

# Fragmented Lives in Kashmir: An Existentialist Narrative through *Panpompar*

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Abstract :

This paper brings forth the disintegrated lives in Kashmir that followed the 2016-17 Kashmir unrest. The backdrop of the unrest pertains to the killing of Burhan Wani, a notorious Islamic militant by Indian security forces on 8 July 2016. The unprecedented violence that erupted after Burhan aftermath saw many killed, injured and maimed. The short film *Panpompar* by Archana Phadke and Avani Rai contemplates on the seamless violence and its toll on the life of the common people. This film features a little girl named Nowsheen who is unable to comprehend the loss of her brother in the unrest. This paper aims at shredding light on the existentialist crisis that has debilitated the land, disregarded the commoners and made it vulnerable for any external forces.

Keywords : Kashmir unrest, Burhan Wani, violence, Nowsheen, existentialism, land.

## Introduction

Violence and bloodshed remains the Kashmir trope ever since Indian independence. The constant tussle between the Kashmir residents and authoritarian forces are quotidian affairs. They adorn the news headlines almost every day. The state and central government have remained inept in curbing the surmounting violence. The 2010 Kashmir unrest on the backdrop of the purported killing of three natives along with Pakistani infiltrators led to a massive protest. These protests were organised by Syed Ali Shah Geelani and Mirwaiz Umar Farooq at the helm of Hurriyat Conference, an active separatist organisation flagging the gross human rights violations. The protesters largely comprised of teenagers and youths who clamoured for demilitarisation and pro-Independence were answered by teargas shells and live ammunition. This protest turned riot by and by witnessed about 112 deaths. Only when the government agreed to the restitution did the violence end. However, this did not stump the intermittent violence that ensued.

The 2010 Kashmir unrest was just a presentiment of what was to follow in the long run. Not long after this incident came the killing of Burhan Wani, head honcho of Islamic militant organisation Hizbul Mujahideen. Burhan who joined militancy at the age of fifteen did so owing to an incident where police personnel thrashed him and his brother Khalid. He was active on social media and through his efficacious rhetoric on militantism, Burhan became a noted figure. His conspicuous presence was bolstered by the government of India who announced 1 million rupees bounty for his head. Nonetheless this only buttressed his confidence and zealous energy in plotting more attacks. When he was finally killed, the Kashmir valley was torn asunder by his sympathizers and repressive forces. The mounting attacks witnessed the usage of pellet guns, assault rifles, tear gas shells, and rubber bullets by army men killing many and blinding yet again a lot. These incidents and their traumatic aftermath dubbed the Kashmir valley as a disputed territory globally. This inturn prompted two youngsters from Maharashtra, namely Archana Phadke and Avani Rai to make a short film on the crimsoned valley. They initially thought of making a film wholly on Maharashtra but later gave up the decision and shifted the locale to Kashmir. Archana Phadke comments on the pursuit of cast and how it led them to Nowsheen and Ahsaan thus, "Out of the 10 days we were in Srinagar, there was a curfew on two days, which challenged our idea of freedom, us coming from Mumbai".(Quint Neon)

The title *Panpompar* means **moth** which is a significant character in this film. In concurrence with limited resources they went further with this humongous project and made it available online with alacrity.

## Into the celluloid

This 15 minutes 23 seconds film begins with a little girl Nowsheen getting ready to go to school. Her mother remains a mute observant and does not reply to Nowsheen's repeated calls. This shows the foreboding atmosphere prevalent in the house. The scene is no different anywhere as the girl proceeds down an empty valley. This brooding silence is broken by the cries of two boys, probably her classmates asking her to hurry up if she does not want to be punished for being late. However to the surprise of the audience, instead of turning up at the school, the girl saunters through the streets aimlessly and returns home in the evening. The scene changes and takes us to the game between Nowsheen and her brother Ahsaan whose name is illustrated largely on the blackboard announcing the arrival of a new character. This playful atmosphere rendered by the children acts as a foil to the sombre mood of the Kashmir valley. However the girl comes out from her reverie with the chanting of freedom slogans by the protesters, "The Kashmir we have irrigated with our blood, that Kashmir is ours"(Phadke,3.06-3.08).

Nowsheen's mother with the inconspicuous presence weaves in a new narrative to the main plotline. She narrates the story of Wular, a blue lake with abundance and prosperity to Nowsheen and Ahsaan. She also adds that the only way to Wular Lake is over the tallest mountains visited by the night bird. This Wular Lake and its nearby lands might be a tacit reference to a erstwhile prosperous Kashmir and the happy households. The 'Go India,Go Back' slogan embossed on heightened walls show the recalcitrance of Kashmiris who admonish the central government for blemishing their valley with intrepid forces. Nowsheen continues her sojourn to various parts of Kashmir with no respite. Her sojourn later took her to a park where she spotted a moth perched on a shrub. She takes the moth and rears it with care. Nowsheen who otherwise play truant from school, now goes to school with teeming verve accompanied by the moth enclosed in a glass jar. It is soon revealed that she had partaken the larvae to be her lost brother Ahsaan.

Nowsheen imagined the larvae would take to its wings when the time comes and calls out to it. To her dismay, it does not move. She immediately recalls the sporadic gruesome violence which took away her brother. The valley then reverberated with the girl's vehement cries. Next day, the girl takes the jar to a lake and reminisces the story about Wular. The story of Wular Lake is conjoined with the scenes of playsome Nowsheen and Ahsaan.

Wular is a very big lake. It's water is bluest of blue. There is a village at its banks. God has bestowed the village with all his blessings. There is only one way to go to the village. It is, by climbing over the tallest mountain. No one has gone to the village except birds of the night sky. The waters of Lake Wular has magical powers. By drinking the water you will fly over the tallest mountain. (Phadke, 12.20-13.55)

By recounting the story, Nowsheen tells the larvae, "River Jhelum will take you there" (*Panpompar*, 13.56-13.58). Saying so she drops it in the river. Ahsaan, in the beginning of the film when his mother tells him the story of Wular intercedes with the question of whether Wular is poisonous like Jhelum to which the latter answers in the negative. The film to a certain extent relies on the metanarrative of Wular lake. The characters imbue their longing of residing in its Utopian banks. This is their temporary respite from their hardened lives amidst violent clashes. The technique of dexterous dovetailing of a main plotline to a folktale exudes the apprehensiveness of the characters. Nowsheen undergoes the existentialist trauma wherein she finds it hard to comply with the truth that she would not see her brother again. Nevertheless, the little girl displays her maturity when she sends the larvae by Wular lake hoping it will take to its wings once. This manifests her residual optimism in the land and the lake. Unfortunately, her mother refuses to reconcile the truth and silently grieves over her child's demise. While Nowsheen acclimatizes herself to the existentialist condition, her mother on the contrary prevaricates the reality.

Existentialism resides on individual existence, liberty and choice. Even when the universe tends to be hostile, humans set out to find a meaning to their life by taking cues from rationality. When no omniscient presence comes to aid, humanity is left to fend for themselves. By this, individuals take in responsibility by rejecting determinism and break free from the shackles of inaction, impropriety, indecision and angst. This is when individuality redeems its lost sheen. Determinism caters to the causality of present and past events to the outcome or any decision. Hence existentialism is meant for those who rebuts any system or causality and solely relies on individual discretion. The traditional philosophies like Empiricism, Positivism which relied on ultimate order and sought meaning in metaphysical principles or in worldly strictures have been subverted by the nineteenth century existentialist philosophers like Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. However it was French existentialists who superceded Cartesian philosophy of consciousness contemplated on the themes of alienation, brooding, freedom, nothingness etcetera. They asserted that ,

a human being is thrown into a concrete, inveterate universe that cannot be thought away, and therefore existence precedes consciousness, and is the ultimate reality (Mastin).

Sartre gives credence to this assertion by stating hence, “At first Man is nothing only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be” (Sartre 163).

Sartre and Kierkegaard concede that rationality exhorts humans to conceal their existential anxiety and the former acts as a “bad faith” that conform humans to a structure or a system. This would render an individual to harp on the demands of the fundamental structure to evade irrationality, thus leading to an abnegation of the individual subjectivity. Only self and its reflections will help in finding the truth thereby disregarding objectivity. However Camus asserted that this search for order is a corollary to the real lack of order rendering human beings as mere subjects in the absurd and chaotic universe. Here human beings seek truth or meaning by their own actions and not by heeding to the natural order. This is what ultimately the film *Panpompar* apprises the audience of. It tells the viewers to find a leeway amidst the chaotic universe by reckoning on their convictions and interpretations. Nowsheen does what others find incomprehensible. She banks herself on the folklore on Wular to overcome her angst. This trifle decision however dispenses meaning to her existence which might be unfathomable to others.

## **Conclusion**

Kashmir valley offers multifarious meanings to all and sundry. This is a hackneyed metaphor for violence. Unbeknownst to the rest in the country, Kashmir was once a resplendent valley of abundance and statuesque beauty. The post-independence period saw Kashmir turning to be the bull’s eye torn asunder by India and Pakistan. Nonplussed and subliminal as to discern where they actually belong, Kashmiris call out to grant autonomy can never be reckoned with. Under these excruciating circumstances, the residents lose their optimism and liberty and ultimately take to stone pelting. The repressive forces often lambasted by the residents and separatists are also flummoxed as they are mere chattels who only act upon the order. It behoves them to toe the line in adherence to the Central order. This culminates in police and army men as inimical to the residents. This is when the film *Panpompar* offers some kind of solace.

Shot in the perturbed Kashmir valley after the 2016-17 unrest after Burhan Wani’s death, this film endured many impediments. Nonetheless *Panpompar* gives people an undying hope to anticipate the restoration of valley to peace. The filmmaker Archana Phadke with her tenacity made this film with just five hands on the deck and ensured that the children never missed their school. She ruminates on the main characters as, “I truly believe that the children made the film. Their playfulness, warm smiles and innocence would always keep us energised” (Quint Neon).

The main character, Newsheen spans the film with her sombre demeanour. She is flanked by her mother with her brooding silence. Newsheen's brother, Ahsaan lives only in her reverie and remains largely in the subplot. However he is a testament to the agony faced by his mother and sister at home. The larvae discovered by Newsheen dramatized an omniscient presence implying the lurking danger, portentous future and existentialism. The little girl manifests the constant kerfuffle between her self and reality. Becalmed even at the tumultuous situations, she mystifies the irrational world. Her relentless search for companionship impels her to associate with larvae. This larvae turns out to be the panacea emancipating her from loneliness, estrangement and boredom. Having lost her only brother, she becomes laconic and reticent. Her mother with her demure stance is no different. However, Newsheen finds answer without relying on rationality whereas her mother remains encumbered in darkness and solitude. This metanarrative of a girl in search for meaning and the tale of Wular Lake, an utopian land offers repartee to the existentialist trauma and poignancy unheard by the authorities and separatists. This film becomes even more pertinent in the current scenario where the abrogation of Article 370 by central government has by and large brought a stasis to the valley thus tethering the common lot to authoritarian shackles and benumbed by existential throes.

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