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Explicating Historical Dynamics of Disintegration in Kashmir: Tracing Politics of War through a Study of Short Stories of Akhtar Mohiuddin

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Abstract:

In the recent decade, there has been an influx in writings on Kashmir in a myriad of attitudes and genres. My current paper is based on collection of five short stories titled, Short Stories of Akhtar Mohiuddin (2015) translated by Syed Taffazull Hussain. Akhtar Mohiuddin is a celebrated Kashmiri writer awarded with Padma Shree and Sahitya Akademy Award. He is known for voicing the silenced common folks through his writings. Five stories in the collection are set in the backdrop of the crucial junction of the socio-political crisis in Kashmir since 1947. These stories map the trajectory of violence; nature of war and its shifts; and, its repercussions and yields. The paper will essentially focus on how the wide spectrum of violence in Kashmir is delineated in the stories by exploring political as well as military realms of the war and violence which lead to contravening of human life and trust. It further goes on to explain how war is fought at the cost of the dignity of individuals. It yields nothing but counter violence and hatred which is again manipulated as a narrative tool against the common folks. The paper is a historical survey of war in Kashmir through the stories and its impact on human life.

Keywords: AFSPA, disappeared, extra-judicial killings, war, disintegration.

“A tiny valley of no more than five million souls, landlocked, preindustrial, resource-rich but cash poor, perched thousands of feet up in the mountains like a tasty green sweetmeat caught in a giant’s teeth, wanted to be free.” (Rushdie 253)

Introduction:

Kashmir is the most militarily concentrated zone in the world with more than 7,00,000 armed personnel. Over 100,000 people have died since 1989 and more than three lakhs have been displaced (Wikipedia). Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons claims that 8,000 to 10,000 Kashmiri civilians have been subjected to enforced disappearance, and around 12,000 custodial killings have been reported in previous twenty years (Zahir-ud Din, Greater Kashmir). The numbers are depressingly increasing with each passing day. Hence, the war in Kashmir needs no further cementing to be acknowledged as war.

Advanced Learner's Dictionary in one of its definitions defines war as "a fight or an effort over a long period of time to get rid of or to stop the unpleasant" (1717). This illustration goes down well with the conflict in Kashmir which is perpetual for decades. The war is perennial, intensifying into plague time to time. Kashmiris have been living in 'everyday war-like situation', although this is an undeclared war often justified as natural retaliation against a group of people with anti-national sentiments heralding threat to national integrity and security. Balraj Puri aptly terms such Kashmiri politics, or to put it rightly, the politics over Kashmir as "a prisoner of Kashmir's past." (Zutshi 9)

In recent decade, there has been an influx in writings on Kashmir in a myriad of attitudes and genres. My current paper is based on collection of five short stories titled, Short Stories of Akhtar Mohiuddin (2015) translated by Syed Taffazull Hussain. Akhtar Mohiuddin is a celebrated Kashmiri writer awarded with Padma Shree and Sahitya Akademy Award. He is known for voicing the silenced common folks through his writings. In Hussain's own words, "the stories in the book record the events in Kashmir at crucial points in the chequered history in their state..." (Hussain 7). These stories map the trajectory of violence; nature of war and its shifts; and, its repercussions and yields.

The paper will essentially focus on how the wide spectrum of violence in Kashmir is delineated in the stories by exploring political as well as military realms of the war and violence which lead to contravening of human life and trust. It further goes on to explain how war is fought at the cost of the dignity of individuals. It yields nothing but counter violence and hatred

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Five stories in the collection are set in the backdrop of the crucial junction of the socio-political crisis in Kashmir since 1947. The first story is set at the backcloth of 1947 communal crisis in Kashmir wherein: “Kashmir, on the one hand, was being attacked by the tribals and on the other hand, the massacre of Muslims was going on in Jammu. On the one hand, demented Muslims were killing Hindus and Sikhs and on the other hand, equally demented Hindus and Sikhs were killing the Muslims” (Hussain 11). Amidst such turmoil Sikhs and Hindus run from the outskirt villages of Kashmir to Srinagar to save their lives. One such Sikh man in shambles with a malnourished child reaches the vicinity of Abdul Samad in Srinagar. Hungry, the man begs for food at the doorstep of Samad’s wife. Having finished his meal, the Sikh asks the lady about her ethnicity. On learning that the woman who offered him food is a Muslim, his trauma of murderous Muslim insanity that he witnessed back at home resurfaces. He strives to negotiate with his two-pronged dilemma- if the woman who treated him to food with respect is Muslim, how could those be Muslims who went on a spree of killing and looting. Or if both share the same God and belief, how could they be poles apart from each other. The woman convinces the Sikh man to keep the child with Abdul Samad’s wife for she is childless. The Sikh keeps the baby with Abdul’s wife after she pledges by Allah that she will take a good care of the child and will rear him as her own child. Years pass by. The child dwells into a little gentleman. The Sikh develops good ties with the family and visits them frequently. Suddenly, the child falls ill and dies. The people in the hospital are amazed to see a Sikh man and a Muslim lady crying together by the body of the child- “A purdah lady and a Sikh were weeping together over the dead child while far away in Punjab it was said that the Muslims and Sikhs were murdering each other like wild beasts. (Hussain 23, 24)

The story delineates two major points – one that 1947 shadows the Kashmiriyat with the first phase of violence by its own people over their fellow inmates; two that the story explores the realms of possibility of peace and brotherhood, keeping ignited the spark of Kashmiriyat. Simultaneously, the Sikh’s quest to find answers to the questions as who are the real Musalmaans (which is metaphorical, refers to religion that turns out to be null and void in its values as all – Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims go on a binge of Killing tarnishing their gods and

humiliating the humanity). Remarkably, the phase of the story marks the first phase of war in Kashmir with communal tension at its peak.

The following story, "I Can't Tell" is set in the backcloth of August 1953. The then Prime Minister (Sardar-i-Riyasat) of the state Sheikh Abdullah is jailed in 'Kashmir conspiracy case' by the Indian government led by then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru over the allegations that he had been conspiring with other nations against India. The supplies to the state are restricted so that the price hike of daily commodities could build a vicious distrust in the public for Sheikh's government. His government is dissolved and taken over by the henchman puppet representatives of the Indian state, ostensibly the rivals of Sheikh Abdullah. The life becomes unbearable for those who cannot buy their bread and butter in turbulent inflation with whatever meagre they earn from day-long labour. People take to the streets shouting the slogans "Sher-e-Kashmir Zindabad", demanding the release of their leader"(59).

Qadir Chan, the protagonist is deeply frustrated with the current state of affairs and holds Sheikh responsible for everything including the fact that he could not afford to buy a shroud for his dead mother. Here, he represents the governing sentiments of the day, cleverly orchestrated by the state to earn anti- Abdullah sentiments. He catches the hold of one of the protesting supporters of Sheikh Abdullah in the street and beats him to death. While he fears his arrest for the murder, Rasheed Bakshi's (the henchman of the Indian government) people pick him and employ him. They laud him for his brave act of killing. They assure him his safety saying, "To the one thousand and five hundred persons who were killed in the police firing today you added just one more. Why should you worry?... you will kill who knows how many such persons. Why do you worry needlessly? By God, we need mujahids like you." (Hussain 67)

Qadir Chan is used as a tool to create favourable situation for the forces to baton charge and tear shell the public. Usually, he is made to drink heavily in the morning and then sent to the prearranged place to perpetrate scuffle with someone. He would beat or abuse someone in the public. If the opponent retaliates, the public is baton charged by the forces in the name of maintaining law and order. The next day news will be manipulated by the media and the poor public will be blamed for creating pandemonium, thus manufacturing a narrative to justify military and political violence through what Luis Althusser terms as "Repressive State Apparatus" (Buchanan). Qadir Chan is asphyxiated by the vicious political captivity, whereby

neither can he continue nor can he opt to exit. He is threatened with imprisonment for his previous murder in case he thinks of quitting his job. Besides, he fears for the safety of his family, primarily his daughters. Qadir Chan here serves as a metaphor for those who are dishevelled into such political conundrum and pitched against their own people. In short, Kashmir becomes a war-torn dystopia born out of the collective malice of politics, military, and media, all working in consonance to neutralize violence as a normal reaction by filling the gap of any suspicion left by the other. It is the politics that decides the count of death and life. It is the people who are nowhere to be found in the discourse, rather used as a tool in forging a particular propaganda.

Since Sheikh Abdullah's dismissal as the Prime Minister of the state in 1953, and his subsequent imprisonment marked the beginning of the rigged elections and puppet governments. Kashmir went to polls umpteen times after that but the trust of its people was breached each time, filling the hearts of Kashmiris with hate and distrust, later culminating into an armed rebellion.

The next story, "Election Kashmir Style" asserts that the elections in Kashmir are mere theatrics. The results are preordained. It is simply to befool people and to make them fight like rats. It is election day in Kashmir. Some street urchins take out a procession on the street with green flags. Suddenly, they start throwing stones at Kachurs' house shattering its window panes.

Later in the day when the results are declared, the party with red flag wins the election. The same group of young boys is seen taking out the victory procession on the street. Haji Sahib, the local businessman addresses the procession and provokes them to throw stones at Dars' alleging that Dars were responsible for Kachurs' stone pelting. Haji and Kachurs, therefore, enter into cooperative business side-lining the Dars. Later Dars reveal that Kachurs and they had mutually agreed to the stone pelting of their houses.

The story has got a direct bearing of "I Can't Tell" on it for there too we come across the fetid play of politics where the locals are pitched against their own people so that the state could stay blameless. Stone pelting to armed violence, there is nothing that does not have a political motivation. Hence, the war in Kashmir is politically potent, being fed upon by several

stakeholders who benefit from it immensely. Here, the stone pelting is pre-ordained affair to either gain political mileage, or to earn political sympathy.

The next story, “Jella’s Teeth” is the unravelling of the naked truth of power misuse against the civilians in Kashmir by the armed forces in the name of Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA). Regardless of the integrity of individuals, the forces rip their souls apart by playing with their lives like toys. Jalila in the story is an educated young lady, daughter of Rasul, the donkey driver. Jella has completed a law degree and proudly hangs her nameplate on her door that reads “Jalila Rasul B.A. LL. B” (81). On a curfewed day when only armed personals are to be seen on the street, Jella (her nickname) requests an army officer to allow her father across the road to meet someone, which is granted instantly. After a while, she is baffled to hear some cries outside. She rushes out immediately to find her father being beaten mercilessly by an army officer. Jella censures the officer entering into an altercation with her. The officer is enraged by Jella’s impunity to question him. He beats her too leaving her wounded badly. The next morning, the curfew is lifted. Rasul, the donkey driver is seen searching something on the road muttering “Jella’s teeth, they must be lying here somewhere” (84).

Like all other stories Jella’s story also is metaphorical, as Jella besides her father represents all those who are victimized to violence every day on the pretext of security, suspicion, or the impunity of questioning. Individual selfhood and prestige are reduced to sheer command obeying robotic existence.

The last story titled “The Terrorist” in the sequence is of paramount significance as it is the culmination of all the previous phases and stages. It concerns a child who is on a walk with his mother. On seeing an armed patrolling troop approaching them, he clings to his mother and refuses to buzz any farther. On noticing that the officer in command thinks that the child is terrified and tries to console him saying, “Son, don’t be afraid... that is a good boy... now go and move along with your mother” (86). The mother is enraged by it and retaliates in a scornful manner, “This rascal is afraid of you. Humph! He wants a gun and is asking me to take the gun from a policeman and give it to him” (86). Enraged, the officer looks down upon the child angrily and mutters, “bloody terrorist” and moves on quickly (87).

The story is set in modern time and reflects the repercussions of the previous episodes in the history. The child signifies the fearlessness of death and its representatives, notably military. The things have deteriorated to an extent that bloodshed, death, and everyday violence is so normal that it has become the part of everyday life for every Kashmiri. Amidst an undeclared war and unacknowledged humanity, death itself has died and transformed into a metaphor of catastrophe. These are mere bodies that are being killed. Even the children are so accustomed to violence that arms are toys of fantasy for them. The fearlessness of the child and his fancy for weapons is the transition of generations, now magnified into death mongering business. The last story cannot be seen in isolation. This is the end chapter (yet incomplete) of the transition of violence as traced across the stories at different junctures of time.

The stories trace the beginning of war back to 1947; map its transformation through politicization and militarization across 1953, the 1990s, till late nineties. The endings of the stories are of principal importance as they respectively designate the course of time where they have culminated. The ending of the first story fundamentally explores the potentials of peace beyond communal conflict. Life is rehabilitated even after the wretchedness of the turmoil. The second in contrast ends in the mayhem of frustration where possibilities have been buried deep inside political deceit being guarded by state agencies including media, used as “Ideological State Apparatus” (Buchanan). Where Ideological Apparatus fails in carrying out the desired agenda, Repressive State Apparatus is brought into practice as happens in “I Can’t Tell” and “Jella’s Teeth”. “Election Kashmir Style” ends with the neutralization and naturalization of violence as well as elections as the gateway of opportunity for business. “Jella’s Teeth” declares denial of individual integrity by armed forces empowered with AFSPA being used by the state as “Oppressive State Apparatus.” In Contrast, the last story ends with a declaration of open war by common individuals in retaliation to the war by the state against them.

Conclusion:

Chitralkha Zutshi asserts that “Kashmir is not only an actual geographical entity but an idea.” (Zutshi 5) Adhering to such a principle, Akhtar Mohiuddin’s series cleverly unearths the politics of as how ‘Kashmir as an idea’ is simply concocted into Kashmir of ‘territorial dispute’. Such a language game as well as meta-narratives has cemented the use of state tools like media, armed forces, empowered with AFSPA and so on. Chitralkha Zutshi in her book Kashmir:

History, politics, Representation (2018) redefines Kashmiri imagination of freedom, "...Kashmiri imagining of freedom in different temporal frames was not confined to political freedom, but also included concepts such as human dignity, economic equity, and social justice." (Zutshi 8) Contrarily, such a dignity, equity, and justice are replaced by rapes, massacres, extrajudicial killings, exodus, and Human Rights violations. Hence, in such a course of politics human landscape of Kashmir is replaced with the bloodstained landscape.

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