

Perspectivising Kashmir Through the Lens of Indigenous Literature and Oral History

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Abstract

Kashmir has been a zone of conflict for a number of years now, and this position has been exacerbated significantly in view of the abrogation of Article 370 by the Indian government, further militarization of the region and criminalization of local journalists. The limitation of internet connectivity services which were only recently restored under directions from the Supreme Court of India goes on to show how the region has been forced into a state-engineered silence. Although such heights of state control have been more apparent in recent years, the conflicts in Kashmir have stretched for decades. Indigenous literature has been monumental in capturing life under duress in the most agitating times in the history of Kashmir, and although linguistic barriers have limited such literature to a particular geographical region for a long time, it is more necessary than ever to have a wider translation of indigenous works from conflict zones to reach a better understanding of such suppression. With this view in mind, my research article analyses two short stories by Akhtar Mohiuddin, acclaimed Kashmiri writer who expressed the voices of the people of Kashmir through short stories, novels and poetry. A recipient of the Padma Shri in 1968, Mohiuddin lost his son and son-in-law during the 1990s uprisings. His stories are marked with a streak of resistance as well as a complex but lucid view of the political angles that have led to the impoverishment, servitude and silencing of the Kashmiri individual. Taken from Taffazull Hussain's English translation of five short stories by Akhtar Mohiuddin, 'I Can't Tell' and 'Jella's Teeth' are works that show the extremities of persecution faced by Kashmiri folk that have led to crafting the silence that is at its peak today. A transformation in the social landscape is also marked through these stories.

Keywords: Kashmir, conflict, Akhtar Mohiuddin, Kashmiri.

The term 'conflict', even when used in everyday language, has no particularly positive connotation. When it comes to defining conflict, the discussion itself becomes conflicting, and one that starts to veer towards political science rather than literature.

However, it is of relevance to my presentation today to take up one particular definition given by Singer and Small in 1972 that continues to shape how we perceive conflict today. Singer and Small's Correlates of War Project defined conflict as 'violent disputes in which at least one of the combatant parties is a state, and there are at least 100 battle-deaths'. What is worth noting about this definition is that it covers exclusively soldiers and military staff. Civilian victims play no role in this definition. Subsequent definitions by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute and Upsala Conflict Database continue to restrict conflict to battle - related deaths. Through my paper today I intend to explore the role of the civilian in a region marked for conflict throughout history. By closely examining two short stories written by the Kashmiri writer Akhtar Mohiuddin, 'I Can't Tell' and 'Jalla's Teeth', we will inspect the violence that overshadows civilian life in conflict zones and the necessity of understanding the complex politics that has led to the impoverishment, silencing and suppression of the Kashmiri individual.

The role of literature in the transmission of human experience is an unmatched one. Literature is the sole device that carries within itself the ability to communicate what is otherwise incommunicable; to disseminate ideas and convey stories beyond boundaries and limitations. The setting up of a story involves creating a world of precepts. When it comes to indigenous literature written under times of duress, that world assumes a stark reality. It is important for this reason to go back to that primitive art of storytelling that humans have passed down from generation to generation to understand what has led us to where we are today. Crises spanning social, economic, political and psychological aspects are imbued with meaning when they are viewed from the perspective of the individual who encompasses all of these aspects.

Although a number of writers, both native and non- native have expressed their varying views on the conflict in Kashmir, local writing is especially important given the voice that it provides to unheard history. Though the narratives of suffering differ from writer to writer, most of them find common grounds on the modes of experience. What is also important is the transition that local writers perceive in the social landscape even in life under duress, which is missing from the accounts of non- native perspectives.

Akhtar Mohiuddin was a Kashmiri novelist, short story writer and playwright who is marked for his contributions to the development of ethnic Kashmiri literature. He is reputed for giving voice to the silence of the masses. Although he wrote originally in Urdu and Kashmiri, his works have been translated into English by many writers and scholars in recent times. His stories span from 1947 to recent times, depicting historical recurrences as well as the changes in the humanitarian landscape of Kashmir. A recipient of the Padma Shri in 1968, Mohiuddin lost his son and son-in-law during the 1990s uprisings. His stories are marked with a streak of resistance as well as a complex

but lucid view of the political angles that have led to the impoverishment, servitude and silencing of the Kashmiri individual.

The first story, entitled 'I Can't Tell', is set in 1953 against the backdrop of the arrest of the then- Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, Sheikh Abdullah. Written in the third person omniscient narrative, the story opens with the narrator observing a scene taking place in the business hub of the city, Lal Chowk. Around fifty police officers, whom the narrator takes for the Kashmiri Police by their dress, have gathered in the market. The narrator clarifies that the officers are actually members of the Central Reserve Police Force, but are dressed as Kashmiri officers so that in case any altercation takes place in the presence of media persons, their actions are put down to the responsibility of the local government. Here the writer portrays the conflict between two forces of the state and the malpractices of paramilitary forces in the region to circumvent accountability for strife. As a crowd gathers, the narrator sees a government strongman beating a pedestrian to death. The strongman's victim is a supporter of the ousted Sheikh Abdullah and has been raising slogans in his favour. Following this incident, the police open fire and tear gas shells on the crowd.

The reason for the government strongman's rage is seen in a subsequent visit by the narrator to his house. Since different regional newspapers maintain different accounts of the story, the narrator becomes curious to know the truth of the incident. As he familiarizes himself with Qadir Chaan's life, we learn that Qadir Chaan's family is poor, and that he has a few daughters one of whom is ostensibly of marriageable age. We see here that the social landscape in 1953 projected marriage as a requisite for young girls, instead of social liberation or education. Education existed as an opportunity mainly for upper class men, who could monetize their learning and improve the economic condition of the region. The presence of an unmarried young girl in Qadir Chaan's family signifies financial constraint, since 'marrying off' a daughter till date requires heavy monetary investment from her family. As Qadir Chaan opens up to the narrator, he talks about his many responsibilities and his guilt and remorse at his actions, but seems to feel that he has 'no other option'. Qadir Chaan reveals how he was left impoverished after the arrest of Sheikh Abdullah, and how an increase in the price of essential items further reduced him to a state of abject poverty. The sudden death of his mother in this period of crisis leaves Qadir Chaan unable to buy her a shroud for the funeral. Through these plot points, Mohiuddin explores the effects of conflict on the region at large, experienced at their harshest by the individual unprotected by caste, class or education. Qadir Chaan's personal loss is augmented by this larger overall impact of conflict, spiralling him into helplessness, anger and a bitter demand of accountability from their leaders.

Qadir Chaan talks about his sense of betrayal at Sheikh Abdullah, whom he holds responsible for his financial plight. The writer shows through Qadir Chaan the disappointment of Kashmiri civilians in their arguably elected leaders who have done little to mitigate their suffering. Qadir Chaan's sense of betrayal becomes his hamartia—the reason for his downfall. Following the Sheikh's arrest, a protest is held by his supporters which is attended by Qadir Chaan. Now viewing the calls for liberation from a perspective of disillusionment and frustration, he begins to beat up some of the protestors. One of them is killed in the tumult that follows. Qadir Chaan's guilt of murder drives him into the hold of Sheikh Abdullah's political rival and collaborator with the police, Rasheed, who promises to keep him out of jail in exchange for Qadir Chaan working for the government. His work is simple; all that he has to do is create conflict and make situations favourable for the police to cane charge and tearshell the Kashmiri public. Qadir Chaan's fear of arrest is placated by Rasheed by invoking the idea of the 'mujahid', guerilla fighters in the Middle East who are lauded as religious and nationalistic hero. Since supporters of the liberation movement were called 'mujahid', Rasheed subverts Qadir Chaan's guilt of having killed a civilian by saying that he had simply contributed to the creation of one more 'mujahid' in addition to the many that were created by the police every day. The writer shows through the character of Rasheed how the liberation movement was used to entrap Qadir Chaan, already bearing the culpability of murder, into state control. Qadir Chaan belongs to neither party, but his disillusionment with one catapults him into the arms of the other. In return for his work, Qadir Chaan receives monetary compensation from the government, further highlighting the only source of sustenance for the individual who demands accountability remaining collaboration with conflict-creating forces. Qadir Chaan thus becomes a pawn in the struggle between the state and national forces, and his requirements of the basic necessities of life and dignity whose denial leads him to committing to violence remain invisible in the accounts of the newspapers. Thus the writer justifies the title of the short story 'I Can't Tell', referring to the invisibility of the individual's suffering in the face of political strife between two forces of the state. The story of Qadir Chaan is one that is very important to form a comprehensive view of conflict. Lynn Davies, professor of International Education at the University of Birmingham emphasizes in her work entitled 'Education and Conflict: Complexity and Chaos' the essential condition for a non-violent conflict to escalate into a violent one: "Violence as a response is produced when certain innate needs or demands are deeply frustrated". The dehumanization of a larger civilian part of the Kashmiri public plays heavily into escalating violence instead of working towards a resolution. Qadir Chaan represents those whose lives are caught up in the political turmoil and are pitted against their own people for their survival.

The politics of the region decides who lives and dies, and ordinary people find no place beyond this binary in this particular discourse.

The second story, incisively entitled 'Jella's Teeth' shows a significant transformation in the social landscape of Kashmir. The protagonist of the story is a young lawyer named Jalila Rehman. The daughter of a donkey driver, Jalila represents the socially uplifted Kashmiri young woman who has managed to circumvent her sociopolitical and economic status by pursuing higher studies and fashioning a self-identity which was ill-afforded to Kashmiri women prior to the 60s. Her pride in her education is made evident from the nameplate that hangs outside her house, reading 'Jalila Rasul, B.A. LLB.' On a day when curfew is being observed, Jalila, nicknamed 'Jella' requests an army officer to allow her father to cross the road because he has to meet someone. A while later, she is roused upon hearing cries from the road and rushed out only to see her old father being badly beaten up by an army officer. Surprised and hurt, she tries to intervene and convince the officer to let her father go. Becoming enraged at Jalila's impunity in questioning him, the officer beats her up badly too. As the curfew is lifted the following day, Jella's father, the old donkey driver is seen walking along the road, seemingly searching for something, muttering 'Jella's teeth, they must be lying here somewhere'.

Juxtaposed between a younger generation and an old one, an educated generation and an illiterate one, 'Jella's Teeth' shows how both are held together by a common violence and suppression at the hands of paramilitary forces in Kashmir. Jella's knowledge of the law makes it seem as if she can save herself and her father from undue persecution. However, the authority of the army officer extends beyond the law when his rage leads him to beating up both the father and the daughter. The breaking of Jella's teeth becomes a metaphor for Jella losing the protection that her study of law had apparently guaranteed her, as well as her licence to question things as they were and are in Kashmir. The writer throws us back to the personal connection that binds the two generations, which leads to their coming to each other's aid. 'Jella's Teeth' highlights the violence at the hands of paramilitary forces that even the educated and socially uplifted cannot escape from.

There is a dearth of translated short fiction accounts that cover the conception, formulation and destabilization of the identity of the Kashmiri Muslim woman, as individuality and existential struggles remain attributed to men with such pointed singularity that most fiction writers continue to adhere to the practise of depicting life in duress solely from a male perspective. However, recent ethnographic research and non-fiction accounts, such as Ather Zia's work '*Resisting Disappearance: Military Occupation & Women's Activism in Kashmir*' has paved the way for developing an understanding of how Indian occupation in Kashmir has affected the life of Kashmiri Muslim women, as well as their agency and active resistance against the enforced disappearance of Kashmiri men at the hands of paramilitary forces. The account of the

co-founder of the human rights organization APDP (Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons), a simple homemaker named Parveena, is particularly lucid in its description of how the conventional roles of masculinity and femininity in the region have become destabilized in the wake of continual violence. In the 1990s, Parveena, who had very little formal education, was forced into an unfamiliar life of scouring jails, police stations and army camps in search of her son Javaid, who was taken into custody by the Indian forces and never returned. An English translation of Parveena's account in Kashmiri, as provided by Zia, runs thus: "After the soldiers took Javaid, his voice kept ringing in my ears. I keep hearing his cries for help. When the sun rose that morning, I was not the same woman; I was *badlliyy* [different]. When I left home to search for him, I was not the woman from the day before. *Me gondh kamar . . . be drayas jangas*. I braced myself; my body had entered a battlefield. I became *shisterr* [iron] [...] I stopped wearing a burkha; I bared my face. I was not the same woman; I became *sanglaat* [hard like stone]. I sat in the streets. I chased after army officers and politicians—anyone, everyone who I thought had the power to help me find my son. People called me *metch* [crazy]. Yes, I am *metch*; how can I be sane? Even God will forgive me for this kind of craziness. I am a mother; I gave birth to my son. My heart has been gutted out. The Indian government has wounded my womb; they have scarred me. I do not care if my hair or face is showing [...] I would have stayed inside the four walls of my home with joy, but the pain of losing a child has dragged me out into the streets. Now, see, I am not alone; we are hundreds of women and thousands of families, all united, and we have more people supporting us now. We won't cower down, not anymore. *Aseh che kaem Karin* [We have to continue the work]."

Plunged into a crisis of identity and trauma with the disappearance of her son, Parveena's individuality emerges strongly along the lines of maternity, whose transcendental power enables her to defy the sociocultural norms that demand her to be an '*asal zanan*', a 'good woman' in remaining discreet or unseen, as is customary for the region. The maternal bond between Parveena and her son becomes ammunition for a resistance group to be formed among the parents of disappeared persons in Kashmir, and enables her to take up the role of the performative activist in her pursuit of her son. It creates space for agential action in radical terms, adhering to Saba Mahmood's definition of agency "not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create." Thus women come together, making maternity a basis for collective action, going beyond the binary of the home and the world in their demand of transparency and accountability from the Indian government about the whereabouts of their children. The feminine self, in such a movement, looks to an essentialist bond between mother and child to counter patriarchal power at the hands of both society and government, creating the conditions for and simultaneously going beyond a stable configuration of self-identity as influenced by sociocultural practices and understandings of religion.

Although accounts of gendered sexual violence remain elusive, the alleged Kunan Poshpora mass rape incident of 1991 remains an important issue for the Human Rights Watch, which asserted at the time that the number of women who had been raped by soldiers could be between 23 to 100. With the growing repression of the media and literary practices in Kashmir, covering sexual violence and harassment in the region remains a challenge for researchers, ethnographers, theorists and students in contemporary times.

John Burton in his research on conflict resolution in 1990 formulated his human- needs theory to find an exit from the conflict's destroying dynamic and aim to find a solution agreeable to all parties. The first step according to him was to transform the violent conflict to a non-violent conflict based on differentiating between interests and needs for the parties involved. Burton says that interests are changeable or negotiable, while needs are quasi-natural and cannot be denied without escalating the conflict. What is noteworthy is that security, justice and recognition according to Burton's research are to be mentioned among other's needs and values. They are regarded as universal, are not to be suppressed and are consequently indivisible. Burton's point is to improve communication between the conflict parties and to develop a mutual understanding for either side.

Unfortunately the limitations on the freedom of the press in Kashmir and the arrest of journalists under the UAPA act have acted as further interruptions in communication within and outside Kashmir. India's 142nd position on the World Press Freedom Index is in a large part due to the silencing of the press in Kashmir. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) affirmed the communication blackout in Kashmir ever since it was stripped of its semi-autonomy in 2019 and the disruption of media at the height of a pandemic, that foretold grave distress for an already militarised region. Without reliable news to count on, the hope of dialogue sinks further into a dream. The lives of Kashmiri civilians become as invisible as Qadir Chaan's, and as prone to violence and suppression despite every progress of the 21st century as Jella's.

In view of these stories, the definition of conflict as given by Singer and Small is clearly reductive and misses out on important humanitarian aspects aside from the military perspective. Prominent conflict analysis scholars Alker, Gurr and Rupesinghe have developed their own conflict dynamic trajectory which throws a great deal of light on the development, escalation and de- escalation of conflict on the whole. Their analysis consists of six phases:

1. dispute phase, (opposing claims expressed through existing institutional processes)

2. crisis phase, (opposition use existing institutional processes, but their substitution with violence is openly threatened or expected)
3. limited violence phase, (legitimacy or usefulness of institutional processes is question, and systematic and regular use of force is considered justified)
4. massive violence phase, (regular, systematic, and unrestrained use of force; institutional processes for peaceful settlement are disabled or avoided,)
5. abatement phase, (actions leading to temporary suspension of opposition, use of violence, and expectations), and
6. settlement phase (resolution of opposing claims and establishment or reestablishment of mutually recognized institutional processes).

It is worth noting that while difficult to categorise the conflict in Kashmir among the first four phases, lack of proper dialogue upon this issue leaves us still distant from reaching the fifth phase of conflict development.

The conflict in Kashmir has stretched for decades now. The dehumanization of Kashmiri civilians and dialogue stemming from state propaganda has done a lot to exacerbate the issue. Perhaps going back to the fundamentals of experience that has driven indigenous writers to expressing their truth within the bounds of fiction can help us to understand the plight of Kashmir to a greater extent. The desire for peace that interlaces most forms of literature, dating from the Greeks right down to contemporary literature is not only restricted to fiction. In view of the constant escalation and de-escalation of political tensions between highly competitive states, the hope of dialogue to bring peace to a region that has only known violence for years is an ardent one. A wider translation of indigenous writing, such as Taffazul Hussain's 'Short Stories of Mohiuddin Akhtar' is indispensable towards the creation of such dialogue. Only by developing understanding can we persist in any real possibility of resolution.

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