

A Saga of Plight and Trauma in Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night*

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Abstract

The paper explores the Basharat Peer's memoir *Curfewed Night*. His book presents a saga of plight and trauma of people of Kashmir in 1990s when crossborder firing, brutal violence and exodus was at its helm. The unheard stories, political imbroglio, gun fires, massacres, deaths and disappearances, and brutal violence have been discussed in the paper. Moreover, it highlights the traumatic journey of Basharat Peer from childhood to youth. The paper focuses on the atrocities and humiliation faced by Kashmiris on everyday basis. The book is a 'voice' of thousand of Kashmiris through written discourse. Basharat Peer has been able to tell the humanistic side of a story. He walked on tight rope while recounting the situation of Kashmir. In the memoir, *Curfewed Nights*, Peer brings alive the horrors of people in Kashmir. The reminiscences from childhood to adulthood, the painful experiences of one's own land, the idea of upsurge and interruption of 'Azad Kashmir' over the years have been discussed in detail.

Keywords: Kashmir; conflict zone; trauma; violence; exodus

Introduction

Kashmir is among the world's most conflicted zones. The presence of more than 1.5 million soldiers in Kashmir is a testimony of this fact. The armoured cars and soldiers patrolling roads or manning checkpoints have become as much a part of the landscape as the chinars and willows. The situation became more grim and worse in 1990's when insurgency, cross border firing was at its helm. Nearly fifty thousand Kashmiri youth lost their lives in gruesome disguised 'Azad Kashmir' battle. Although the idea of 'Azad Kashmir' has been propelling from last 50 years but the movement has never taken a concrete shape. In fact any such attempt has been constantly crusaded, eroded and suppressed by India at regular

intervals. There is no resolution to Kashmir issue for past 70 years. The CNN report says that more than 47,000 people have so far been killed in separatist violence that has gripped Kashmir since 1947. Some research surveys show that 70% of Kashmir people have undergone through traumatic events at least four times in their lives. The nature of suffering includes firing, rape, frisking, torture, mistreatment, crackdown, arrests, roundup raids, kidnapping, molestation, forced labour, mass rapes and violation of modesty.

Review of Literature

The author, Basharat Peer has displayed the menaces of terrorism, in a poignant and thought-provoking way. The ground reality of the life of people across LoC, the judicious portrayal of the terrific situation draws attention to the people across the world.. In the light of such bloodshed, violence, death and trauma, the literatures of the related region have an important role to play. Kaul believes the young writers from Kashmir are raising the issues meticulously with responsibility. It's not mere propaganda literature, rather the texts are giving voice to unheard people of Kashmir. As Kaul (2012) states, "the particular circumstances of trauma demand an effective response that registers the emotional dimensions of the original". The nature of conflict of the problem is such it seems there has been and there will be no solution to this issue for coming ages. Sumantra Bose aptly puts that "The adversarial rhetoric used by India and Pakistan, for their domestic audiences as well as in international settings, has stayed remarkably similar in tone and content over this span of time". (Bose 2003:42-23) The narrative discourse produces compelling accounts through which the human suffering could be brought to forefront. Shamsie (2010) rightly asserts that the book *Curfewed Night* accounts for barbarism and the injustice directed towards innocent Kashmiris. Another prominent writer Shahid Ali through his anthology shows interest in the transition and transgression of travel. In his poem, he reflects no man's land vulnerability in the middle of India and Pakistan's animosity. According to Shahid Ali (2013), "what exists between two countries is a provisional, liminal space." The writer of *The Garden of Solitude*, Siddhartha Gigoo (2010) appreciates saying that "book shot to popularity after around 20 years of political turmoil. Twenty years is nothing as far as evolution of art is concerned *Curfewed Night* was important because it was read not only by Kashmiris and people in India, but people in the West also." He further adds, "previously there had been Urdu poetry and short stories –some of it self-published but not novels and memoirs." Several fiction and

nonfiction is emerging from Kashmir nowadays. To name a few are Mirza Waheed, Siddarth Gigoo, Shahnaz Bashir, Feroz Rather, Mridu Rai, Malik Sazzad, Sanjay Kak and Rahul Pandita.

Historical Aspect of Kashmir

Kashmir really was one of the regal states during the British principle and when India got autonomy in 1947. Most of the populace was Muslims and the ruler was a Hindu lord, Hari Singh. The most conspicuous pioneer of Kashmir at that point was Sheik Abdullah. Some clan's man from northwest boondocks Pakistan attacked Kashmir in October 1947 and the battle among India and Pakistan starts and stopped in 1949 after the mediation of United Nation. The UN interceded to end the contention between the two nations and later the UN likewise prescribed a submission to figure out which nation Kashmir has a place among India and Pakistan. Later things become a lot uglier as over the two decades the demonstration of dread released the entire valley, as the apparatus in the races by the Indian government, in 1987 and captured the resistance chiefs that prompted the development of the most popular aggressor bunches like JKLF and HM. With this there was likewise development of some dissenter gatherings and furthermore an expansion in rebellion and nearness of increasingly more Indian armed force, paramilitary and other security powers. India and Pakistan have likewise battled three wars over Kashmir and the ongoing one was the Kargil War in 1999. During the most recent multi decade Kashmiri's saw a massive sufferings like custodial killings, torment, vanishing, ethnic purging of Kashmiri Pandits , searching, checking of Identity cards, counterfeit experiences, insurrection, and numerous different things, similar to the murdering of dissidents or the slaughtering and removal of Pandits.

We can say that the Memoir Curfewed Night is about the sufferings of a typical man. The books depicts the human catastrophe of Kashmir during mid 1990's and afterward after. In the book, the writer has expounded on the individuals whom he met as a columnist. In the book, Basharat Peer has expounded on the individuals who endured because of Army just as Militants. Friend has expounded on the two doubles for example male and female. Basharat Peer has not just expounded on the Muslim populace of the valley that are in greater part, yet additionally discusses the Kashmiri Hindu Pandit populace who had to leave the valley and are currently living, in the vagrant camps of Jammu and other Indian urban areas like Delhi. Therefore we can say the book is about the sufferings of a 'Typical Man' in Kashmir.

The status of Kashmir has been fervently bantered since the segment of British India and it has seen the two core nations India and Pakistan advanced four wars with one another, the ongoing one was the 1999 Kargil war. The situation of a typical man accumulated universal consideration during the 1990's when dissenter development begins and numerous little youngsters started to walk for arms preparing in Pakistan and afterward the Indian government send an ever increasing number of troops to Kashmir to smother the development, with this Kashmir saw the most frightful and damaging period. During the period Kashmiri's saw the demise of in excess of 70,000 individuals and many became vanished. The individuals of this contention zone have endured the most and it influences the soundness of the individuals. The contention in the area prompted numerous maladies and it likewise influences the mind of a 'Typical man'.

Kashmiri basic man saw a colossal enduring during the 90's when individuals started to come on avenues in enormous numbers yelling mottos for opportunity from India. During the time many little fellows crossed the LOC to another side of Kashmir 'the Pakistan controlled Kashmir.' Hundreds were killed and thousands had to leave the valley. The situation, injury and the agony of a typical Kashmiri appears to be ceaseless, in light of the fact that there were killings consistently some by activists and others were executed by officers, and a Common Man of Kashmir was left to grieve and to endure.

Reminiscences of Childhood and Adulthood

The book opens with beautiful description of Peer's hometown where 'Spring was the season of green mountains and meadows, blushing snow and an expanse of yellow mustard flowers in the fields around our village. On radio Kashmir, they played songs in Kashmiri celebrating the flowers in the meadows and the nightingales on willow branches'. (2) Peer had a wonderful childhood memories when he used to offer samovars of kahwa, the sweet brew of saffron, almonds, and cinnamon, to the labourers working in his fields. But the smoke and sunset always added gloominess on the faces of these people. 'And around sunset if they saw streaks of scarlet in the sky, they said, "There has been a murder somewhere. When a man is killed, the sky turns red."'(6)

During Ramadan people fast not only to understand what hunger means but also to learn to be kind to the poor. Many Kashmiri Muslim who have deep belief in Islamic culture

like Peer's grandfather tried to ensure that no music was played in the house; anything that he considered un-Islamic was forbidden. (8) Right from childhood Basharat Peer had a sense of the alienation and resentment most Kashmiri Muslim felt and had against Indian rule. 'We did not relate to the symbols of Indian nationalism- the flag, national anthem, the cricket team. We followed every cricket match India and Pakistan played but we never cheered for the Indian team. If India played Pakistan, we supported Pakistan; if India played the West Indies, we supported the West Indies; if India played England, we support England'. (11) Majority of Kashmir people have always supported Pakistani cricket team as he explains, 'Everytime Javed Miandad, the short, stocky Pakistani batsman, missed a ball, the bus erupted in a chorus of swearing. Every time he hit the ball and scored a run, the passengers let out loud exclamation of joy. (11)

The brutal massacre of Gowkadal bridge tensed the entire valley. 'Those murders will burn in a fire far brighter than this. I cried when I heard it on radio last night.' (15) The situation got worsened and by February, 1990, Kashmir was in the midst of a full-blown rebellion against India. News in the radio became the news of defiance and death. Protests followed killings and killings followed protests. (16) The spirit of pro-independence prevailed in entire Kashmir. They seemed to be in a trance, whirling like dervishes, singing pro-independence songs. I walked behind them, repeating their words in complete wonder. (16) 'War till Victory' was graffitied everywhere in Kashmir; it was painted alongside another slogan: '*Self-determination is Our Birthright!*' (17)

It has become a regular routine that Peer learned new phrases: frisking, crackdown, bunker, search, identity card, arrest and torture. (18) Many young Kashmir people selected to become militants rather than facing Indian oppression. They crossed border and got trained in training camps ran by Pakistani forces across the borders. 'They returned as militants carrying Kalashnikovs, hand grenades, light machine guns, and rocket launchers issued by Pakistan. (18) Moreover, if the Kashmiri militants died fighting the Indian troops they were carried like heroes in funeral processions and their comrades-in-arms saluted them with guns. (212)

By the summer of 1990, thousands of young Kashmiri men crossed the Line of Control, for arms training in the Pakistan-controlled part of Kashmir. When they returned as militants, they were heroes- people wanted to talk to them, touch them, hear their stories, and

invite them for a feast. Many more were trained locally, in apple orchards and meadows-earning them the nickname dragud, or meadow. (24)

While returning to home Peer described 'The poplar lined highway he travelled through lovely saffron fields and visions of high, icy mountains, I was reminded, now had military convoys rumbling along to camps, check posts, and patrols, and militants firing rocket-propelled grenades at them. (29)

Peer's grandfather always wished his grandson to be a bureaucrat and advised him to read a lot. He said, 'Nehru and Gandhi studied law in England and were both very good writers. You have seen their books in our library. Vaclav Havel is a very big writer. The Dalai Lama has read a lot and can teach so many things to people. None of them used guns but they changed history. If you want to do something for Kashmir, I would say you should read. (30)

The young people were given clear instructions regarding crossing Line of Control. 'The guide had instructed them not to light a cigarette or litter the wrappers of the biscuits they carried. Burning cigarette tips would invite fire if noticed by soldier's binocular; biscuit wrappers in the jungle could expose the route they took'. (36) Many of them were trained for six months in using small arms, landmines, rockets, and propelled grenades. (36) Many families whose sons died while crossing the LoC, from where bodies cannot be recovered, held funerals in absentia. People offered funeral prayers with an empty coffin or without a coffin. (37)

During crackdown, the army first cordoned off the village. Every man and boy has to assemble in the hospital lawns by six. It is a crackdown. (50) The women had been ordered to stay at home; mother and aunts would be soon be opening the doors of every room and every cupboard for the soldiers looking for militants, guns or ammunition. (51) Two parallel lines of raised hands, the right hand holding firm the proof of identity, a few inches higher than the empty left hand. There was no distinction between the farmhand and the judge, just one man behind the other. (51)

It was difficult for parents to raise and educate kids in such a dreadful situation. Parents saw getting their children out of Kashmir as the solution. The rich were sending their

children to Europe and North America; the middle and lower middle class chose all sorts of colleges and universities in Indian cities and towns from Bangalore to Balia. (60)

Once while travelling back home, Peer witnessed a blast. 'It was like a strong blast of air lifting the car in the air. The force of the blast pushed the car onto the rising ground on the right. Bricks and stones torn from the road fell on the car roof'. (75)

Post 1990's Kashmir

Srinagar has been described as a fine-looking place with the fear of impending war. Srinagar is now the city of bunkers whereas previously it used to be the city of seven bridges. 'In old pictures, Srinagar is elegant; latticed houses, mosques, and temples admiring each other from the banks of the river Jhelum; people strolling on the seven wooden bridges spanning it, wandering into old bazaars selling spices, lovingly embroidered shawls and carpets, and samovars with intricate engravings, or stepping with a prayer and an expectation into a medieval shrine flaunting verses from the Quran and poems of mystics on windows and facades, and the gentle greens and blues of papier mache interiors. But elegance is granted little space in an age of wars. Those wooden bridges have either collapsed or were murdered. Their skeletons remain, in the shadow of new arcs of concrete'. (108) The place is now full with the armoured cars, funerals, strikes, fear and despair. Moreover, Srinagar newspapers regularly carry obituaries of dead rebels with young, somber faces along with elegies for the smiling, ageing men in expensive suits who guard the gates of privilege. Some print headlines announcing deaths in red. Some run a box on the front page giving the daily, updated statistics of the dead. Srinagar is being in a coffee shop, in an office, outside a college, crossing a bridge and feeling, touching, breathing history, politics, and war, in unmarked signs and landmarks. It is seeing a bridge, a clearing, a nondescript building and knowing that men fell here, that a boy was tortured there. (117) Peer, poignantly says, 'I had been too young to understand how brutal brutality could be'. (117) The cemetery is full of named and unnamed names. Most graves mentioned the generic names of the killers; police, army, security forces, as if they too were to be immortalized like their victims. In a corner, were a few empty graves. (124)

In the view of Peer, Srinagar is a city of bunkers. Of the world's cities, it has the highest military presence. But Srinagar is also a city of absences. It has lost its nights to a

decade and a half of curfews, and de facto curfews. (128) An elderly person says, 'There used to be a temple, a mosque, a pond, and few apricot trees there,' he added, 'now it is all military'. (131) Even the newspaper routinely refers to the missing men as 'disappeared persons', and their waiting wives are the 'half-widows'. Many Kashmiris believe the 'disappeared' men were killed in custody and cremated in mass graves. Wives of many such men have given up hope and tried to move on. Others are obsessively fighting for justice, hoping their loved ones will return. (131) The serene and calm palace has now converted into firing on protesters, arrests, disappearances, custodial killings, kidnappings, assassinations, and torture dominated Kashmir. (136) While moving around Kashmir one feels like playing a video game. The soldier moves his finger; buses stop, people form queues, walk, stop, board and leave. (160) It seems there is no respite for the people of Kashmir. Many writers and journalist find it difficult to find a proper content for their writings in Kashmir as there are no good stories in Kashmir. There are only difficult, ambiguous, and unresolved stories'. The author Peer presents a distressing and sad state of Kashmir in the following lines: 'When an innocent man is killed, the sky turns red.' An innocent man had died in Kashmir almost every day after that winter. (205)

Trauma and Conflict in Kashmir

The book contains several stories of disappearance, torment, anguish, suffering and terrible survival. One of such torture centre is Papa-2. 'Papa-2 was the most infamous torture centre run by the Indian forces in Kashmir. The dreadful and heinous treatment a prisoner has to go through is inexplicable. Every prisoner had a coarse, black blanket for bedding. The blankets were full of lice. 'We called them lice blankets'. Shafi laughed. The prisoners defecated and urinated into polythene bags in that corner; they then threw the bags into a dustbin. Every time a man had to use the 'toilet', two others held a blanket like a curtain to give him some privacy.' (140) At times, 'They took you to the lawn outside the building. You were asked to remove all your clothes, even your underwear. They tied you to a long wooden ladder and placed it near a ditch filled with kerosene oil and red chilli powder. They raised the ladder like a seesaw and pushed your head into the ditch. It could go on for an hour, half an hour, depending on their mood.' (143) 'Or they burnt your arms and legs with cigarette butts and kerosene stoves used for welding. They burn your flesh till you speak.' But the worst was when they inserted the copper wire into my penis and gave electric shocks. They

did it with most boys. It destroyed many lives. Many could not marry after that.’ One of the prisoners named Waseem described ‘He was bleeding when he urinated, his penis had swollen and pain crawled up it like a leech. When he was moved to the detention centre at Srinagar, an infection had set in and he saw puss and blood in his urine’. (147)

Peer’s book is an authentic account of representation of violence, onslaught and relatively frequent oppression. Women have also not been spared and have been a subject to oppression, subjugation, mistreatment, killing, rape and sexual harassment by Army troops. During a crackdown, when Mubeena was asked by the doctor to open the window she undressed her taking it as a command by Army troops. ‘When she hears the doctor’s phrase, ‘khol do’, the daughter drops her pants. She has been repeatedly raped and associates the phrase ‘khol do’ (open up) with the rapist’s command to undress. (150) Newlywed brides have also been subject to rape and murder. The horrifying situation has been put in words by a Kashmiri poet, Farooq Nazaki:

Mothers wash the blood stained apparel of grooms
On stream banks,
Bridal wear burns to ash,
Bridesmaids cry
And the Jhelum flows. (156)

In the memoir *Curfewed Night*, Basharat Peer records the thoughts about mental conundrum and clash prevalent in the poems. It covers, most painfully, the carnage and mayhem faced and experienced by Kashmiri people. The impasse of the situation can be well understood in the poem ‘Innocuous Innocent’ describing a dying man :

A bloodstained label
Struck to his lapel
Reads: In
Does it mean ‘Indian, Informer, Intruder, Insurgent?’
It bewilders to make it read ‘Innocuous Innocent’ (203)

Conclusion

The story of Kashmir has been eloquently and passionately presented by Basharat Peer and equally overwhelmingly accepted especially by the youth of Kashmir. He has attempted to render justice to both sides but his own grudge against the situation is clearly visible. He has juxtaposed emotional trauma with complex crisis of Kashmir. He finishes the story with a ray of hope. He says, ‘ 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, paramilitaries. I hoped that some day they could return to their homes where they could sit on balconies, or argue with their cousins about changing channels. I hoped that someday the war they were fighting and the reasons for its existence would disappear like footsteps on winter snow in my childhood’. (233) With so many sinister events happening in Kashmir, it is not wrong to say that the failure of the subconscious was the border. The line of control did not run through 576 kms of militarized mountains. It ran through our souls, our hearts, and our minds. (238)

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