

# Basharat Peer's Curfewed Night: Literary Reaction To The Post 90'S Violence In Kashmir

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## Abstract

*Kashmir is the most volatile issue between India and Pakistan. The conflict took dangerous dimensions after the eruption of militancy in the early 1990s. The two countries were on the edge of nuclear war as the tensions between India and Pakistan grew. Kashmir was included into the major trouble spots of the world by the international community who advised both Pakistan and India to exercise utmost restraint and start dialogue towards its resolution. Due to the turmoil many youths in the 1990s thought that the solution lays in secession from India, which could be achieved only through an armed struggle turning the whole State upside down in the turbulence. Time and again, Kashmir and its prolonged insurgency make news headlines but since 2008, the literary reaction to the devastating tragedy has gone through a process of revitalisation. The literary response was started by the genius Agha Shahid Ali, who made the literary world perceive Kashmiri's ability to produce startling English Literature. Since 2008, Mirza Waheed, Basharat Peer, Rahul Pandita, Gangaahar and Shahnaz Bashir among others wrote about dehumanised Kashmir, of tempestuous times and the resolute hope in spite of the vacuum that has been created. Every human calamity has a literary reaction and my focus is on the literary reaction to the cataclysmic annihilation of the earthly paradise into horrendous, barricaded, and unacceptable garrison.*

**Key Words-**Violence, 1990's, Militants, Brutality, suffering

The year 1990 is regarded as watershed by many Kashmiris as it marked deaths, arrests and injuries of the Kashmiri people on large scale (Gangaahar 37).<sup>1</sup> A lot of literature of both the Pandits in exile and the Muslims of Kashmir tell their stories with a 'difference' in their outlook respectively based on communal lines. The suspected collaborators of Indian Army or Pro India people were killed by militants. The Pandits as per Basharat were supposed to be enemies within akin to India by militants.

Militants tried to politicise Islam against the Indian government, and used religion for mobilisation. Basharat maintains that "images from Islamic history were thrown around. By 1993-94, Islamist militant groups had gained the upper hand In the separatist militancy, and Kashmiri nationalist groups like pro-independence JKLF had become defunct ...." (Curfewed Night 178)

The Curfewed Night, Basharat Peer's memoir records the beginning of the Kashmir violence and the rise of militancy, through his youth which he himself has understood and seen from his childhood. Basharat as a youth in his book tells the story in which he witnessed violence and rising tensions until sent to Aligarh more for safety than for higher education. He gets his Master's Degree from Aligarh and works as a reporter in Delhi. A son of hardworking bureaucrat, Peer witnesses the rise of militancy and military aggression in the valley. During his youth he is fascinated by the militants and yearned to join JKLF militant outfit, but his father and grandfather thought to send him to some university outside the valley so that he remains distant from the influence of the militant outfits, the unrest, turbulence and danger.

During his teenage, he is eyewitness to the war between the armed forces and the militants, young boys joining militant outfits and going for arms training across the border to POK (Pakistan Occupied Kashmir). He witnesses suspected militants and militants being arrested, maimed or killed and interrogated in the infamous interrogation camp, Papa 2. Basharat works in Delhi and learns after some years, about the unsuccessful attack by militants to kill his family in a mine that blows their car. He rushes home, and then on his visit back to Delhi, he decides to resign from his job and write a memoir about the untold stories of violence and suffering in Kashmir. (Peer 73-74). On his way to home from Delhi as a journalist to write the untold stories on Kashmir, he confronts the signs of communal divide represented by the restaurants and hotels on the Kashmir highway with billboards reading "Sikh Hotel. Hindu Hotel. Muslim Hotel. We ate at the Muslim Hotel" (Peer 61). He encompasses a wide range of savagery in Kashmir, its consequences on the common people and the loss endured by youths of Kashmiri Muslims, and the loss of homeland by the Kashmiri Pandits. He records that it was after the "rigged" assembly election of 1987 which resulted in the onset of conflict and the rise of militancy.

The immediate reaction was the creation of JKLF, a militant group, under the leadership of Mohammad Yasin Malik. As the narrator records, this followed, various sequential events of mass protests and deaths as the protesting mobs clashed with the security forces, "Protests followed killings and killings followed protests" (Curfewed Night 16).

Peer suggests, the communalised political conflict appropriated by the radical organisations and the support and violence from Pakistan, has instilled in common Muslim youth of Kashmir Valley an spontaneous sense of anger and alienation against Indian state. Most young people in Kashmir are unaware about the political history of Kashmir that has led to the bloodshed and militancy, yet there is a common hate and anger against India among them. He details the turmoil and clashes during the 1990's right from the exodus of Pandits from valley(22-23), kidnapping of daughter of Mufti Mohammad Sayed the then Home Minister of India by JKLF(10); Gawakadal massacre, which left hundreds of protesters dead (14, 120-121); and other day-to-

day violent incidents. Peer in his novel records his interviews with the affected people—both Hindus living in camps spreaded over some parts of Jammu and Muslims from the Valley. The interviewees are recorded telling their experiences right from the tortures in the PAPA 2 interrogation camps, “custodial killings”, the infamous Gawakadal massacre, the disappearing of young boys, and the sufferings of the Kashmiri Pandits rendered homeless in a completely remote land.

An interviewee tells Basharat, the journalist, about what he had witnessed on the day of Gawakadal incident: I was in that demonstration. Soldiers had cordoned off the massacre site with barbed wires, and armoured vehicles were positioned on all the streets. After the massacre, I carried fifteen bodies to the mosque. Their eyes were open and I closed their eyes with my own hands. But I cannot talk like this. You should bring your camera, record my interview and show this on Aaj Tak. (Curfewed Night 119)

He documents that how Kashmiri students outside the valley suffered due to the rebellion in Kashmir, that the Hindu radical groups labelled Kashmiris outside Kashmir as militants and antinational. He mentions an account of a boy named Bilal had made a narrow escape from a mob of fanatic group whom he told his fake name telling them he was Parveen Bhat, a Hindu. Earlier he had observed the communal violence that had emerged after the demolition of Babari Masjid. Basharat recounts Hilal telling him about the violence on Kashmiri students on board a train headed to Jammu from Delhi:

‘Most students gave their real names and said that they were from Kashmir,’ Hilal told me. Then he saw frenzied groups of karsevaks calling them ‘Kashmiri Muslim terrorists’ and attacking them with crowbars and daggers... ‘I am a Hindu. My name is Parveen Bhat. My father’s name is Badrinath Bhatt’ Hilal said.... Later Hilal learnt that his friend and fellow was missing for a month. (64-65).<sup>ii</sup>

Both the militants as well as the military forces inflicted pain and sufferings on the people of Kashmir, asserts Peer. The militants didn’t differentiate between Hindus and Muslims who were suspected to be the supporters of the government of India and killed them. They assassinated the VC of University of Kashmir, Mushir-ul-Hasan and many other Muslims siding with India. On May 21, 1990, they “assassinated the head Priest of Srinagar, Maulvi Farooq, a controversial politician.” The firing by security forces added salt to the wounds at the funeral procession of the slain high Priest. “Bullets pierced the coffin; pallbearers and mourners fell. About a hundred men were slain. Their blood-soaked shoes lay on the road after the bodies were carried away.” (123)

Basharat Peer throws highlights on the communal harmony of Medieval Kashmir in contrast to the communal tensions of post- 1990’s. He recalls the tales of Dara Shikoh, his father told him “the most liberal Mughal prince . . . who invited many learned men to his palace to translate texts of Hindu philosophy, religion

and literature into Persian and Arabic.” His father told him these anecdotes repeatedly because he wanted “me to see Pari Mahal as a place of multi-religious traditions.” (Peer, Curfewed Nights 111-112 ). Basharat also recounts his meeting with Mohammad Iqbal, an Archeologist who informed Peer of the ancient idols and other artefacts explaining the mixture of Budhist and Hindu art in old Kashmiri sculpture. Basharat depicts the origin of city of Kashmir and says that the city was established by Ashoka in 250 BC and had named it Sri Nagri, signifying ‘city of wealth’; and that, after the Battle of Kalinga, Ashoka had “renounced violence, became a Budhist and dedicated his life to promoting the religion’s teaching” (114). Peer maintains while comparing the ancient beauty of Kashmir to the present day sombre scenery, that “Srinagar is a medieval city dying in modern war. It is empty streets, locked shops, angry soldiers, and boys with stones. It is several thousand military bunkers, four golf courses and three bookshops.” (115-116)

Basharat also writes about disappearances of youth in the valley. He says “Srinagar is also about being hidden from view, disappearing. Absences and their reminders stand at every other street.... Between 4000 and 8000 men have disappeared after being arrested by military, paramilitary and the police.” (131)

Basharat records his interviews with people whose near relatives had been arrested and disappeared who have formed an organisation named APDP, Association of Parents of the Disappeared Persons to “fight cases in the courts” (132). Peer, the journalist in the novel, recounts that: The government has refused to set up a commission of enquiry into the disappearances and claims that the missing citizens of Kashmir have joined militant groups and crossed for armed training to Pakistan. Many Kashmiris believe that the ‘disappeared’ men were killed in custody and cremated in mass graves. (131)

Peer features his interviews with those who have survived the notorious Gawakadal massacre that happened in 1990. A hawker, in an interview tells Peer, “I was in that demonstration ... soldiers had cordoned off the massacre site with barbed wire, and armoured vehicles were positioned on all lanes..... After the massacre, I carried fifteen bodies to the mosque” (119). Papa 2 was the “most infamous torture centre run by the military and paramilitary forces in Kashmir” (137). It was originally a large mansion built by Hari Singh which was then converted into a guest house and then, during the Nineties, into a torture camp. A survivor tells the interviewing Basharat that “it was hell”; the prisoners had to defecate and urinate “in polythene bags’ they then threw the bags into a dustbin” (140).<sup>iii</sup>

Another survivor giving the description of the Papa 2 and the tortures meted out there says to Basharat: “You do not live a normal life after that torture” (143). From the above discussion, it is obvious that Basharat Peer has outlined a ground-level picture of brutality in his memoir that covers, to a major extent, the violence experienced by the Kashmiri people (both Muslims and Hindus) on account of the turmoil that began back in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. From then on, through various stages of history it has taken different

political and communal turns. It proves to be a distressing legacy whose ghost not only haunts the valley, but also transpires in different forms with a constant frequency.

### Works Cited

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- iii. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

