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Rejection of the Nation in Malik Sajad's Munnu: Analyzing the Idea of Nation and Nationalism through the Graphic Narrative

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Abstract:

This paper on the graphic narrative *Munnu* (2015) attempts to uphold how, through the amalgamation of the visual and verbal, through the juxtaposition of the personal and political sphere, Malik Sajad portrays the horror perpetuated by the Indian state in Kashmir and canvases the angst of inhabiting, growing and “remaining” in a conflict zone. The text questions the idea of a nation that is not a “willensnation” (Renan) and resists the dehumanization of a community by exploring the themes of regular crackdowns and curfews, political protests, violence of excessive militarization and army operations, frequent disappearance of common people, unidentified graves and mass graves and abysmal sense of alienation experienced by the “conflict generation” (Sajad) in Kashmir. By analyzing the texts and images, this paper showcases how the narrative of nation/ nationalism is rejected and reconstructed, and how the text exists as a testimony to the “terrors of the nation” (Nayar).

Keywords: Nation, nationalism, graphic novel, imagined communities, Kashmir, secessionism.

I. Introduction

“... Almost every year, the United Nations admits new members. And many ‘old nations’, once thought fully consolidated, find themselves challenged by sub-nationalisms within their borders – nationalisms which naturally dream of shedding this sub-ness one happy day.”

-Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (1983)

In this age of ever-altering and ever-transmuting discourses on nation and nationalism across the world, the idea of a nation has been undergoing rapid construction, deconstruction and reconstruction. Though the phenomenon of nationalism has existed and continues to exist as the most “universally legitimate value in the political life of our time” (Anderson 1991: 3), Hugh Seton-Watson rightly remarks that “no ‘scientific definition’ of the nation can be devised” (5) due to its vast and furcated structure. India itself, being a space enwrapping diverse cultures, communities, religions, etc, have time and again, showcased the overwhelmingly varied perceptions of nation, nationality and nationalism within its very borders. This paper upholds

how the nation India, which could be called an “imagined political community” (Anderson 6), fails to cast its shroud of nationalism on the Kashmiri separatists, thereby triggering the latter to imagine their own political space and voice their sub-nationalism or in the eyes of the state, secessionism. Through an analytical study of Malik Sajad's *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* (2015), the paper also attempts to portray how the narratives around the Indian nation, nationalism and national sentiments are resisted and rejected by the Kashmiri separatists, and how the graphic novel exists as a testimony to the “terrors of the nation” (Nayar 2016) and “takes revenge” (Sajad) by countering the predominant notions of nation in India.

Sajad, a renowned and established cartoonist, chooses the form of a graphic narrative to capture the horrors perpetuated by the nation, following the impressions of Guy Delisle's *Burma Chronicles* (2009), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000) and Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (1996) among many others. To elaborate, the Indian graphic novel, from its very conception, has adopted the historical, socio-political and contemporary issues that shrouds this geo-political space as a pivotal theme and have always, to quote Paul Gravett, showcased an inclination to “surface issues under-reported in conventional news media”. Art Spiegelman's influence on him is also evident from his portrayal of the Kashmiris as deer - more precisely, the Hangul deer that is indigenous to Kashmir and has been listed as an endangered species. This symbolic dehumanization, much like the portrayal of the Jews as rats in *Maus* (1980), is a deliberate move to uphold the frightful and harrowing conditions of the Kashmiris dwelling in the conflict zone, amidst excessive militarization and intervention of the nation. Secondly, it serves to visually other the “Indians” and foreigners (portrayed as humans) from the Kashmiris (portrayed as the hungul deers), thereby creating a fracture in the idea of Kashmir being a state in India and Kashmiris being Indians. Sajad, a tactful cartoonist, through the amalgamation of images and words, questions the idea of a nation that is not a “willensnation” (Renan) or a nation by volition and resists the dehumanization of the Kashmiris by exploring the themes of regular crackdowns and curfews, political protests, violence of excessive militarization and army operations, frequent disappearances of common people, unidentified graves and mass graves and abysmal sense of alienation experienced by the “conflict generation” (Sajad) in Kashmir.

The paper has been primarily divided into three sections: the first section will uphold how the nation (political sphere) thwarts the individual (personal sphere), so much so that riddance from the system seems the only way out. The second section will uphold the direct and indirect ways in which the violence perpetuated by the nation has been resisted by the Kashmiris as portrayed in this text. Finally, the third section will uphold how the text rejects the nation at multiple levels, firmly seeking “Azadi” or freedom from the Indian subcontinent to form their own “imagined” nation, Kashmir.

II. Nation as a Harrowing Apparatus

The text upholds the horrifying impact of the nation and its intervention in the daily lives of the Kashmiris, so much so that the home becomes akin to a harrowing apparatus.

Significantly, the graphic narrative opens with the chapter titled “Family Photo” by displaying a photo frame capturing the protagonist and his siblings, with fingers from the exterior trespassing the frame and pinning down their identities (p. 2). The fingers tracing down the identities of Munnu and his siblings symbolize the state that ceaselessly indulges in identifying its citizens, tracking their every move and restricting their basic human rights.



Munnu: Figure 1

This is a deliberate attempt to uphold the condition of the people of Kashmir – they are individuals that are under constant surveillance, ceaselessly monitored by the nation and exert their existence more as photographs or identity holders rather than through their self. In fact, questions of identity play a significant role in the text. Without markers of identity of them being an “Indian”, the Kashmiris are condemned vehemently by the Indian regime, sometimes even leading to their torture and execution.

Again, the “Family Photo” is placed against the backdrop of the geographical landscape of Kashmir: “Eidgah”, “Balgarden”, “City Centre Lal Chowk”, “Srinagar”, river “Jhelum” and Munnu’s area of residence, “Batamaloo” are captured with well-defined captions. What is intriguing is without mentioning a single word, Sajad exploits the visual dimension of the graphic narrative by showcasing the numerous army towers scattered across the land, thereby introducing the readers to a space of ceaseless surveillance by the state regime.

Sajad upholds how the simplest aspirations get thwarted in the lives of the Kashmiris due to the political operations of the nation. Munnu, the child protagonist along with his siblings, are asked to “celebrate Eid modestly” (p. 3) by their parents as celebrating amidst the families of martyrs who have died at the hands of the Indian army is abominable. Kashmir is a land of mass graves, disappearing people and young martyrs who have died resisting India – celebration amidst this melancholy, deadness and perpetual suffering is diabolic.

Again, when Munnu eagerly says that he wants to become an artist (p. 10), his father Gulya warns him about the perils of becoming an artist in a zone of contention: “... But you live in Kashmir, and tourists don't come here now. Who will buy your art? The army?” (p. 10). Gulya himself being an artist has suffered economically and knows that art does not thrive in a land of violence: “... Who wants furniture in hell?” (p. 30). In order to survive and support his family, he had to take up engraving copper cups, bowls and jugs that “sell like mutton during wedding season” (p. 31), leaving behind the carved wooden blocks, stencils and chisels in the attic. Another similar aspect of the suffering of the Kashmiris has been projected through Munnu's difficulty in taking his mother to the hospital during the curfew days (p. 319). The page showcases the brutality inflicted by the army who addresses Munnu as a “Bloody Moron” and thrashes him and his family for being out in spite of the curfew. The cruelty of the speech of the army soldier is emphasized through the serrated speech bubble. Even ambulances carrying critical patients are mercilessly dealt with, thereby canvassing a nation that denies even the simplest form of humanity to its citizens. In the quest of defining nation, Renan remarks:

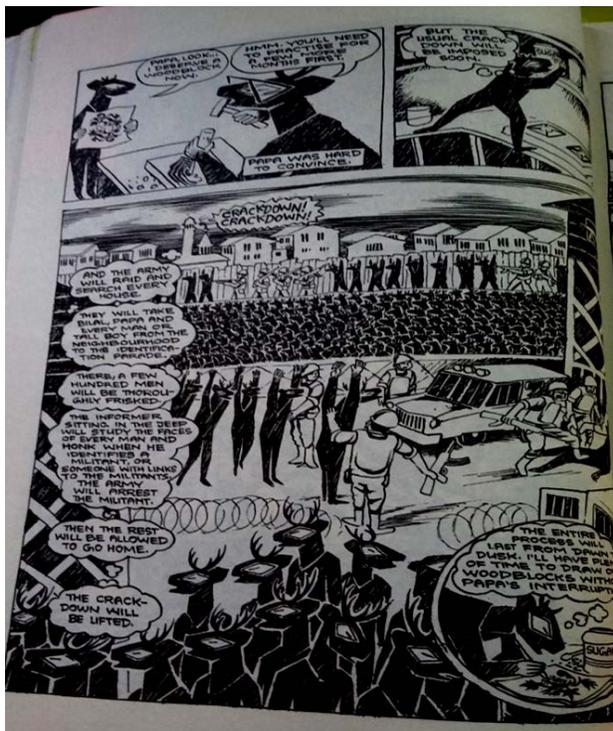
A great aggregation of men, with a healthy spirit and warmth of heart, creates a moral conscience which is called a nation. When this moral conscience proves its strength by sacrifices that demand abdication of the individual for the benefit of the community, it is legitimate, and it has a right to exist (1994: 18).

However, in the case of India's occupation of Kashmir, violation of basic human rights and suppression of the community in the name of securing the sovereignty of the state is a daily phenomenon, and hence, the nation's right to “exist” is questioned in this text.

Much like the child protagonist Marji in *Persepolis*, the text presents a childhood crushed under the weight of preserving the integrity of the nation. The perpetual strife between the army and the Kashmiri separatists results in frequent shutdown of life in Kashmir. This also includes schools which are closed down very often and children are sent to “darasgah” (16) instead. Munnu, much like the other children of Kashmir, lives a life marked by constant fissures and insecurities, amidst graves, curfews, crackdowns and dead bodies that traumatize the psyche. The numerous deaths of martyrs and neighbors that shroud his existence haunt him in his sleep. “The impact of the traumatic event”, as Cathy Caruth points out, “lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time” (1995: 9). Hence, in Munnu's nightmares, Mustafa's grave visits him; he is also haunted by the fear of losing his family, especially Bilal, his favorite brother. Peer Sahib's

“tabarukh” or the “blessed sugar” (p. 53) helps him sleep tight though, “... until the crackdown was imposed again” (p. 54). “Children needs company even if they belong to a prophet” (p. 60) but in a place of constant strife, childhood is snatched away too early and carving AK-47 on erasers seems to be the only escape from the nauseating hell.

Sajad is ruthlessly accurate in portraying the horrors perpetuated by the Indian state through the military in Kashmir. Since the Indian military forces in Jammu and Kashmir function under emergency powers granted to them by the central government, they are allowed to curtail civil liberties. The army is pitiless in handling the local citizens, always scrutinizing their every move. Ernest Gellner, critiquing the idea of nationalism in his *Thought and Change* (1964), remarks that “... nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self consciousness: it invents nation where they do not exist” (p. 169). It is to invent and enforce the integrity of this nation that the centre imposes its authority through the military on the marginalized areas demanding autonomy, or as in this case, “Azadi” or freedom. In page 12 (Figure 2), through Munnu’s perception of a crackdown, the readers are introduced to this dark episode where the army raids every house, takes the men and tall boys of the neighborhood to the “identification parade” (p. 12), frisks them while the informer observe the faces of every man and honk when he spots a militant, allowing the rest to go home.



Munnu: Figure 2

Regular crackdowns are an integral construction through which the nation interferes in the private domains and exerts their authority on the civilians. Sajad's acute sketch of the crackdown canvases the brutal treatment that the Kashmiris undergo during such circumstances: the soldiers' bayonets pointed at them closely as the civilians walk in a line with raised arms, the three soldiers kicking a Kashmiri for no mentioned reason, the barbed wire fencing, and the awed and panic-stricken expression on the eyes and faces of the Kashmiris give away their helplessness in such a situation. Sometimes, to create an atmosphere of panic, the army would drag the dead bodies of militants (martyrs for the Kashmiri separatists) through the streets of Batamaloo, "until there was no skin left on their faces" (p. 38). Sajad portrays another such occasion when the militants who were hiding in the ceiling were tracked down and killed mercilessly: "The army then peppered the ceiling with bullets and it rained blood" (p. 80).

The text also hints at the atrocities committed by the army to the women of Kashmir: Ajaz was killed for raising an outcry when his sister who had come to visit him in prison, was sexually assaulted on the pretext of "frisking" by the "cowardly and arrogant oppressors" (p. 66). The graphic content in the third panel of the page portrays the army molesting the girl while she yells for help, crying "BROTHER!" while the Kashmiris locked behind the bars helplessly yet aggressively yells "INDIAN DOGS, GO BACK!" The Kashmiri police too, are equally savage in handling the local people. The text portrays how, to earn themselves a "medal and a cash reward of 120,000 Indian rupees" (p. 233), the police killed Rehman, an innocent individual and referred to him as "Hafiz, a foreign terrorist, in their press conferences". These numerous instances of terror, torture uphold the barbaric construction through which the nation exerts its power on the territory. In such a case, the very idea of India as a nation is questioned, as in the words of Renan:

A nation never has any real interest in annexing or holding on to a country against its will. The wish of nations is, all in all, the sore legitimate criterion, the one to which one must always return (20).

In fact, the text is enwrapped in a shroud of deadness, with sketches of graves, unidentified graves and mass graves recurrently featuring in the pages of this narrative (p. 5, 27, 36, 64, 243, etc). As strategically portrayed in the text, the collective agony of the people of Kashmir in their collective mourning for the martyrs blatantly upholds their dismissal of the Indian nation as a whole. For example, in page 35 and 65, Sajad upholds how the martyrs who were anti-nationalist or even terrorist in the eyes of the nation, were being mourned by hundreds of Kashmiris.

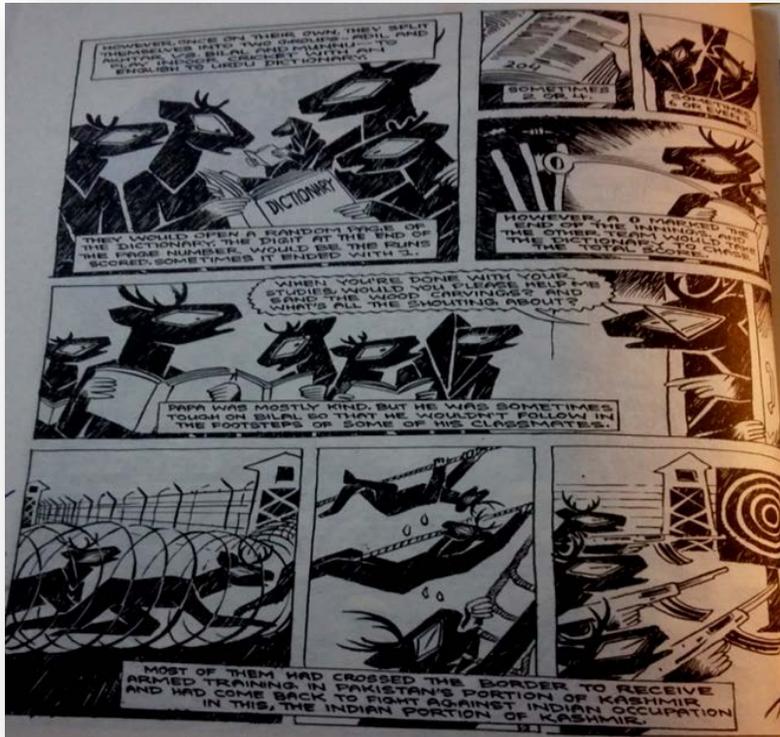


Munnu: Figure 3

This particular sketch (Figure 3) upholds the collective participation of the Kashmiri people in mourning the death of a martyr who of course, is a militant in the eyes of the Indian nationalists. The page frames an expanse filled with Kashmiris till the horizon, carrying the corpses towards the “sacred mound”. Sajad showcases that what is criminalized as dissent by the Indian state is in fact, nationalism for the Kashmiri separatists. Their wide eyes and the aghast expressions portrayed on the faces of the Kashmiris uphold their devastated state of existence, as though they were witnessing a “horror movie” (p. 35). Mustafa’s killing just accentuates the fact that dissent is criminalized in India, and there lies the shallowness of the Indian nationalism. The nation has defeated them, and there lies the nation’s defeat.

III. Resisting the Nation: Imagining Nation

Sajad’s narrative provides a detailed account of the ways in which Kashmiri people resist the occupation of the Indian state, both subtly and blatantly. In fact, dismissal of the nation occurs in the very sub-title of the book, that is, Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir. Hence, Munnu is not a boy from India. Kashmir is the “imagined community” that he belongs to and “Indian” is the identity that he vehemently wants to shed. Towards the beginning, the text upholds how most of the Kashmiri youths have “crossed the border to receive armed training in Pakistan’s portion of Kashmir and had come back to fight against the Indian occupation in this, the Indian portion of Kashmir” (p. 4).



Munnû: Figure 4

The graphic in the last three panels paint how youths cross the borders through the barbed wires, sweat and strife and risk their lives willingly to receive military training, in order to eliminate the Indian army from their land.

The angst within the Kashmiris and the hatred for India vents out at the slightest prompt: the text upholds how a protest for releasing the principal of the school gradually turns into a protest against the nation. “We want freedom” (p. 8) in spiky, serrated speech bubble denotes the emotional turbulence of the people of Kashmir. In fact, even the children in Kashmir resist the nation in their own subtle ways. When the students find the idol of the Hindu God Shiva in their new school (which actually happened to be an abandoned house of a Kashmiri Pandit) in Balgarden, Riyaz can only address it as “the gods of the Indian and the fucking Indian army” (p. 92) and then, disdainfully, spit on it. So much is their collective hatred for the “cowardly Indian bastards” (p. 127) that they make a petrol bomb, hoping to blow up the school. In this text, the women of Kashmir might not participate in this resistance directly; however, like Haseena, all mothers pray that “the army lose their way” (p. 139).

The most significant way in which this narrative rejects the nation and its nationalism is through the political cartoons of Munnû. Mark LeVine writes: “Art is especially important where civil society has little space for protest or to otherwise challenge the power of repressive

regimes” (2015: 1277). Art as a form of resistance is not only Sajad’s mode of having his voice heard across the world; it is also Munnu’s weapon against the barbarity of the Indian occupation in Kashmir. As pointed out by Anderson, it is through print capitalism that nations emerged and art has also been able to successfully refute the wrongs of an oppressive regime. It is through this form of print, that is, political caricatures (and the author, through his graphic narrative) that Munnu connects with the people of the Kashmir territory and imagines their participation along with him in his resistance to the Indian regime. Joan Connors remarks that “[political cartoons/ caricatures] focus on potentially provocative political issues, but tie them to imagery and references from entertainment that may unexpectedly draw readers to politics” (2007: 261). Munnu’s representation of the Indian army as a ferocious bear holding an AK-47 on the Republic day of India (p. 166, Figure 4), as a soldier in crutches saluting the Indian flag on the Independence Day (p. 182), are few of the many cartoons through which he had opposed the Indian occupation of Kashmir.



Munnu: Figure 5

For instance, the figure above captures the celebration of Independence Day in Kashmir amidst the “sea of uniform” who frisk Munnu for checking if he was carrying a grenade. The fourth panel uphold Munnu’s sketch of a soldier in crutches saluting the national flag of India. Hence, though his art, Munnu satirizes the Indian army and their incompetence which they concealed with a display of anger and brutality.

These minor forms of protest in the text lead us to the final section in which we analyze the nature of the complete and unanimous rejection of the Indian regime by the Kashmiri separatists, and their aspiration to imagine a political community distinctly separate from India.

IV. Rejection of the Nation: Emergence of Nation

The text rejects the discourse perpetuated by the Indian nation at multiple levels through myriad narratives, weaved coherently and consistently with the life of its protagonist, Munny. However, in this dismissal of the Indian nation, lies the very seed of “imagining” another nation, a political community, both “inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson 6), distinctly separate from India, or even the neighboring states of Pakistan and China. Kashmir, in this text, is an “imagined” nation. This is portrayed in the opening page (p. 2: Figure 1) of the text which upholds a bird’s eye view of the topographical landscape and landmarks of Kashmir, within which lies the controversial circular segment. This segment shows Kashmir (represented in white) surrounded by the neighboring nations of Pakistan, China and also India (represented in black) and represented as an “imagined community” that is firstly “limited” (Anderson 7) as it clearly segregates itself from its neighboring lands and secondly, “sovereign” because revolution would crush all absolutism within its structure.

Election in a democracy is the process through which the citizens accept and participate in the affairs of the nation directly. By their refusal to vote for the Indian electorate, they not only dismiss the nation but also reject their identity as Indians. The text upholds how Munny’s family does not vote; they only mark their fingers with hair dye “to avoid the wrath of the army during random raids, crackdowns and frisking” (p. 106).

The text also presents how Kashmiris participate in the “spectacle in Eidgah Square” (p. 111), a show all about climbing the street lamp, waving a flag of red, green and white and shouting “Azadi” (p. 112).



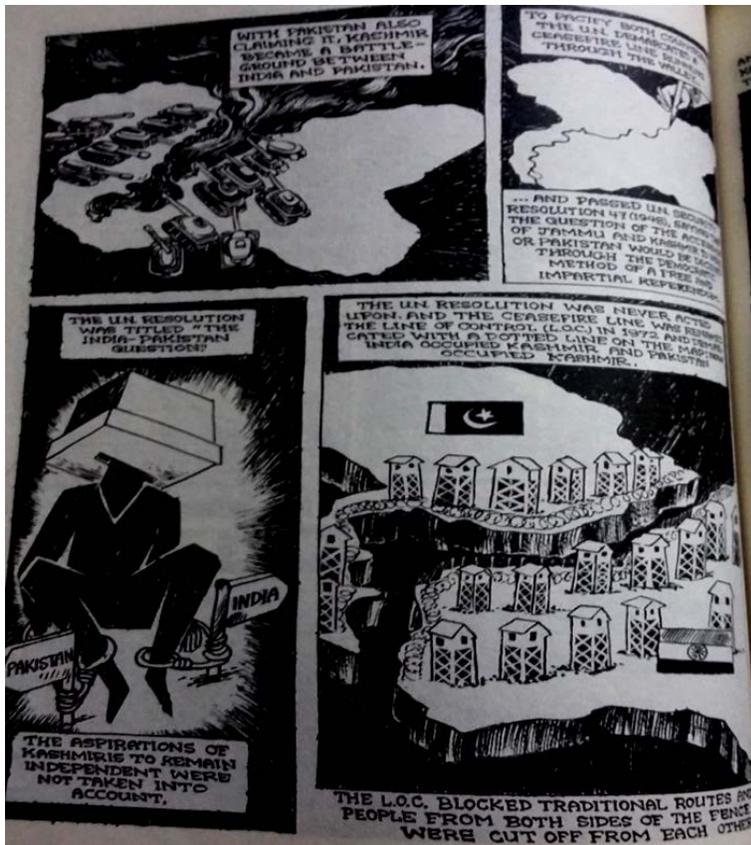
Munnū: Figure 6

As portrays in Figure 6, the flag which is distinctly different from that of either India or Pakistan, is a marker of the Kashmiri identity and there lies the significance of a petty act of climbing a street lamp and shouting slogans seeking freedom.

Sajad leaves no stones unturned in portraying the Kashmiris protesting the Indian occupation: “No India, No Pakistan, We want Freedom!” (p. 288). However, India is ruthless in preserving its territorial integrity and hence, “indiscriminate shootings, killings, curfews with shoot at sight, and a media gag once more protected the “integrity of the nation” (p. 289).

Conclusion

The graphic narrative Munnū, through its visual-verbal interaction, upholds the dismantling of the Indian nationalism in Kashmir to construct another new nation by imagining Kashmir as a nation in its own, a territory integral to the Kashmiris and a space of security and progress. Quite ironically, both India and Pakistan continue to treat Kashmir as a bilateral issue, thereby being heavily militarized (in fact, the most heavily militarized zone in the world) and disrupting life for the people of Kashmir.



Munnu: Figure 7

As seen in Figure 7 (p. 208), Kashmir is a bone of contention between India and Pakistan, and Sajad tactfully sketches a Kashmiri (metaphor for Kashmir) with one foot tied to Pakistan and the other to India and his head covered by a ballot box, thereby evoking the “U.N. Security Resolution 47” (1948) which proclaimed that the question of the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India or Pakistan would be decided through a free and impartial referendum (a resolution that remains unexecuted to this day).

Amidst the portrayal of abysmal agony, suffering and subjugation that is represented through the innumerable sketches of graves, dead bodies, blood, wound, murder, etc in Sajad’s epochal work, one particular picture seems to sum up the condition of the Kashmiris.



Munnu: Figure 8

Even though the second panel in Figure 8 seems apparently insignificant amidst the innumerable poignant sketches of Sajad, this picture seems to sum up the angst of the Kashmiris in the simplest way. Even on a perfect day, the bayonets are always pointed at the citizens, the surveillance is always on and the crackdown can happen any moment. “Kashmir’s a prison, you know” (p. 292), says Munnu, as insecurity and disillusionment is at the very heart of its existence. Hence, through his graphic novel *Munnu*, Sajad portrays how the narratives around the Indian nation, nationalism and national sentiments are resisted and rejected by the Kashmiri citizens, thereby “take[ing] revenge” (Sajad) by countering the predominant notions of nation in India.

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