

Kashmiriyat: Creation and Destruction: A Study of Select Texts and Customs

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Abstract

The disputed land of Kashmir has a long history of social, cultural and religious amalgamation, mixing and interconnectedness. The land, now predominantly populated by a “Muslim” population, has its own version of religious faith and practices drawing heavily from the earlier native Kashmiri tradition, which was itself a mix of the Shavite, Trika and Bhakti cultures. The ethos of Kashmir is not Hindu or Muslim but Kashmiri or ‘Kashmiriyat’ which is a mix of both these cultures where none were originally pure. In the current paper, I propose to study the socio-religious and political make-up of the land with the help of the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali, a short story from Kashmiri language by Hari Krishan Kaul (translated in English by Neerja Mattoo) and some popular cultural icons. Through a reading of the socio-religious festivals/rituals of visiting dargahs and temples and annual fetes, the paper proposes to reveal that *Kashmiriyat* stands and stood for “a pluralistic culture of tolerance” and a mutual existence in harmony of opposite faiths despite a history of violence. The violence of 1990s was the breaking point of the long held resistance of the land to the divisive politics of native Kashmiri leaders, the Pakistani infiltrators, as well as the Indian government.

Keywords- Cultural Multiplicity, Kashmiriyat, Tolerance

The Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2000), is one of the major poets to bring the Kashmir conflict to international awareness through his 1998 volume *The Country Without a Post Office*. The news of violence and bloodshed in his homeland Kashmir forces Shahid Ali to remind his people about the legacy and cultural lineage of Kashmir:

Let me cry out in that void, say it as I can. I write on that void:
Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmire, Cashmir, Cashmire,
Cashmere, Cachemire, Cushmeer, Cachmiere, Casmir, or Cauchemar

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in a sea of stories? Or: Kacmir, Kaschemir, Kasmere, Kachmire,
Kasmir. Kerseymere?

(The Blessed Word, CWPO, 121, 10-13)

What Shahid Ali is essentially grieving at, is the loss of that fine sensibility, the cultural multiplicity and the existence of the different versions of Kashmir that had contributed to the make-up of his own sensitive cosmopolitan mind. The various ways in which the word Kashmir has been spelt are voices in which the cry to the land is made and correspond to the different versions of the land to its people. The various religious and socio-political outlooks of the Kashmiri people are funneled into one syncretic word and land- Kashmir! Shahid Ali goes on to bleed his heart out into beautiful verses that contain his agonizing pain at the burning of his homeland. He longs for the land to resume its state of mutual harmonic, idyllic existence of the Muslims and the native Pundits.

By the dazzling light
we see men removing statues from the temples.
We beg them, “who will protect us if you leave?”
They don’t answer, they just disappear
on the road to the plains, clutching the gods.

...

I’ve tied a knot
with green thread at Shah Hamdan, to be untied only when the
atrocities
are stunned by your jeweled return....

(I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight, 180, 41-55)

Agha Shahid Ali, the diaspora poet, identified himself strongly as a Kashmiri, though he lived the larger part of his life in the U.S. A. yet his poetry is constantly hinting at his nostalgia for his homeland, his roots, language and the native Kashmiri culture. Shahid Ali was a Shia-Muslim who had an English medium schooling from an Irish catholic school in Srinagar, read Urdu poetry and had Hindu gods and goddess (Radha-Krishna) instituted in his room. Shahid Ali loved the land of Kashmir, its people, its poetry and most importantly the rituals—visit to the dargas, the celebration of festivals like Janamashtami, and of course, the food—“Roghan-Josh” in “Pandit-style” (Ghosh, 5, 2002). Ali adored and in turn symbolizes *Kashmiriyat*—the social consciousness and the set of cultural values that is common to the geographic space and population of Kashmir irrespective of their religious association. The poet Shahid Ali epitomes all that *Kashmiriyat* stood for; the essence and effervescence of Kashmir.

Questions however, may be raised about the idea of *Kashmiriyat*? What constitutes this ‘ethno-national and social consciousness? Is it the cultural values? How does an individual come to believe himself as one thing and not as the other? Is there a thing called

multifarious identity? How does a place acquire a distinct culture? Is the geography responsible? Is it the people? How and to what extent is history responsible in informing a consciousness? In the specific case of Kashmir, how much of the Kashmiri identity is a product of the religious or of social or of political norms? The present study is an endeavor to make an inquiry into the ideas-social, religious or political that informs the Kashmiri identity and see if Kashmiriyat is a concept in its own or is it a spurious construct used only to humor the emotion of the masses?

The Kashmiri Short story writer and a Sahitya Academy awardee, Hari Krishan Kaul (1934-2009) in his story *Smoked Fish* illustrates the process of imposition of a structure to any given society. The story recounted in brief here, would help in understanding the birth of hegemonic discourses. In a certain land of idyllic beauty lived eleven men, who all suffered some sort of handicap, one was blind, another dumb, another deaf and so on. But they lived peacefully by consuming the fish caught from the nearby stream and cooking it with some dry grass available in abundance. One day fancy takes over the Dumb who keeps aside his share of fish, deck it with flowers and engage in some sort of worshipping, astonishing the fellow mate, Deaf. When others come to know of it, they are astonished, but Lame tells them that it is Dumb's way of paying gratitude to the fish that satisfies their hunger and he shall offer flowers to such a great man himself. Baldy feels that the flowers should be offered to the stream and therefore does so. Blind starts humming a song about a poor man and his three sons. Lame comes up with the explanation that the sons are Nar, Naar and Noor who are responsible for populating the stream with fishes and One-armed is asked to draw images of the three. Stammer objects to his whole idea initially but his stammer provokes much derisive laughter he decides to keep mum on the issue. The gang besides Stammerer begins to offer fishes in accompaniment of the flowers to the images. One day a twelfth man enters the area also dressed in a pheran—his, however was black unlike the indefinable colour of the others. This man tells the others that the cooked fish they have been eating is called 'smoked fish' which creates a lot of excitement. The man then offers new black pherans to the gang but tells them they can't take it off ever again if they put it once. Stammerer is not happy with this condition and refuses to take the pheran. The twelfth man puts it back in the bundle with his left hand. Upon realizing that the twelfth man too was a handicap like the rest of them, Stammerer is elated and tries to hug him in the excitement. Left-handed is not at all pleased with this and makes a sign to the others who bash him up thoroughly with their left hands. A few days later Left-handed gathers them all and tells them that there is no Nar, Naar or Noor but a king who lives up the hills and sends them food. It is him they should offer the flowers and not displease them else "they shall all be roasted in the fires of their hunger". The Stammerer unconvinced with this idea, stay away from them. After a few days, it is noticed that the stream has fallen short of fishes. Left-handed uses this as an opportunity to re-establish his ways by asking them to wear the black pheran. With some hesitancy all agreed,

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except the Stammerer, who had to bear the pangs of hunger and who could not register his protest because he was unable to speak.

This story is highly symbolic especially considering the fact that it is written by a modern Kashmiri writer. The story may be read as the representation of the genesis of the Kashmiri land and culture when the land with its immense natural beauty, had ample to offer to all its inhabitants. The introduction of customs was termed as purely “fancy” and so is the conception of Nar, Naar and Noor. This part is important more so, because the initial submission to the trident deity signifies the pluralistic conception of the divine power much like the Hindu mythology of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesha. The people of Kashmir were worshippers of Shiva-Parvati as well as Vishnu and his later avatar Rama. The ‘Noor’ character could be a hint to the early Sufi version of Islam that existed peacefully with the native Hindu cultures. Not to be missed here is the mention of Naar— a female deity. Many female deities and saints are worshipped in the land. While the origin of the Valley is itself credited to the reincarnation of Goddess Parvati as the pebble-dropping bird ‘Sharika’ when the pebble gained size and emptied the sea of nagas, creating the valley of Kashmir. (Madan, 8) Madhu Wangu in her essay *Maji Khir Bhavani: The Kashmiri Kuladevi* comments upon the popular deity of Kashmir tracing the legend of the Goddess, remarks that Khir Bhavani stands for the gender equality as practiced by Tantric Shavaite of Kashmir. Maji Khir Bhavani residing at the Tulmul Nag of in the Pir Panjal range, is a “grant bestowing, benevolent and spiritually enlightened deity by channeling her sexual powers through Tantric Yoga”. (295) She is also known as a *Tripura Sundari* having all the three *gunas*: *sattva* (purity, truth, tranquility), *rajasi* (activity and passion) and *tamasi* (darkness and sloth) and thus signifies ascent from a Tamasi guna to a Sattavika one through self-discipline and realization. The typical darshan to this deity involves the indulgence of all five senses to awaken the sixth one. Lamps are lit, fragrant flowers are offered, mantras are sung during which the devotees touch various parts of their bodies and vegetarian delicacies, Khir, halwa, dry fruits are offered and consumed within the vicinity of the temple. What is most interesting in this entire cult of Maji Khir Bhavani is that it has emerged as late as 1870s superseding the earlier Bhairava (Shiva) deity, “in response to the local changes in political, social and religious conditions of Kashmir” specially due to the Dogra rule. Wangu comments on this infusion of a new Goddess to the Kashmiri culture as “nothing unusual” but a part of the “ancient Hindu phenomenon whereby new deities arise at a juncture when cultural group undergoes drastic social and political change”. One can easily understand the popularity of such a deity in Kashmir— the ecology and geographical make-up of the land demands indulgence, enjoyment and not abstinence. Figures as Maji Khir Bhavani, the mystic poet Lal Ded and the Sufi Nund Rishi may be seen as creation of ‘thirdspace’ where “everything comes together... subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential,

structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history”. (Soja, 57) Homi Bhabha’s ‘Third space theory’ also refers to such cultural figures that lead to new power structures in the society. Both Edward Soja, a post-modern geographer and Homi Bhabha, a cultural critic acquiesce to the idea of cultural identity being transformative with time and space. The Kashmiri culture revealed from these icons is both unfixed and evolutionary, responding to changes in the population composition or the rulers.

The third component of the Providence “Noor” described as “meek” “unarmed” and the most generous of the three. In Islamic theology, Allah is ‘noor’ or light, not having any human attributes. Allah is said to be the most beneficent and the most benevolent of all. So it can safely be assumed that the meek, unarmed Noor stands for the early Sufi mystics who had come to the Valley and silently worked their way, spread their teachings in the Kashmir.

In the *Introduction* to the comprehensive study of the land, *The Valley of Kashmir: The Making and Unmaking of Composite Culture?* T. N. Madan notes that the first three hundred years of Muslim rule witnessed three different kingly styles and the first King Shah Mir (1339-89) “followed the path of gradual assimilation” (8). It was during his reign that the first popular Sufi saint, Mir Sayyid Ali Hamdani (Iranian Kubrawi order) entered Kashmir. The first one to enter the land was Bulbul Shah. (Suharwardi order) Sayyid Ali Hamdani believed and preached in just and equitable treatment of all the subjects by his ruler, Shah Qutubuddin (1372-89). Shah Hamdani, as he was popularly known, had the mental acuity to understand the cultural ethos of Kashmir. He knew that to persuade the commoners to give up their deities and believe in ‘*Tawhid*’ (One God) required perseverance and discretion. He therefore, started the ritual of *Aurad-i-fathiyya*—“the loud, collective chanting of litanies in praise of God and the Prophet before every prayer resembling the chanting of mantras in Hindu temples in Kashmir”— the practice being still followed in most mosques in India and is a distinguishing feature of Islam as practiced in the land. (Sikand, 494) It was Shah Hamdani whose influence transformed the life of the mystic poets, Laleshwari or Lal Ded and of Nund Rishi, inspiring them to sing the virtues of communal harmony and simple living. Nund Rishi started as a rishi by renouncing the world and observing severe penance but he later came to realize that true service to God lies in serving His creation. Both these mystics were poets of the commoners and helped in bridging the Islamic tradition and the Kashmiri belief and practices. Their stress on a single divine power, One God and a syncretic religion comes close to the Bhakti poet, Kabir. (Nurbakshi)

The collective worshipping of Nar, Naar and Noor thus, directly corresponds to the medieval period in the history of the land where the Hindu and Muslim were evolving and changing their interface according to the socio-political changes and when Sufism was gaining ground and was being embraced by the commoners as artisans, craftsmen, and peasants. While Sufism was the most peaceful and proper way to convert people to Islam,

the modern Islamic purists have, nonetheless denigrated the Kashmiri Muslims as ‘idol-worshippers’. Muhammad Ashraf Wani has quoted Walter Lawrence in his essay on Sufism, Local traditions and Islam in Kashmir:

In their hearts they (Kashmiri Muslims) are still Hindus, and the religion of Islam is too abstract to satisfy their superstitious cravings and they turn from the mean priest and mean mosques to the pretty shrines of carved wood and roof bright with the iris flower where saints of past time lie buried...every Kashmiri believes that the saints will aid if men will call, and they think that a dead saint is more efficacious than a living priest. The Kashmiris are called by foreigners *Pir Parast*, that is, saint worshippers, and the epithet is well deserved. (249)

The twelfth man who was left-handed and wore a black *pheran* is symbolic of the self-proclaimed purist Muslims who actually are a cultural intrusion imposing a new cultural hegemony by the use of violent methods and by ripping off the native practices in a single blow. His ‘left-handedness’ implies a completely opposite perspective of life and living. He calls upon the rest of the eleven men to tell them that their gods, prophets and saints are to be given up at once, for their Nourisher is one King (can be read as one *Allah*) whose wrath they shall incur if they do not pay proper veneration. Hari Krishan Kaul has tactfully incorporated the precise language used by this purist group in common parlance— “if we should ever displease him, we will also be roasted in the fires of our hunger, like these fishes that is to be sure!” The reader here is reminded of the *dozakh ki aag/* Fire of Hell as one of the popular oratory components of the purist discourse. Stuart Hall in his essay, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, while accepting the fluidity of the cultural identity points out the reason why the European colonization was unacceptable to the Black people:

Because Presence Europeanne is about exclusion, imposition and expropriation, we are often tempted to locate that power as wholly external to us—an extrinsic force, whose influence can be thrown off like the serpent sheds its skin. (118)

In this light, the twelfth left-handed black *pheran* man symbolizes the hegemonic power that tries to do away with the past of the earlier lives of the inhabitant. It is here that the difference between cultural evolution and cultural intrusion is most distinct. The left-handed could also be taken as the pseudo-Nationalism that was imposed on the land of Kashmir post-independence. The Kashmiri people had an indigenous culture and the mobilization of army to that land has led to the alteration of the entire cultural milieu. The insistence of the Left-handed one that all should discard their old garbs and only wear the black *pheran* provided by him is a direct imposition of a new ideology.

Cultural hegemony is at work here. The power center shifted from the triumvirate prophets to the absolute one brings in a new discourse, a new law validated from the new

center. The Stammerer's inability to record his objects may be seen as the common man's helplessness who has no voice in deciding the course of his own life or living by his own ideals. One of the most heart-rending points of the story comes at the end when we see Blind though wearing the black pheran, sitting apart from the gang and singing a plaintive song—this is the creative artist who stays with the system but could never feel or become a part of the system.

The story reveals how identities (here, Kashmiri) come into being, how they are forced into something else and how adaption may be a painful process to some while not to the others. The myth of Maji Khir Bhavani also elaborates upon the evolution of the native Kashmiri culture which initiates from the shavaite tradition while accumulating Vishnu worship, gained a nature of its own to produce a native virgin vegetarian goddess who required indulgence. The birth of sufi mystics and the mystic poets also point to the religiously syncretic culture of the land that has been ever adaptive to new faiths and rituals while retaining its own essential nature. It was the imposition of a single social order, be it a pseudo-nationality or a religious outfit, that the Kashmiri people see as a threat and that actually poses problem to the present day multiplicity of the land.

In the face of the continuing trouble in the land, the push and pull faced by the natives, the scheming mechanizations of the politicians, the need is to question whether energies should be divested into preserving this multiplicity or to funnel it into one singular outfit and impose uniformity over an land of inherently multiplicity.

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