



Voicing the Pains of Conflict-torn Kashmiris: A Study of Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night*

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Abstract

In the English literary history of Jammu and Kashmir the subject matter of the contemporary Kashmiri English writings is replete with the themes like violence, political discrimination, horrors of the gun-culture, deaths and disappearances, and trauma and torture. The post 1990's Kashmiri English writings mostly highlight the political imbroglio between India and Pakistan over Kashmir and its impact on everyday life of a common man. Likewise Basharat Peer in his memoir documents many unheard stories from the Kashmir valley, which are unique in that these are stories of the Kashmiri common folk whose lives are dictated by the violence.

The present paper attempts to study Basharat Peer's celebrated memoir *Curfewed Night* which is a brave and remarkable piece of literary reporting that reveals the personal stories behind one of the most brutal and festering conflicts in modern times.

Keywords

Jammu and Kashmir, Conflict, Trauma, Sufferings, Disappearances, Violence, Political Imbroglio

Introduction

Basharat Peer is a Kashmir born journalist, author, script writer and political commentator, who attended Aligarh Muslim University to study Political Science and studied Journalism at Columbia University. His *Curfewed Night, A Frontline Memory of Life, Love and War in Kashmir* divided into fifteen chapters is an eyewitness account of the Kashmir conflict, won the Crossword Prize for non-fiction and was chosen among the book of the year by the Economist and The New Yorker. Peer has borrowed the title for his memoir from the poem of Agha Shahid Ali entitled *I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight* which is:

The city from where no news can come is now so visible in its curfewed night that the worst is precise.(S.Ali.Line:3-4)

Peer writes *Curfewed Night* in the form of a memoir of his childhood, his village, his days in school, his family, and the people at large for whom life has been so difficult because of violence, crackdown, and relatively frequent oppression. He mixes a mosaic of memories with reportage and history to present an intimate account of one of the most tragic conflicts of our time. It is an insider's view on what it was like to grow up in the shadow of an occupying army. The book tells the story through the perspective of the young Peer who witnesses the rise of militancy and violence from his school days through his youth.

Being a Kashmiri he has suffered a lot in his adolescence when a separatist movement began in Kashmir in 1989 as "insurgency had simmered for a few years before it exploded in the beginning of 1990." (B.Puri-1).

Peer says "The war of my adolescent had started."(14). *Curfewed Night* is cry, on behalf of the people of Kashmir valley who have been caught for nearly two decades in the crossfire of arguments and arms between Pakistan and India. However, it is the people of valley who suffer most one way or the other and their sufferings are not heard anywhere as Baba Noor says:

[T]he sufferings of the people caught up in conflict have almost been lost sight of...the Kashmir problem is fundamentally that of its people .We, the people of the state , have lived with this problem and have borne the brunt of its political social economic , physical and psychological consequences. More particularly it has been the valley of Kashmir and its immediate surroundings that have remained most vulnerable and suffered the worst in the continuing conflict.(Baba Noor-103)

The nature of the conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir has not changed much since the outbreak of militant uprising in 1989. Sumantra Bose rightly asserts that "The adversarial rhetoric used by both countries, for their domestic audiences as well as in international settings, has stayed remarkably similar in tone and content over this span of time" (Bose 2003 :42-43).

Peer's book is not a fictional representation of the different faces of terrorism in Kashmir, but an authentic account of the gory realities of war based on real life experiences. He has brought some real incidents of Kashmir to our sight to highlight how people of Kashmir are made to suffer at every front.

Discussion

Curfewed Night is a memoir of growing up in the trouble-torn valley of Kashmir, which poets once referred to as paradise on earth, and what the world today recognizes with conflict and struggle. The book opens with an insightful quote by the American novelist James Baldwin, “People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.” Peer accentuates this mutual entrapment through the engaging art of story-telling. All the stories are filled with emotions, full of pain and sufferings which the conflict inflicted on people of Kashmir. W.Habibullah asserts that

[...T] here is no Kashmiri family that didn't suffer in the troubled closing decade of the twentieth century. Even those who remained aloof and sheltered from the turbulence, have at the very least suffered loss or damage of property. (W.Habibullah. 2011:193)

As a story-teller Basharat Peer tries to process what he and the people around him lived through during the violence in Kashmir. Peer records what he saw himself and what other witnesses and victims narrated to him. His memoir is a pure political document based on firsthand experience of the victims of the conflict. Like other interviewees in the book, a driver named Rashid described the situation of a border town Handwara. The whole town was burnt by troops, “they throw gunpowder over the houses and the fire mortars and the entire village was burnt in an hour” (Peer, 20). The author has successfully portrayed the mass destruction and killing. It is natural that the atrocities and violence by Indian forces generated, among people of Kashmir, a common anger against India. 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 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)

Curfewed Night is a bold and unforgettable piece of literary reporting that reveals the personal stories behind one of the most dangerous conflicts in modern times. Hundreds of persons disappeared in Kashmir during the turmoil and nothing is known about their end. Peer has not failed to display the disappearance of thousands of youth, who were never seen again, not known whether they are alive or dead. Peer painfully 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 has the poet's sensibility and the journalist's eye for detail and the elements of reportage make him depict the plight of people of Kashmir so truthfully. He “ brings alive the horrors of people in Kashmir, their never ending pain caused by the loss of the young and the old. People outside Kashmir have already heard first hand stories about the militant and army rule in Kashmir but this book goes much farther than those accounts. One really loves the way Peer narrates the stories interconnecting them with one another moving swiftly and immaculately from Tariq to Shafi to Bilal to Shameema to Asif to Hilal to Yusuf to Vikas to Shabnam to Shahid to Ahmed and countless others who suffered the wrath of either the militants or the army in one way or the other.” (W. Tasleem 2011:02).

The book contains several stories of disappearance, torture, tragic survival. Kashmiri people were mercilessly tortured by security forces in various interrogation centers. Peer unveiled the torture chambers, Papa1 and Papa2, into which large numbers of suspected people have been captured and later their bodies would be found floating on rivers with cigarette burns, missing fingers and limbs. In the words of Basharat Peer: “Papa-2 was the most infamous torture centre run by the Indian forces in Kashmir.” (137) In this “infamous” interrogation centre the detainees were beaten ruthlessly that even innocents will accept that they are outlaws, militants or helpers of militants when physical pain was inflicted on them. Shafi , a detainee of Papa 2 narrates the sufferings faced by people in these interrogation centres saying that “how can I forget it? Not even straw cows would eat the food they threw at us there?” (Peer, 143). He further describes the plight of detainees as thus:

[...T] hey beat us with guns, staffs, hand. But that was nothing... were asked to remove all your clothes, even your underwear. They tied to a long wooden ladder and placed it near a ditch filled with kerosene oil and red chili powder. They raised the ladder like a seesaw and pushed your head into the ditch. It would go on for an hour... they burnt your arms and legs with cigarette butts or kerosene stoves used for welding. They burn your skin till you speak... but the worst was when they inserted wire into my penis and gave electric shocks. They did it with most boys... (Peer, 143)

Kashmiri people suffered in and outside the valley especially the businessmen and the student community only because they are Kashmiris. They are either branded as antinationals or terrorists. 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. Peer recounts Hilal telling him about the assault on Kashmiri students on board a train headed to Jammu from Delhi”(F.Naseer 2017:692)Hilal narrates:

‘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. (64).

The conflict has put mental stresses on people which generally precipitate mental disorders.it is natural that the atrocities of security forces have forced people to develop psychiatric disorders. Peer “elaborates how suffering, humiliation and other haunting memories of the conflict indelibly tell upon the psychological growth of the victim. We see this in the narrator’s father and the younger brother of his grandfather, both of whom, after closely escaping the deadly militant attacks, develop a serious psychological imbalance”.(M.Ghulam2015:036) Peer’s father, who nearly dies in a mine blast, develops a strange mental state wherein every loud sound petrifies him. And his grandfather’s younger brother develops a complete mental disorder after escaping a militant shooting.Peer, who had himself lived through these hard times, vividly captures the actual lived condition in a conflict zone:

Being a militant wasn’t only about getting arms training and fighting, it was also about being excluded from the joys of life. Being a militant was also about the near certainty of arrest, torture, death, and killing. (Peer 212).

Kashmir has witnessed various mass killings in which thousands of people were brutally killed. Peer’s journalistic memoir covers, most painfully, the brutalities and atrocities faced and experienced by the Kashmiri people. The interviewees are recorded telling their experiences right from the infamous Gawakadal massacre, An interviewee tells Peer 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).

It is a terrible and haunting experience for all and sundry.One more interviewee narrates the same incident to Peer that he witnessed, “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). This massacre is undoubtedly one of the saddest and most brutal act of violence of the last few decades.

Women too have been the soft targets of the conflict and were most victimized one way or the other. They are being oppressed, beaten, sexually harassed and killed. During the crackdown they were sexually harassed and raped by troops at their houses. Kunanposhpora is a village of district Kupwara. One day the males were asked to come out of their houses and assemble at a single place and the females were raped. It was a mass rape “... Indian army raped more than twenty women...” (Peer,156). The case of a bride named Mubeena of Chawalgam speaks volumes about the plight of women in Kashmir. She “had been raped by a group of Indian Paramilitary forces” (Peer, 150).

In the memoir Basharat Peer records his interviews with the affected people who were either the eyewitnesses or the victims of the violence prevalent in Kashmir. Maulvi Farooq, was assassinated by some unknown gunmen which came as a bolt from the blue to the people of the valley. They were in desperate mourning and thousands attended his funeral but the paramilitary forces showered bullets at the funeral procession killing lot of people. The tragic episode has been described thus:

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 gory happenings of the last couple of decades are presented in most pictorial language which itself is stained with the warmth of the bubbling blood of innocent Kashmiris. They have been the targets of the inhuman treatment given to them by the Indian security forces. Whether it is the disappearance of the people, mass rapes and killings, curfews or cordons, massacres, or woeful tales of interrogation centers the depiction and narration of all incidents lead to the conclusion that Kashmiri people are the worst hit casualties of the conundrum and conflict.

Conclusion

Peer depicts the violence that turns the Kashmir valley into one of the most heavily conflict-hit places on the planet, and a place of numberless human rights violations that ruin thousands of lives. He “encompasses a wide spectrum of violence in Kashmir, its repercussions on the common people and the unending loss suffered by Kashmiris”(F.Naseer2017:694). *Curfewed Night* is not only a book, it is the blend of lives of people in the conflict ridden state and it apprises us of the miseries and trauma of people. Peer has succeeded in chronicling the plight of Kashmiri people in a most realist manner bringing together various perspectives from those who have either been the victims or the eyewitnesses of the gory happenings. Almost all the tragic incidents

in the conflict torn Kashmir find a place in this narrative. It is the very amalgamation of literature and reporting/reportage that make this book a rather distinct property of literature and social sciences. Basharat Peer being one of the native writers in contemporary times to speak of Kashmiris captures the painfully scattered lives of these traumatized people who are forced to live a difficult life. He gives the voice to the untold stories that are part of the conflict of Kashmir.

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