging intermixture of violence and beauty. Yet he manages to find a balance in writing about the violence of Kashmir without being superfluous. The novel's narrative perspective is very much from the point of view of the young narrator, whose name we never learn (another Rizwan?). He thinks, as he watches his employer, the vicious Captain, binge drinking, 'I'm beginning to get used to this. That's worrying' (9). In a dark take on the *Bildungsroman*, the novel charts the boy's 'progress' from shock and revulsion at the dead bodies, to communing with the dead people, even lying beside them; to not really noticing them as he becomes habituated and hardened to the work. We only see other characters, such as the Captain's peon, from the boy's perspective, as unmitigated embodiment of evil.

People did not know that Kashmir has a voice of its own- a voice that is framed independently of Pakistan and India. Just as the unnamed narrator of *The Collaborator* puts in "to hell with them all, to hell with India, to hell with the killer dogs they send here in their millions to prey on us, to hell with all this swarming Army here, to hell with the Pakistanis. To hell with the Line of Control, to hell with Kadian and his Mehrotra Sir, to hell with India, to hell with Pakistan, to hell with Jihad, and to hell with, to burning, smoldering hell with everything! It must all end. It must all, all end" (Waheed 2011:300-301).

The idea of comparative studies of these three writers is to show the literary revival of the English literature with the pioneering work of Agha Shahid Ali and the colossal efforts of both Peer and Waheed who give expression to the pain, anger and at the same time, hope that Kashmiris have been nursing as a reaction to the turmoil of 1990s. All the three authors wrote of man's love for his land, pain of leaving home and the joy of return as well. They describe the ruin of Kashmir and give the gut-wrenching accounts of bizarre events that took place in Kashmir. How a young man took to arms and training in Pakistan, how a mother watched her son hold an exploding bomb by Indian troops, how a poet finds religion when his entire family is killed, how idyllic villages are rigged with landmines, ancient Sufi shrines decimated in bomb blasts, how a meadow of daisies is turned into foul-smelling dump yard of corpses, how a boy fears to find the familiar faces of his friends among those bullet-ridden cadavers, how a place of soaring mountains and sylvan valleys turn into a site of a bloody conflict that has ebbed and flowed for decades?

The young generation of Kashmir is delving deeper and reading widely to understand what is happening around them. They pull out data and mass tag scanned images of newspaper articles

on social media sites, dating back to 1947-48 (when India gained independence from the British and Kashmir acceded to India) in order to create awareness. They blog, write articles and analyze because they feel the yearning to tell their stories and be heard. “We have to move on but we need to keep memory alive. Each single act of violence, mass or individual, has to be remembered. “We need memorials for those who laid down their lives” (Najeeb Mubarki), a Kashmiri journalist, said during a conference. That is what the younger generation of Kashmiri writers, bloggers, and journalists are doing: recording each memory, keeping it alive, and building memorials through their writing. “...the boys have grown up, and they are going to tell their stories (Peer).” Basharat Peer once said in an interview. The boys have indeed grown up and they are telling their stories. They are giving Kashmir its much-needed voice, the literary response that can tell the emotionally numbing experiences of the kind that Kashmiris have lived through for much of the 1990s when violence acquired an absurd “banality.”

“Let me cry out in that void, say it as I can.

I write on that void: Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir, Cashmir, Cashmire,
Kashmere...” (Agha Shahid Ali)

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