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Narrating Violence: A Study of Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night: A Frontline Memory of Life, Love and War in Kashmir*

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Abstract

Political, Racial, Communal and Gender violence is one of the major subjects in the fields of literature as well as other fields of humanities and social sciences. This has resulted after the breakdown of world peace and order after the two Great Wars. Although violence has been there in the human society from the very beginning of the creation, but violence has been taken as a subject of concern by many poets, philosophers and researchers in both literature and other humanities' subjects after the breakdown of empires and emancipation of colonized nations worldwide. One feels the irony in the fact that freedom of nations has not brought forth a respite from the incidents and cults of tyranny and victimization for so long. Even after her freedom of from the colonial shackles, India along with her young neighbouring countries have for many political, communal and regional reasons been engaging and dealing with violence in many ways. Violence has inspired many a book that has either come from those who loathe it, or from who justify it, or from those who are caught in it as victims.

Key Words- *Victimization, Disappointment, Violence, Militants.*

In general, modern postcolonial litterateurs have criticized it in every possible way of narrativising or complaining it. To this effect, Dan Simmons writes:

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I despair at the rise of the modern violence. I truly give in to despair at times, that deep pit of despair... I watch the American slaughterhouse, the casual attack on popes, presidents, and uncounted others, and I wonder if there are many more out there with the ability or if butchery has simply become the modern way of life (Simmons, *Carrion Comfort*)

However, in India, Independence has either left many conflicts unsolved or seen to the birth of new conflicts: the conflict of the North-East, Naxalite conflict and the Kashmir conundrum, to name the major few. In Kashmir, the political and communal conflicts that began at the time of India's independence have metamorphosed into the cult of violence, killing and displacing hundreds through years. In other words, the violence in Kashmir is rooted in its history. The historical events of the twentieth century proved detrimental to the state of Jammu and Kashmir: Before 1947, there was resistance against the Dogra rule in the Valley of Kashmir; but the accession of the state to the Indian republic was to the disappointment of many Kashmiri Muslims. However, the disturbance in Kashmir did not recede after 1947 accession to India and during the rule of Sheikh Abdulla's National Conference; but the present violence in Jammu and Kashmir has its new origin in late 1980's—especially starting from the Assembly elections of 1987. The aftermath of the elections took violent turn giving a kick-start to the unrest, resistance against the central government, and militancy in the Valley (Puri 27, Ahmed 104). It is evident that, whatever the reasons, the main force behind all violence in the region was, and still is, the result of conflicts of power—be it exercised by either the Indian administration that controls the region, or the Pakistani interest to exercise their dominance on the pretext of communal allegiance, or the local secessionist organisations which play a major role in the unrest. It may not be inappropriate to buy that “All violence flows from the same source. . . .the need for power. Power is the only true morality . . . the only deathless god, and the appetite for violence is its only commandment (Simmons *Carrion*). The power rivalry led to another

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gruesome turning point that was the exodus of the Hindus (the Pandits) of the Kashmir valley in 1990. These incidents and the subsequent violence have made an unavoidable subject matter of the post 1990's literature in Jammu and Kashmir.

Although the resistance against the Dogra rule was carried out by both the Hindus and Muslims shoulder to shoulder, but the resistance movement of post 1990's was carried out by Muslims only equating Hindus to Indian government representatives in the State (*Curfewed Nights* 22). Since its turning into a Muslim centered resistance against the Indian government, it took a communal turn after the 1980's which prompted the Hindus of the Valley into exile out of the fear of communal violence. The violence was justified and legitimized by the separatists and their public supporters of the Valley in the name of 'Kashmiri nationalism' based on communal lines. The year 1990 is regarded as watershed by many Kashmiris as it marked deaths, arrests and injuries of the Kashmiri people on large scale (Gangahar 37) Much literature of both the Hindus in exile and the Muslims of Kashmir tell their stories with a 'difference' in their perspectives respectively based on communal lines. Basharat Peer in his *The Curfewed Nights* says that the Muslim separatists, who had taken the charge of resistance "had no tolerance for dissent" (195). Militants killed anybody whom they suspected to be pro-India or the informers to the Indian armed forces. The militants suspected the Hindu Pandits as 'enemies within' akin to Indian government. Peer maintains that,

Along with killing hundreds of pro-India Muslims ranging from political activists to suspected informers for Indian intelligence, the militants killed hundreds of Pandits on similar grounds, or without a reason. The deaths had scared the Pandits, and thousands, including my classmates and their relatives, had left the Valley by March 1990 for Jammu, Delhi, and various other Indian cities. (*Curfewed Night* 22; 195)

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Extremist militant groups in Kashmir used Islam for mobilization. They tried to politicize the religion against the Indian government, and that is why Pandits were branded as the ‘enemies within’ and akin to Indian government that was referred to by the militants as a Hindu nation. 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)

Basharat Peer’s memoir *The Curfewed Night*, records what Peer himself has seen and understood right from his childhood that was marked with the beginning of the Kashmir violence and rise of militancy, through his youth. The book tells the story through the perspective of the young Basharat who witnesses the rise of militancy and violence from his school days through his youth until sent to Aligarh more for safety than for higher education. After getting his Master’s Degree, Basharat works as a reporter in Delhi. A son of an affluent and hardworking bureaucrat, Basharat witnesses the rise of militancy and military aggression in the valley. As a young boy, he is fascinated by the militants and he yearned to join JKLF militant outfit, but his grandfather and father see to it that he makes it to some university outside the State so that he remains away from the influence of the militant outfits, the turmoil and danger. Peer writes:

Parents saw getting their out of Kashmir as the solution [to save them from the dangers of violence]. 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 town from Bangalore to Balia. (Peer 60)

During his school days, he witnesses the war between the armed forces and the militants; young boys joining militant outfits and going for arms training across the border to Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. He witnesses militants and suspected militants being killed or arrested and interrogated in the infamous Papa 2 interrogation camp. And after some years, working

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in Delhi, he learns about the unsuccessful attempt of militants to kill his family in a mine that blows their car. He rushes home, and then on his visit back to his Delhi job, he decides to resign and write a book about the untold stories of suffering and violence in Kashmir. (*Curfewed Night* 73-74). Basharat, after returning home from Delhi as a freelance journalist to write stories on Kashmir, first encounters the symbols of communal divide represented by the hotels on the Kashmir highway with billboards reading “Hindu Hotel. Sikh Hotel. Muslim Hotel. We ate at the Muslim Hotel” (*Curfewed Night* 61). Basharat encompasses a wide spectrum of violence in Kashmir, its repercussions on the common people and the loss suffered by Kashmiri Muslims of their youths, and by the Kashmiri Pandits who lost their homeland. He records the onset of conflict and the rise of militancy after the state assembly election of 1987 which the narrator tells us was “rigged”:

In 1987, five years after Sheikh’s death, the Indian government rigged state elections, arresting opposition candidates and terrorizing their supporters. Malik and his friends found immense popular support. The Bottled up resentment against Indian rule and the treatment of Kashmiris erupted like a volcano (*Curfewed Night* 13).

The immediate reaction was the formation of JKLF, a militant outfit, under the leadership of Yasin Malik. This followed, as the narrator records, various successive incidents of mass protests and deaths as the protesting mobs clashed with the paramilitary forces, “Protests followed killings and killings followed protests” (16).

Peer details the violence and clashes during the 1990’s right from JKLF’s kidnapping the daughter of the then Home Minister of India, Mufti Mohammad Sayed (10); Gawakadal massacre, which rendered hundreds of protesters dead (14, 120-121); the exodus of Pandits (22-23) and other day-to-day violent incidents. In the novel, Basharat Peer records his interviews with the affected people—both Muslims from the Valley and the Hindus living in camps scattered over some parts of Jammu. The interviewees are recorded telling their

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experiences right from the infamous Gawakadal massacre, the tortures in the PAPA 2 interrogation camps, the disappearing of young boys, “custodial killings” and the sufferings of the Pandits rendered homeless in a completely alien 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*. (119)

Basharat comments that the people suffered equally at the hands of both the military forces as well as the militants, especially Hizbul Mujahedeen, a Pakistan sponsored militant outfit. They killed both Muslims and Hindus who were suspected to be the supporters of the government of India. They assassinated the Kashmir University Vice Chancellor, Mushir-ul-Hasan and many other Muslims siding with India. Again on May 21, 1990, they “assassinated the head Priest of Srinagar, Maulvi Farooq, a controversial politician.” The paramilitary rubbed salt to the wound by firing 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)

The communalized political conflict appropriated by the extremist organisations and Pakistan’s support and violence, as Basharat Peer suggests, has instilled in common Muslim youth of Kashmir Valley an instinctive sense of alienation and resentment against Indian state. Most young people in Kashmir do not know anything about the political history of Kashmir that has led to the violence and militancy, yet there is a common anger against India among them. As Basharat Peer asserts:

Despite . . . my ignorance about the political history of Kashmir, I had a sense of alienation and resentment most Kashmiri Muslims felt and had against the

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Indian rule. We did not relate to the symbols of Indian nationalism—the flag, the national anthem, the cricket team. We followed every cricket match India and Pakistan played but we never cheered for the Indian team. (10-11)

Basharat Peer records the impact of Kashmiris' rebellion on the Kashmiri students outside the state maintaining that the Hindu extremist groups branded Kashmiris outside Kashmir as antinational and militants. He elaborates an account of a boy named Bilal who had witnessed the communal violence that had ensued after the demolition of Babari Masjid. He had made a narrow escape from a mob of extremist group whom he told his fake name telling them he was a Hindu named Parveen Bhat. Peer recounts Hilal telling him about the assault 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).

In contrast to the post- 1990's communal violence, Basharat Peer throws light on the communal harmony of Medieval Kashmir: He remembers his father telling him stories of Dara Shikoh, "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 stories repeatedly because he wanted "me to see Pari Mahal as a place of multi-religious traditions." (Peer, *Curfewed Nights* 111-112). Peer recounts the origin of city of Kashmir and says that the city was founded by Ashoka in 250 BC and had named it Sri Nagri, meaning 'city of wealth'; and that, after the Battle of Kalinga, Ashoka had "renounced violence, became a Buddhist and dedicated his life to promoting the religion's teaching" (114). Peer also narrates his meeting an Archeologist, Mohammad Iqbal, who

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apprised Basharat of the ancient idols and other artifacts explaining the mixture of Hindu and Buddhist art in old Kashmiri sculpture. Comparing the ancient beauty of Kashmir to the present day gloomy scenery, Peer comments 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)

Peer also talks about disappearances of youth in Kashmir. 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) Peer recounts his interviews with people whose close relatives had been arrested and disappeared who have formed the Association of Parents of the Disappeared Persons to “fight cases in the courts” (132). Basharat, the journalist in the novel, maintains 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)

Basharat details his interviews with those who have survived the infamous Gawakadal massacre that happened in 1990. In an interview, a hawker tells Basharat, “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). Another interviewee tells Basharat Peer, “Bullets whizzed past my ears. The bridge was covered with bodies and blood. CRPF men continued firing. I saw more people falling, closed my eyes, and pretended to be dead” (120-121). *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 Maharaja Hari Singh which was then converted into a

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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). 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 evident that Basharat Peer has sketched a ground-level picture of violence in his journalistic memoir that covers, to a major extent, the brutalities experienced by the Kashmiri people(both Hindus and Muslims) on account of the turbulence that began back in the beginning of the 20th Century.From then on, it has taken different political and communal turns through various stages of history. It proves to be a traumatic legacy whose specter not only haunts the valley, but also materializes in different forms with a constant frequency.

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