

The True Literary Voices of Kashmir: A Study of *Curfewed Night* and *The Collaborator*

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Since 2008, the English literature of Kashmir has gone through a process of resurgence and this offers a glimpse of hope in the dark clouds of Kashmiris. The good news is that their grey clouds have plentiful silver lining. This gets verified by the fact that there is a sort of renaissance their literature is going through. Kashmir is catching global attention today and not for ordinary reasons. It is true that they have a rich tradition of producing fantastic literature, mostly in Kashmiri, Urdu and, to some extent, Persian. But their brush with English is somewhat new. The English era of Kashmiris begins with Agha Shahid Ali – the genius, who made the literary world take note of Kashmiris' ability to craft astonishing English literature. No matter the angel of death had him little early, and we didn't get to read a novel from him, his poems remain the best thing ever produced in English. His writings – including his translations of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's Urdu ghazals -continue to captivate, and leave a reader with incredible but pleasant bewilderment. What has created ripples in the literary world lately, however, are Basharat Peer's memoir *Curfewed Night*, and now Mirza Waheed's novel *The Collaborator*. Peer and Mirza are genuine Kashmiri English writers, who know their job well and have made an excellent case for what they have crafted. Both these books are undoubtedly a work of colossal effort. What they have done in great measure is to make the world open its eyes to Kashmir's profound human stories. These books are bold, do not mind making people angry, and come with an emotionally-charged personal relation to their narratives. For those who wish to appreciate why Kashmiris nurse so much of pain and anger, these books hold the answer. In two of these books, there is also some resonance with Muzammil Jaleel's "My Lost Kashmir", which appeared in the London Observer way back in 2002.

Every now and then, Kashmir and its protracted insurgency make headlines. But most of them talk about the tragedy as if it were mere statistics while as *Curfewed Night*, a memoir by Kashmiri journalist Basharat Peer, is an attempt to tell the human side of the story. While working as a journalist in Delhi in early 2000, Peer tells us, Kashmir was the almost daily death count in the newspapers. Both Peer and Waheed represent a clear break from their predecessors like Walter Lawrence's *The Valley of Kashmir*, Tydale Biscoe's *Light and Shade*, Michael Palin's *Himalaya* and Justine Hardy's *In the Valley of Mist*. There are still others like Vikram Chandra's *Srinagar Conspiracy*, M J Akbar's *Beyond the Vale* and Prem Shankar Jha's *Kashmir 1947*. But all of them are either the outsider's account of Kashmir or the historical accounts which were restrained, India-friendly, balanced recounting of a situation that has always needed more heart to narrate.

Basharat grew up in the foothills of the Himalayas in the beautiful Valley, reading Shakespeare, Stevenson, Dickens, Kipling and Defoe. He has a fond memory of a blue Willys jeep driving to a village called Seer in southern Kashmir:

It would follow the black, ribbon-like road dividing vast expanses of paddy and mustard fields in a small valley guarded by the mighty Himalayas. (Peer 2008:09)

He had adoring parents, cricket playing mates and a familiar milieu. One may think that his upbringing was nearly perfect. It was, almost. But the winter of 1990, when the author was just 13, brought war in the valley and his world went topsy-turvy. His idyll was shattered. He writes, "The war of my adolescent had started." (Peer 2008:14) Kashmir was a princely state under British rule in India. In 1947, when India and Pakistan were separated after the British withdrawal from the subcontinent, Kashmir's fate was left in limbo. A predominantly Muslim state, it was ruled by a Hindu king, Hari Singh. Meanwhile, Sheikh

Mohammed Abdullah, Kashmir's most popular leader, sought India's assistance after tribesmen from the Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan invaded Kashmir in October 1947. A fighting ensued but ceased in January 1949 after the United Nations' intervention. In order to end the conflict UN recommended a referendum to determine which country (India or Pakistan) the Kashmiris belonged to. But things took an ugly turn in 1953 when India jailed Abdullah, dashing Kashmiris' hopes of a mature and competent leadership. His release a few years later was unable to bring smiles on the people's faces as he abandoned the issue of referendum. Over two decades later, Indian government rigged the elections, arrested opposition candidates and unleashed acts of terror. This led to the formation of insurgent groups like Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) whose militants Peer and his friends revered in their adolescent days.

Peer's fascination with the militants was shattered when his whole family objected to the idea of joining the insurgents. His grandfather, he writes, fixed his watery green eyes on him and asked, "How do you think this old man can deal with your death (Peer 2008:48)?" In order to save him from death, he was sent farther and farther from Kashmir, first to Aligarh Muslim University near Delhi, then to the Indian capital in the newspaper offices, from where he often ventured back into Kashmir to report. Like many journalists who at some point are frustrated with the limits of their medium, Peer realized that Kashmir's stories cannot be fully told in a newspaper or magazine format. Thus, to his parents' dismay, he gave up the newspaper job and travelled to his war ravaged homeland. As he went about writing a book on Kashmir in his head and a notebook in hand, he was often haunted by the past, at times unable to write and ask the questions he wanted to. Trained as a journalist (he is a graduate of Columbia University and has worked at Rediff and Tehelka in India), Peer has the poet's sensibility and the journalist's eye for detail and the elements of reportage. Ahmad Rashid writes that:

The story of Kashmir has never been told before so evocatively and profoundly.

Peer writes with the skill of a novelist, the insight of a journalist and the evocative power of a poet (Ahmad Rashid).

The book is divided into fifteen chapters. The book contains several stories of betrayal, survival and courage, disappearance, displacement and destruction. It speaks of deep tragedies. It is as much about the author's life as about Kashmir and its people. Peer, who may well be the best chronicler of Kashmiri tragedies, however ends the book in a positive note. After all, hope still floats in the Valley. At one point in the book, he writes: "I was carrying a copy of *Homage to Catalonia* with me and gave it to him (Ahmed). 'You will find Kashmir in its pages,' I said (Peer 2008:225)". War sparks creativity. But Peer often laments the lack of good books on Kashmir.

Curfewed Night brings alive the horrors of people in Kashmir, their never ending pain caused by the loss of the young and the old. People outside Kashmir have already heard first hand stories about the militant and army rule in Kashmir but this book goes much farther than those accounts. One really loves the way Peer narrates the stories interconnecting them with one another moving swiftly and immaculately from Tariq to Shafi to Bilal to Shameema to Asif to Hilal to Yusuf to Vikas to Shabnam to Shahid to Ahmed and countless others who suffered the wrath of either the militants or the army in one way or the other. Peer painfully recounts his struggle to get a rented accommodation in Delhi made further difficult due to his ethnicity and religion. Peer explains how it is that people don't lead normal lives in Kashmir, why they thank God just for staying alive, why every child once dreamt of picking up a Kalashnikov and joining the armed struggle, why the 'azadi' is so much important to them, what it is to be looked with suspicion even in your own place with the so called outsiders, what it is to fear the police and army as they have the unrestrained power (like AFPSA) of putting the innocents behind bars in the name of interrogations and terror suspicion. One of

the heart rending accounts this book contains is in chapter twelve, which has an anecdote about a mother's courageous attempt to save her son. A mother runs towards a battleground where the army was going to use her two sons Bilal and Shafi as human bombs. She sees Bilal about to be sent into the militant's house with a mine in his hands. She throws herself at Bilal, removes the mine from his hands and holds him in her arms. The soldiers let them go.

One realizes why Kashmiris feel insulted to be called as a part of India. Everybody would feel the same in the given circumstances. They live fears, tragedies and the life in which there is a loss of self esteem and dignity. Ironically not many in 'India' are actually aware of either the history of Kashmir, or the tyranny on its people. Steve Coll observes that:

Curfewed Night is the finest book I have read on the contemporary Kashmir conflict-literary, humane, clear-eyed and reliable. Peer has given a voice, unforgettable, to a generation of Kashmiris who have never been heard in the United States, but who should be (Steve Coll).

All people outside the Kashmir know is that Kashmir belongs to them, it's a part of their country and they will fight a million battles to keep it this way. They don't care if in Kashmir the women are raped and abused every day, its youth is being oppressed every hour, the children are deprived of a peaceful and sane childhood every minute and the old are losing their dignity and once held self-esteem by each moment. They just don't care. So *Curfewed Night* is not only a book, it is the blend of lives of people in the conflict ridden state and it apprises us of the miseries and trauma of people. Pankaj Mishra in his review of the book says rightly that:

Curfewed Night is a tale of a man's love for his land, the pain of leaving home, and the joy of return-as well as a fierce and moving piece of reportage from an intrepid young journalist. Describing the ruin of Kashmir, it doesn't only shock, but also challenges our most cherished beliefs-in democracy, rule of law and the power of individual conscience. Everyone should read it (Pankaj Mishra).

Curfewed Night is a brave and unforgettable 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, Peer brings this little-known part of the world to life in haunting, 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 young man's initiation into a Pakistani training camp, a mother forced to watch her son hold an exploding bomb by Indian troops, a poet finding religion when his entire family is killed. He writes about politicians living in refurbished torture chambers, idyllic villages rigged with land mines, and ancient Sufi shrines decimated in bomb blasts.

The other book which this paper attempts is Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator*- a debut novel. It is set in the early 1990s in the village of Nowgam, high up against the border passes. The unnamed narrator is the village headman's 17-year-old son. He used to play cricket and swim in nearby water meadows with four close friends. Now, ever since a florid mullah appeared and radicalised the villagers, his pals have all slipped away into Pakistan to take up arms. It is a scene that is being repeated all over Kashmir, with thousands of boys trekking over the mountains to join the uprising. The narrator's honour has departed along with his friends, because Captain Kadian, the head of the local Indian forces, has forced him into working for the army. He must go out into those same meadows to identify guerillas the army has killed and dumped there. At an age at which he should be preparing for adulthood, he is trapped in scenes from a horror film, rooting through corpses for documentation. Every day, he fears he will find his friends among the bodies. Yet his oppression has a human face:

Captain Kadian. Like the narrator's vanished friend Hussain, Kadian favours the singer Mohammed Rafi; he is lonely away from home and overindulges in whisky, hectoring the boy when drunk. Waheed methodically builds an atmosphere of menace and despair, all the while interleaving elegiac description. His writing is often excellent. The boys jump into a river, "splashing its cool water into the sky and gazing at the pearls that would come down mixed with the sharp rays of a July sun (Waheed 2011:74). Ever present are the mountains: "These undulating rows of peaks, some shining, some white, some brown, like layers of piled-up fabrics (Waheed 2011:75). At the core of the story is the narrator's agonisingly protracted dilemma over whether to cross the border to join his friends in the training camps or to stay put with his parents. Whether his indecision is due to weakness of character or a realistic grasp of the insurgency's futility remains unclear, but stasis comes to dominate the novel, which would benefit from cutting. Even so, this funereal tale of the annihilation of a community possesses a disturbing power that is both lingering and profound. The unnamed protagonist of Mirza Waheed's devastating novel grows up in the forgotten last village before the border. The border is not really a border but – in official parlance – the Line of Control, which divides the former princely state of Kashmir between India and Pakistan; the time period is the early 1990s, when the confrontation between the Indian state and Kashmiris demanding azaadi (freedom) turned particularly violent. Such a place, in such a time, cannot remain forgotten very long.

The novel starts when the eponymous narrator is 19, and the forgotten days of the village are long past. He is employed by a captain in the Indian army to go down into a valley near the village and collect the ID cards and weapons of the corpses – thousands of them – which are strewn about the valley floor. The corpses are those of Kashmiri "militants" or "freedom fighters", depending on which side of history you're on, who crossed the Line of Control into Pakistan for training and were gunned down by the Indian army while crossing back. Their ID cards can be used for PR purposes when the Indian army issues press releases about the militants it has killed; the corpses themselves are just "dead meat", left to rot. The early descriptions of the protagonist's visits to the valley of corpses are written in the most haunting prose.

By the way, did I mention there's a profusion of tiny yellow flowers growing among the grasses here? . . . You can see bright yellow outlines of human forms enclosing darkness inside. It makes me cry . . . In some cases the outline has started to become fuzzy now, with the tiny plants encroaching into the space of the ever-shrinking human remains. I don't know the name of the flowers. Some kind of wild daisies, perhaps (Waheed 2011:14)

Picking through corpses among the daisies would be enough to drive anyone to insanity or tears—or both— but in the case of the 19-year-old there is a possibility he faces each time he goes into the valley that makes the situation even more horrific. Might he encounter the bodies of his four childhood friends – Hussain, Gul, Ashfaq and Mohammed?

The novel is divided into three sections. The first moves between the present and the past, weaving together the story of the narrator, whose family are the only ones to have stayed in the village while everyone else has fled, with the early days of Kashmiri resistance; his friends went to train in Pakistan and left him behind. The second section charts the consequences of his friends' departure amid the increasing brutality of the Indian crackdown in Kashmir; and the final part returns us to the story of the Collaborator and his relationship with the Indian captain who employs him. Along the way, Waheed gives us a portrait of Kashmir itself. Away from the rhetorical posturing of India and Pakistan, he reveals, with great sensitivity and an anger that arises from compassion, what it is to live in a part of the world that is regarded by the national government as the enemy within, and by the government next door as a strategic puppet.

The book is also gripping in its narrative drama. Why has this young man become a collaborator? Why is his village empty, save for him and his parents? Why has his mother stopped speaking? Why did his four friends join the armed struggle, and why didn't he go with them? How long can he continue to nod and listen to the drunken Indian captain, who boasts of his success in killing Kashmiri boys? One of the most remarkable features of this novel is how much of it is concentrated around a single person, in isolation. It is only in his memories that the narrator has friends and a close-knit family he can rely on, and even within his memories those relationships start to fall away as the state of war throws up divisions and absences and speechlessness—so that when we encounter him in the present, his closest intimacies seem to be with the corpses in the field. They are the only Kashmiris of his age left in the vicinity.

Waheed is too subtle a writer to draw an explicit connection between the isolation of the 19-year-old and the isolation of Kashmir as it enters the third decade of a war forgotten or distorted by the rest of the world, but the boy's situation can't help but reverberate beyond his individual story. It is perhaps because his story suggests so many other stories. Kashmir is one of India's most spectacular regions, a place of soaring mountains and sylvan valleys. It is also the site of a bloody conflict that has ebbed and flowed for decades. The Indian army is fighting an insurgency with sectarian overtones (many Kashmiris are Muslims), allegedly sponsored by Pakistan. Since 1989, an estimated 70,000 people have been killed and around 8,000 have disappeared.

First seventy pages into *The Collaborator*, one begins to dread the inevitable. Mirza Waheed, it seems, will not veer from the trodden path. We have seen this before: the before and after story of Kashmir, the fall of paradise to something worse than hell. It's all there: the familiar snow clad mountains, babbling brooks, blue skies, greener meadows and the innocence of childhood spent amidst such idyllic scapes. All of this set to Rafi's timeless melodies: *Tum mujhe yun bhula na paoge.*

Soon enough, the scene dissolves to gruesome torture, to disappearances and death. But Waheed has already warned us. His tale begins with one Captain Kadian of the Indian Army, purveyor of death, destruction and despicability. The protagonist, who remains nameless is in the Captain's employment to retrieve Identity Cards off corpses deposited into a sort of death-field where yellow flowers grow between the legs of mutilated bodies. Poignantly, this was once where our protagonist and his four friends – all of whom went sarhad paar – played cricket. And yet, just a few turns of page later, Waheed settles into his story and you finally begin to enter uncharted territory. The rhetoric drops off along the margins and it is this boy's deliberations of to cross or not to cross that takes centre stage. For all its lack of "action", this internal struggle of a boy left flummoxed by the world around, of which the relevant aspect is simply that his best friend went across without telling him, is the most gripping. Yes, there is the usual talk of Azaadi, and who did what to who, but the most tender passages are of this boy, who's strongest motivation to go across seems to be his loneliness, a biting feeling of being left behind. It is in these pages that Waheed creates the most powerful images and draws us in. We don't resist. And this is really the nub of the issue. Should we treat books coming out of Kashmir as accounts of victimhood, documentaries, or should we look at them first as literature? All Kashmiris are simply happy to hear their own –long suppressed – voices coming out. To them, at this stage perhaps, it matters little how Kashmir's literary output stacks up as long as it tells the stories that they have lived for the past two decades. For now, it is simply their story, told by them.

Waheed's biggest achievement is that he continues the journey Peer (and in many ways, Agha Shahid Ali) began. Between them they have successfully paved the way for resident Kashmiris, too many of whom feel numbed by the conflict, to yet again hope in the power of words, in stories and song, to find the first outlines of redress. Importantly too, Waheed

reminds us that Kashmir has a voice of its own. It is a voice that is framed independently of Pakistan and India. In his closing pages the protagonist stares at his handiwork – an ablaze field of corpses – and thinks:

To hell with them all, to hell with the Indian, 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, smouldering hell with everything! It must all end. It must all, all end (Waheed 2011:300-301).

For as long as India and Pakistan remain obdurately compulsive about their theoretical, rhetorical, positions on Kashmir, perhaps it is only in narratives like Waheed's *The Collaborator*, that Kashmir will find independence. What *The Collaborator* does remarkably well is bring to the world the story of Kashmir's secluded hinterland – the life of the hapless people living close to the Line of Control. When it comes to *The Collaborator*'s title - originally titled *In the Valley of Yellow Flowers* – a reader is left thinking if it is intentional. A best-selling novel of the same title by Seymour Gerald, published by Hodder & Stoughton, is already in the market since September 2009 in the UK. There is, nevertheless, a big reason to cheer our Aborted Martyrs kind of writers – waging a jihad of a different ilk, winning friends to their political cause and empathy for their people's suffering. First novels seldom bring out the best of the writers. Writers evolve as they write. Basharat and Waheed possess a talent that is capable of producing far more striking stories. When a noted novelist reviewed Basharat Peer's memoir, *Curfewed Night*, he called the book "...a brave and beautiful report from a conflict the world has chosen to ignore".(Source) Imagine an ongoing struggle that claimed more than 70,000 lives, witnessed thousands of arrests, rapes and 'systematic torture' in the past two decades and is still vague to the outside world? Imagine a zone being more militarized than Iraq and still not being talked about. That is the reality of Kashmir. Last year, Basharat Peer was invited by an international news channel to talk about the protests in Kashmir, during which 117 people, mostly youth and teenagers, were killed. Before commenting on the situation, he was asked to give the (geographical) map of Kashmir for the 'viewers'. Kashmir maybe a picturesque, beautiful piece of land, but most of the people outside do not have enough understanding of the cause of the insurgency that broke out against the Indian rule in 1989, or the morbid events that followed it. Why is it so? The reason: Kashmir lacks a voice of its own.

The unwritten books of the Kashmir experience in the English language bookstores in Delhi prompted Peer to write the *Curfewed Night*. Starting with borrowing the title for his book from a poem by the Kashmiri poet, Agha Shahid Ali (1948-2001), Peer carried forth the literary movement pioneered by Ali. *Curfewed Night* was crossing the Rubicon. It was the author's urge to give the world a glimpse of the atrocities and humiliation Kashmiris face every day. Released in 2008, *Curfewed Night* created a stir. The book did what many politicians in the last 20 years could not do for Kashmir: It made the world take cognizance of what is happening in Kashmir. Since then, it has encouraged many Kashmiri writers to tell their stories in the form of novels, articles and blogs. "Ali's legacy is assured with the past decade seeing an upsurge in quality Kashmiri writing in English," writes Claire Chambers, a senior lecturer at the Leeds Metropolitan University, while mentioning Peer and Mirza, in her tribute to Agha Shahid Ali on his tenth death anniversary this year. *The Collaborator* has received good reviews. However, the bigger insight from the novel is the 'nameless' protagonist, a testimony in itself that Kashmiri writers are trying to establish a 'voice' through written discourse. They are writing to be heard and giving Kashmiris a voice that has been suppressed for years now. And why shouldn't they? Aminatta Forna, a writer, puts it

aply, “My country had a war. It would be extraordinary not to want to write about that (Aminatta Forna)”.

There is a war in Kashmir. Would it not be extraordinary not wanting to write about that? What happens if we don't tell those stories? What happens to the people who die during the events that are undocumented? Do they become non-entities as if they never existed? And what about the atrocities people faced? Do they stand negated as if nothing ever happened?

In fact, one of Mirza's premises and earlier impulses to write *The Collaborator* was ‘an image of a dying boy on the roadside’, while Mirza was walking to a crackdown (search operation conducted by the army). The image ‘stayed with him’ and pushed him to form his narrative. That is what rest of the young Kashmiri writers are trying to achieve: they are trying to represent people who either do not live to tell their tales or those who do not have the capability and facilities to write them. They are telling the stories of their battered brethren and the survival of their rather ‘endangered’ community.

Sajad Malik, a 23-year-old cartoonist, recently published a graphic novella which has Hangul as a central character, symbolizing the fragility of Kashmiris as a community. He draws the analogy of Kashmiris as endangered species with that of the Tibetan antelope, locally also known as Hangul. Another instance of seeking a voice is that of a 21-year-old Kashmiri rapper, Roushan Illahi aka MC Kash, whose songs have made headlines. His number, *I Protest*, became an anthem of last year's summer protests. The international media used the title ‘Kashmir rapper uses rhymes to protest Indian rule’ to describe his longing to be heard through the hard-hitting lyrics. The title of MC Kash's other number, *Until My Freedom has Come*, was used as a title for a book published by Penguin earlier this year. Sanjay Kak, a Kashmiri documentary filmmaker, edited the book, *Until My Freedom has Come: The New Intifada in Kashmir*, a compilation of writings of summer 2010. It is an anthology of non-fiction essays and articles contributed by journalists and academics. It has been called, “a timely collection of some of the most exciting writing that has recently emerged from within Kashmir, and about it”.(Source) Other than finding creative outlets to express themselves, the generation born in the 1990s also lays emphasis on reading. The younger lot, in their 20s, seeks inspiration and draw parallels from other parts of the world with disputed presents or pasts to comprehend the reality of the Kashmir that they were born into. They want to understand while children, in other parts of the world, grow up watching Teletubbies, why is it that all Kashmiri kids see around them is firing, encounters and bomb blasts? While most of the teenagers decorate their rooms with the posters of Hannah Montana, what makes their Kashmiri counterparts save Edward Said's stone pelting image as wallpapers on their mobile phones?

The young generation of Kashmir is delving deeper and reading widely to understand what's happening around them. They pull out data and mass tag scanned images of newspaper articles on social media sites, dating back to 1947-8 (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're giving Kashmir its much-needed voice.

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