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Deconstructing the Politics of Ideology and Language Play: A Critical Study of the Ending in Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night*

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Abstract:

Though the tradition of the literature written in Kashmiri language is very old, the emergence of Kashmiri English Writing is quite a new phenomenon. The themes like violence, political discrimination, horrors of the gun-culture, deaths and disappearances, and trauma and torture that were mostly sidelined by earlier generations of writers, took center-stage in contemporary Kashmiri English writings. Unlike the earlier cult of poetry, impregnated with profuse of romantic and imaginative ebullience and sensual and spiritual delight, the Kashmiri English writings mostly highlight the political imbroglio between India and Pakistan over Kashmir and its impact on everyday life of a common man. This thematic shift, resulting with the emergence of prominent writers like Agha Shahid Ali, Siddhartha Gigoo, Sudha Koul, Basharat Peer and Mirza Waheed, is crucial to Kashmiri Literature. A sense of disconsolation, anger and helplessness pervades the modern Kashmiri English literature. Both Siddhartha Gigoo and Mirza Waheed express their anger and criticism of the Kashmir Conflict through the depiction of a common man caught up in the midst of the chaos and confusion. The present paper will study Basharat Peer's celebrated memoir *Curfewed Night*. The paper will chiefly explore the concluding pages of the text which marvelously express the author's 'burning anger' after narrating a series of doleful events. It is not that the author menacingly comes down on the menaces of terrorism, but it is the poignantly thought-provoking description of the Line of Control (LoC), the judicious portrayal of the militant, the Indian soldier and the dislocated Kashmir-born Pakistani lawyer that draws the reader's attention to the author's intense disappointment with the unceasing tactics of war and weaponry in Kashmir. The high point of this paper will be how Peer indirectly deconstructs the unwittingly accepted linguistic constructions and their semantic transport?

Keywords: Curfewed Night, Linguistic Construction, Ideology, Militant, Conflict.

With the emergence of militant insurgency in 1989, the people of Kashmir have lived under a perpetual psychological insecurity and instability. The unceasing contest of insurgency and anti-insurgency continues to play havoc with the lives of the people of Kashmir. According to an official Indian report, 40,000 people, including the guerilla fighters and Indian security personal, died in the violence in Kashmir from 1989 to 2002. Countering the report, Hurriyat Conference asserts that the number of deaths during the same period was 80,000 (Bose 4). The plight of the people continues and their voice, unfortunately, continues to slip under the contesting versions of history, wrapped in political obscurity. The forced displacement of the Pandits of Kashmir, who had lived in close consociation and harmony with the majority (Muslims), is one of the most horrid aspects of the uprising. The nature of the conflict between India and Pakistan over

Kashmir has not changed much since the outbreak of militant uprising in 1989. It has remained ‘static’ and ‘frozen’ over these years. “The adversarial rhetoric used by both countries, for their domestic audiences as well as in international settings, has stayed remarkably similar in tone and content over this span of time” (42-43). The books of history mostly talk about leaders and fundamentalists, their roots, emergence and their countering political ideologies, whereas, the sensitivity and intensity of the conflict and its impact on the people of Kashmir barely gets any mention. It is with the emergence of a fledgling generation of Kashmiri Muslim and Pandit writers that the Kashmir conflict and its impact on people can be read with some detail. Without tampering much with the controversial politics of nineties, the writers like Agha shahid, Siddhartha Gigoo, Basharat Peer, Sudha Koul, Mirza Waheed, and many others have made the significant contributions in telling the profound human stories of the valley of Kashmir to the world. Gigoo’s novel *The Garden of Solitude* (first Kashmiri English novel) not only focuses on the post-migration plight of Pandits, but also deals with unkind turn of the wheel of history in late eighties and the suffering of the majority (Muslims). Mirza Waheed’s brilliant debut novel *The Collaborator* deals with the gory and mysterious deaths and agony, brought about by the armed violence, in the secluded mountainous region of the northern Kashmir. Similarly, Basharat Peer’s *Curfewed Night* (a memoir) “does a great deal to bring the Kashmir Conflict out of the realm of political rhetoric between India and Pakistan and into the lives of Kashmiris”(Kamila Shamsie). Peer’s *Curfewed Night* (now onwards the book will be the subject of my critical study) is not a fictional representation of the different faces of terrorism in Kashmir, but an authentic account of the gory realities of war based on real life experiences. Peer’s heart is heavily burdened by his ghastful encounters with various maimed and muddled victims of the war. Feeling overburdened by these realities, Peer criticizes the apathetic politics of war and different linguistic constructions, loaded with the poison of ideological antagonism at the end of the memoir.

In the long way to come, in the English literary history of Jammu and Kashmir, Basharat Peer’s *Curfewed Night* will indisputably play a significant part. Its mention in the beginning pages of the still systematically unwritten history would be inescapable. *Curfewed Night* covers the most crucial phase of the political history of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. With learned and vivid reportage Peer develops a historically powerful narrative that rips open the heart of the conflict. His love for his land and his strong desire to give tongue to the wounds of his fellow beings and to record their harrowing sufferings, takes him to the remotest parts of his land where armed conflict had already unleashed a reign of terror. Peer brings out the dominant existing narrative of political imbroglios into the actual lived condition of the people in a war-torn zone. Peer also assesses the societal mental health of a conflict zone meticulously by visiting the victims. In clear and understandable language Peer elaborates how suffering, humiliation and other haunting memories of the conflict indelibly tell upon the psychological growth of the victim? We see this in the narrator’s father and the younger brother of his grandfather, both of whom, after closely escaping the deadly militant attacks, develop a serious psychological imbalance. Peer’s father, who nearly dies in a mine blast, develops a strange mental state wherein every loud sound petrifies him. And his grandfather’s younger brother develops a complete mental disorder after escaping a militant shooting. Besides, we also see how the mental health of the younger generation evolves in a conflict-ridden region? In the book, we see the children playing in the streets with wooden-guns slung around their bodies and mimicking the vast number of soldiers patrolling everywhere. We also see some of the narrator’s friends imitating the trendy style of the militants returning from training camps in Pakistan. This

strange psychological preoccupation with the cult of gun and terrorism speaks volumes of the psychological upbringing of the youth of Kashmir. Reading *Curfewed Night* reminds one of a very seminal text in the Post-colonial theory, *The Wretched of the Earth*. In this book Franz Fanon also attempts a psychiatric and psychologic analysis of the dehumanizing effects of colonization upon the colonized.

After catching the reader through a series of doleful episodes, Peer closes his book on a very significant note. What makes the ending convincing is the way the author philosophically denounces the socially and politically motivated differences which disintegrate the basic essences or constituents of the humanity. These differences are expressed through some terms or labels (militant, Indian soldier, Line of Control (LoC) etc.) and the same are purposely associated to certain radically contradicting patterns of behavior. From that episode when the angry army officer bursts into the journalist Amir's office to the moist eyes of Bukhari, who finds the son of his sister on the other side of the LoC after fifty eight long years of separation, everything is evocatively harmonizing. Peer, who had himself lived through these hard times, vividly captures the actual lived condition in a conflict zone. He, ironically, in the concluding passage before the epilogue, deconstructs the nomenclatures like militants, soldiers, paramilitaries and all other unrealistic but murderous ideological associations connected to these terms. His poignant explanation of the symbolical LoC which covers '576 kilometers of militarized mountains' at the end, is not only a well-timed stroke to conclude a series of heart sickening episodes, but also a beautiful passage wherein coalesce the thousands of sobs of the readers of this book, especially those from the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Peer wants the reader to know how the enigmatic LoC, as a symbol of fear and division, merely muddles the collective conscious as well as unconscious of a people.

Let's focus on some of the crucial episodes in the closing pages of the book in which the author seems to criticize the follies of joining certain camps, upholding their antipathetic ideologies and finally loosing that fundamental aspect of humanness. The episode of Yusuf, whom the author knows very well, is simply very telling. Yusuf is hardly seen as 'himself'. He is destroyed by the conflicting choices thrust upon him by implacable external forces. Ironically it is these forces that determine his identity, his nature and his role. As a police constable, he is seen as a 'friend' and 'a common government employee, as a ticket-seller in a local theatre, he is seen as a normal human being, as a Pakistani trained militant, he is seen as an 'enemy', and finally as a politician, he is seen as a 'pro-Indian'. Yusuf himself is nowhere to be found. I see his whole life as the fragments of a big confusion. By giving up his 'own self' and living by certain unnatural and extremist ideological designs only earns Yusuf a volley of bullets in the end. The terms 'constable', 'politician' and 'militant' are not only terrible linguistic constructions but also carry with them radical ideological associations. Through the ending of the book Peer wants to say that a human being exists beyond the confines of language and ideology and that human good is not subject to lexical forms or the inauthentic and inexact meanings captured in these forms. Peer's understanding of language comes very close to Norman Melchert's quote of a great modern philosopher Richard Rorty:

Language is not a medium of representation. Rather, it is an exchange of marks and noises, carried out in order to achieve specific purposes. It cannot fail to represent accurately, for it never represents at all. (Melchert 716)

Yusuf's episode is followed by an equally meaningful story of a 19 year old Pakistani militant, once active in the Shopian district of Kashmir. The militant, after watching a romantically charged Salman Khan Starrer Bollywood movie *Tere Naam*, was seen following a girl outside a girl's college frequently. The militant had also cut his beard and hair in the much hyped '*Tere Naam* style'. He desired to marry and take that girl to Pakistan and live a peaceful life, but the tag militant won't make things so easy for a militant. Unlike Yusuf, the militant realizes and almost ventures back into his real life but, it is a fact, the terms 'peace' and 'militant' won't ever exist together. Peer here seems to advocate the idea that militancy or violence or any extremist ideology is not a necessity or a natural human urge to spread peace or happiness. Peer writes that as a militant, a person can win the wars but he cannot 'look at a half moon and plonk his feet on a chair on the balcony of his house.' He writes:

Being a militant wasn't only about getting arms training and fighting, it was also about being excluded from the joys of life. Being a militant was also about the near certainty of arrest, torture, death, and killing. (Peer 212)

Another significant event involves a group of journalists and an Indian army officer. In the beginning when the officer bursts into the office, where some journalists, including the author are sitting, the officer is seen as rude and commanding. He is conscious of his military status which blinds him to the fact that he is no way better than the people he is talking to. But as they talk more and more they get friendly. The army officer at once slips back into his colorful past as the narrator reminds him of his university days. Slowly the actual man beneath the unreal uniform begins to speak. His words at the end of the conversation are very significant, "I was a different man before I joined the force and came to Kashmir" (232). By nature the army officer, the militant and Yusuf are all same. It is the illogical association of different tags and terms to these persons that disintegrates them:

I hoped that some day they could cease being part of processes that reduced individuals to suspects or military targets, shorn of all human complexity; processes that left them with bare nomenclatures like militants, soldiers, and paramilitaries. (233)

The last two pages of the book (epilogue) marvelously explain the symbolical significance of the Line of Control (LoC). Basharat Peer's tone is both satirical and sympathetic. He satirizes LoC when he sees it first time:

And then, after all these years I saw it: the Line of Control. A loopy, razor wire fence snacked through wild bushes and greens of rather barren mountains, past a few mud houses. This razor wire, this mountain was the Line of Control...This (bridge over a narrow stream at Kaman Post) two third Indian and one third Pakistani bridge was the line of control; the shallow stream passing under it was the line of control.(237)

The tone of the author shifts from satirical to sympathetic as he begins to talk about the destruction, both physical and psychological brought about by this seemingly senseless demarcation. Sharief Hussein Bukhari (a professor of law in Pakistan, born in Kashmir) crosses this bridge after fifty eight long years. His eyes turn moist when he sees the son of his sister, whom he had left when she was a child. When the author talks to him about his separation, he replies;

I would dream of my school, of the apricot and apple trees in our courtyard. I would dream of the house I was born in and of the journey back home. In my dreams I would be arrested at the LoC and turned back. (238)

The author deconstructs the logic of creating LoC as it had only worsened the human suffering rather than doing any good. The poignantly powerful description of LoC at the end is not only a perfect finishing touch but also the best passage in the whole of the book. The author shows how certain insignificant human creations badly tell upon the whole human affairs. Peer marvelously explains the LoC and its meaning to the people of Kashmir in one of the most poignantly telling passages of the book thus:

The line of control did not run through 576 kilometers of militarized mountains. It ran through our souls, our hearts, and our minds. It ran through everything a Kashmiri, an Indian, and a Pakistani said, wrote and did. It ran through the fingers of editors writing newspaper and magazine editorials, it ran through the eyes of reporters, it ran through the reels of Bollywood coming to life in dark theaters, it ran through conversations in coffee shops and TV screens showing cricket matches, it ran through families and dinner talk, it ran through the whispers of lovers. And it ran through our grief, our anger, our tears, and our silences.(238)

Conclusion

The ending of the *Curfewed Night* is highly symbolical and meaningful. The author wants the soldier, the militant and the politician to transcend beyond the confines of linguistic constraints and atrocious ideological contentions into a world where peace, progress and prosperity are collective. According to the author the signs like LoC, militant, soldier and their significations are merely fallacious and that the human good/perfection exists beyond the system of signification.

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