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Paradise/Pandemonium? Kashmiri Identity in Question: A Study of Basharat Peer's
Memoir

Abstract: Though the term 'nation' refers to the concept of a shared cultural experience, there are huge differences too. In a land of diverse culture, these differences are more often realized by the people inhabiting the borders. Basharat Peer, the Kashmiri journalist and author in his non-fiction *Curfewed Night: One Kashmiri Journalist's Frontline Account of Life, Love, and War in His Homeland*, recounts the struggle of growing up in a land torn between two nations. Democratic development in Kashmir was hindered due to the belief that anti-India movements are necessarily pro Pakistani. The memoir portrays how India, the world's largest democracy responded to the insurgency in Kashmir with the power of its armed forces. He also details how Kashmir began to lose its secularist nature with the burgeoning of several insurgent groups with the mission of establishing an Islamist nation. The significance of this study lies in its attempt to hear the voice of the natives which act as counter propaganda to the views propagated by the dominant discourses to influence the majority in the policy making of the government. It psychologically explores the 'liminality'/identity crisis experienced by these people with the continuous intrusion and withdrawal of alien forces in their otherwise stable cultural set up.

Keywords: Identity, trauma, nation-ness, repressive state apparatus, insurgency, secession, Jihad.

“And the nightingale sings to the flowers: our land is a garden!”(Peer 2). Basharat Peer’s favourite song ended with this refrain suggestive of the sweeping beauty of Kashmir, a heaven on earth. Though nature has showered its blessings abundantly on the landscape, Kashmir, today, remains one of the most troublesome areas of Indian continent frayed between India and Pakistan. It was one of the 500 princely states of India which acquired its freedom from British on 15th of August 1947 and was given the choice of joining either India or Pakistan but the condition was rather complicated since it was a Muslim majority region ruled by a Hindu King. While India stood for secularism, Pakistan’s aim was to establish an Islamic nation. The internal turmoil within the region was aggravated due to the autocratic rule of Maharaja Hari Singh against which All J&K Muslim Conference was formed. Under the charismatic leadership of Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah, the party got secularized though in its initial phase the interest was communal. It transformed into the form of a national liberation movement for an autonomous state and the name of the party was changed to All J&K National Conference replacing the word ‘Muslim’ with ‘National’.

When there arose an increasing dissatisfaction with Sheikh Abdullah’s relationship with Indian government coupled with his failure in meeting the demands of the people regarding autonomy, a new group of nationalists emerged. They insisted on a plebiscite to be held so that they could decide what their political future should be. The formation of a separate state with ‘Kashmiri identity’ became their nationalist spirit. The project was led by several groups the chief among them being the JKLF (The Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front). While the ideology of JKLF was more inclusive in nature, there were other groups which remained truly Islamic in spirit. The Ahl-i- Hadith was one such group who believed themselves to be the followers of Prophet and tried to suppress Sufism in Kashmir. When Ahl-

I- Hidath remained an elitist phenomenon, the Jama at-i- Islam emerged as a political party and established its root after the armed conflict in 1989. The conflict was symbolically presented as a conflict between believers and non-believers. According to them, Kashmir being a Muslim state should align themselves with Pakistan, a Muslim nation since all the Muslims in the world form a single community. The struggle for them was a 'Jihad'.

Beyond all these ideological battles, there is life; there is experience and this is what Peer poignantly portrays in the Memoir. The most troublesome area of Indian continent, Kashmir is known to the external world only through media, which reports the political rhetoric between India and Pakistan. An eyewitness account of the violence dominating the lives of the Kashmiris by Peer makes one critically analyse the reality surrounding the lives of the common people in Kashmir. Kashmir, in fact had become the purgatory of partition. Peer grew up in a serene village in the southern district of Anantnag in a closely knit family interested in education and reading Shakespeare, Stevenson, Dickens, Kipling and Defoe. The external happiness of Peer's family is only an outer surface covering the turbulence underneath. Kashmiris were a group of people trying to establish their identity, an identity which they do not want to surrender either to India or to Pakistan. Peer's memoir takes us to the 1990's when Kashmir turned out to a violent zone with Pakistan sponsored militancy and the resisting attempts made by the Indian Government. He recounts how the pro Independence Kashmiris trained in Pakistan were hailed as heroes upon their return to the state.

Outside our small world, there were endless series of gun battles between the soldiers and the rebels, grenades were lobbed, and mines were exploded- death, fear, and anger had taken over Kashmir. By summer of 1990, thousands of young Kashmiri men crossed the Line of Control, for arms training in Pakistan-controlled part of Kashmir. When they returned as militants, they were heroes- people wanted to talk to them, touch them, hear their stories, and invite them

for a feast. Many more were trained locally, in apple orchards and meadows-earning them the nick name dragud, or meadow. Like almost every teenager, I wanted to join them. Fighting and dying for freedom was much desired, like the first kiss on adolescent lips (24).

Like many Kashmiris, he had only hatred towards India in his teens which did not grant them the autonomy as promised. Being a young boy, he was ridiculed when he expressed his desire to join JKLF men and threatened them with his decision to join Hizbul Mujahideen, an ideological rival of the JKLF. The fire in him was put off by his parents who convinced him to pursue his higher education after which if he wishes could join the militants. Peer's family was totally opposed to the idea of counteracting violence with violence. They strongly believed that a nation's history could be rewritten with pen but not with sword. He was sent to Aligarh Muslim University and later joined a newspaper as reporter who frequently returned to Kashmir as part of his profession. Soon, Basharat realized the fact that he would no longer be able to reveal the untold stories of Kashmir if he continued as a reporter. As a result, he resigned his job to write a book on his homeland, to unravel the mysteries surrounding the lives of his people.

The terms of discourse of Kashmiri liberation struggle got transformed with the massacre of 1990 consequently leading to the rise of militant groups in different parts of the valley. Peer contrasts the present with the past, how situations had changed irreparably. "Radio told us the news and newspapers were rare. Then, news had different meanings. News did not mean the daily body count that it became after 1990. News was not about self-determination, sovereignty or terrorism...news was not about us" (104-05). Now, the news is about them too. Now it has assumed the role of a nationalist struggle, the discourse giving way to an Islamist one and the goal of free Kashmir had been sidelined. The armed struggle of the JKLF gained popular support from the Kashmiri Muslims since they were disillusioned with the policies of

the Indian government. Though Basharat Peer seems to be prejudiced in the early part of the memoir, he assumes the role a critical observer in the second half who bewails the expulsion of Kashmiri pundits from their homeland. Peer recalls how his friends and acquaintances were tortured by Indian troops if they were suspected of being pro Pakistan, the set up of two torture camps, Papa 1 and Papa 2 where those people would disappear and their bodies be later found in distorted forms. However, the detention cum torture centre was closed down in the nineties.

Curfewed Night can be considered as an anecdote of the traumatic experience of the victims caught amidst the rivalry between Indian Army and the militants. He records the experience of the people who survived the Gawkadal Bridge massacre of 1990. The role played by media in representing and misrepresenting the facts could clearly be discerned when one of the survivors tells him to bring a camera and telecast his interview on AajTak. Farooq, an engineer who survived the attack of CRPF recalls how the protestors were fired when they shouted slogans demanding freedom. There was a burst of gunfire after which the bridge was covered with bodies and blood. People like Farooq and Peer had this unresolved question hovering their mind whether there would be a lasting peace in their land.

Srinagar, according to Peer “has the highest military presence. But Srinagar is also a city of absences” (128). Since art can determine the course of life, it is suppressed during times of war and violence. Srinagar had lost its city life due to curfews, theatres were closed down, its multi- religious character could no more be found with the migration of the pandits. Those who migrated to different parts always felt nostalgic about their homeland. Habakkadal remains a ruined place with mere burnt houses. These absences in Srinagar is not confined to the physical surroundings alone but to its inhabitants too. The author records that “between 4000 and 8000 men have disappeared after being arrested by military, paramilitary and the police” (131). Mysteries shroud the disappearance of these men since the government claims that they have joined the militant groups while the people believed that they were killed in custody. In

these cases, their family members either give up hope and move on or continue their fight for justice. Peer could always notice a group of men and women holding placards in a park in Srinagar; the wives and parents of those missing men.

“Prague had protested and won; Berlin had protested and won; Kashmiris too had believed that our protests would win Kashmir its freedom” (136). Peer realizes that the peaceful demonstrations in Kashmir had vanished due to the callousness of Indian government in treating the protestors with regard to Gowkhadal Massacre. A peaceful conversation would have prevented thousands of deaths, arrests and disappearance of men. Shafi, a JKLF member earlier reminisces about the repressive strategies adopted by the armed men in Papa 2. According to him, the psychological torture of making them say ‘Jai Hind’ was more intense than the physical torture inflicted upon them in the camp but now his understanding of the separatist leaders is perspicuous. Though he had spent his youth for the movement, he lives in dire poverty unable to undergo surgery to restore his sight and got no financial help from the leaders of the separatist movements. “They live in big houses and drive big cars bought from the money that came for the movement. But they are not willing to help those who destroyed their lives for the cause” (141). They never knew what torture in the camp was while the common people are easily bamboozled into these kinds of movements. The victims, at the later stages of their life could easily discern that they had been allured into the movement by the charismatic speeches of these leaders who spoke of “the sacrifices of the people of Kashmir” and their “struggle for freedom” (142).

State power is maintained by what Althusser terms as ‘repressive state apparatus’ where the people are subjugated with the help of police, courts, prison houses and army. In Kashmir, the separatist movements disturbing the status quo of the nation had to be dealt in through repressive measures by the Indian State while the internal consent of the majority of people was won over by Pakistan through their discourse of Islamist cause. According to Anderson,

nationalism has to be conceived 'by aligning it, not with self- consciously held political ideologies but with the large cultural system that preceded it and out of which as well as against which it came into being' (19). While the Islamists in Kashmir never could identify themselves as part of Indian culture, there are yet other groups who felt that they are different from both the cultures and strived for autonomy. Amidst this sectarian violence caught are people who shared neither of these ambitions but had the basic need of survival. Women never felt safe in the land and were continuously haunted by the fear of losing their husbands, relatives or even chastity. Women like Mubeena Ghani who was raped by a group of paramilitary soldiers a few hours after her marriage compels live in a state of trauma even after many years. Though some soldiers were suspended and new officers took to their post, she "still shivers at the sight of a uniform. That night lingers around her like a ghost, refusing to be exorcised" (155). Peer was reminded of Kashmir when he read Manto's story, where a gang rape victim drops her pants when she hears phrase 'khol do' (open up) since she associated the phrase with the command of the rapists. According to Bloom, women become revolutionaries when they are motivated by the five Rs: revenge, redemption, relationship, respect and rape. In the context of Kashmir, mothers were proud to send their sons to Pakistan for armed training, women joined the protest marches either due to victimization or willingly to support their cause of freedom.

"There was a consciousness of religious identities and differences in political opinions. Many Muslims would keep separate cups and plates in their homes for the visitors of the other faith" (177). Kashmir began losing its secularist nature with the burgeoning of different militant groups who appealed to the sentiments of people with words like 'Jihad'. The author seems to hold no predispositions when describing the socio political scenario of Kashmir; of how militant groups started using Islam for mobilization. He explains how Islamist militant groups had acquired a controlling position by 1993-94 and the nationalist groups like pro-independence JKLF had resorted to the path of non-violent protests. He attributes an equal role

to Pakistan as India in worsening the state of affairs in Kashmir. Pakistan extended its support to the Jamat-e-Islami, a right wing politico-religious organization whose aim was to establish an Islamic state but it could never win the support of most of the Kashmiri Muslims despite their disillusionment with India. Nevertheless, the Jamaat established itself after the founding of Hizbul Mujahideen as its complement in the early nineties and could ideologically influence young men to join their group. Peer's narrative exposes the hypocrisy of these men who exploit the lives of innocent people by excluding their dear ones. Once he had been cajoled into joining the group by a Jamaat chemist which he skilfully managed to evade.

There was also a counter-insurgent group Ikhwan-ul-Muslimoon, armed and funded by the Indian Army which was no different from the militants in terms of exploitation. They remained unsympathetic to those whom they felt to be sympathetic to the militants. Since many Jamaat members had been killed both by the Indian troop and Ikhwan counter- insurgents, they tried to stay away from the militant groups. By the mid-nineties, Lashkar-e -Thoiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed too ensured their dominating presence. In spite of these Islamist attempts at hegemonising the terms of discourse, according to Peer, the majority of Kashmiri Muslims remained unorthodox in their belief due to their education in different parts of India as well as outside it. The contact with various ethnicities, religion and life styles coupled with the onset of cable television brought a paradigm shift in their religious beliefs. On the other side, there were futile attempts to impose a Saudi- style Islamic code too since Islam in Kashmir shows affinity towards Hinduism and Buddhism and vice versa. Before the sectarian violence of the nineties which compelled many Pandits to leave their homeland due to mass massacre, a Hindu woman visiting a Muslim shrine was not uncommon.

“Two words had remained omnipresent in my journeys. Whether it was at a feast or funeral, a visit to a destroyed shrine or redeemed torture chamber, a story about a stranger or about my own life, a poem or a painting, two words always made their presence felt: militants

and soldiers”(206). The life of the common people was caught amidst the presence of these two groups. The chronicle ends with the launching of Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus service across the LoC. Peer underscores the irrelevance of geographical boundaries in defining a nation. While Lacan’s Real is something unattainable, the Line of Control refutes the theory which could fulfill the dream like desire of many Indians and Pakistanis of visiting their homes. “That failure of the subconscious was the border. The line of control did not run through 576 kilometers of militarized mountains. It ran through our souls, our hearts, and our minds. It ran through everything a Kashmiri, an Indian, and a Pakistani said, wrote, and did” (238).

For the people inhabiting the borders, the concept of nation is quite different from the people who belong to the mainstream society. In Kashmir, the struggle for autonomy has been transformed to Islamist ‘jihad’. The text portrays the lives of common people caught amidst the political rhetoric of the State and the various insurgency groups. The author discusses how the life of the people had been transformed due to this struggle; how his people had been victimized. From such a vantage point, it is worth debating whether the rationale behind territorial integrity can be justified at all. Jayprakash Narayan makes a distinction between the “outward” framework of nationalism and the “mental world of those who comprise it” (Narayan qtd in Gandhi, 119). Territorial integrity is a geographical phenomenon where true human experience is negated or rather, nullified.

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