

An Exploration of Liminality via the Kashmiri Identity in 'Short Stories of Akhtar Mohiuddin Translated by Syed Taffazul Hussain'

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Abstract

This paper seeks to represent the Kashmiri identity as trans-local, independent of geographic or religious attachments, and present Kashmir itself as a liminal space that allows for a continuous transmigration of the fundamental principles that Kashmiris draw their identities from. This is attempted through a subjective re-interpretation of epochal events in Kashmir's historicity via Akhtar Mohiuddin's translated anthology. The short story format was adopted by Kashmiri writers as a recognition of its rich mythological and oral tradition. But it also enabled them to drastically widen the contours of language to fit the grief, pain, and mayhem that was the cause of its inception as a narrative form, during the 'Partition of India'.

This paper attempts to underscore the ability of the short story form to record human conditions both semantic and specially the Kristevan semiotic. By defining Kashmir as a liminal space and the Kashmiri identity as trans-local this paper attempts to elucidate some of the more complex hurdles as understood by the ethnic Kashmiri in subverting its collective identity under the Indian or Pakistani super-identities.

Key Words: Kashmiri identity, liminality, culture, tradition, suffering, freedom.

The Kashmiri short story may be viewed as a form in opposition, a rebellion of perspective (lived vs learned & felt vs heard). Writers like Som Nath Zutshi, Tej Bahadur Bhan, Sofi Ghulam Muhammad, Ali Muhammad Lone and Akhtar Mohiuddin began writing in the Kashmiri language; a shift all of them adopted from Urdu, their initial language of choice. At first glance the shift seems counter-intuitive. One might ask why shift a narrative of protest to a more insular audience, why make it more inaccessible to the larger audiences of India and Pakistan most of whom knew and spoke the Urdu language to a degree? Why in the process of creating an identity also make it inaccessible? The answers are unclear and can only be inferred from a translation of these stories, a process these writers probably never intended to subject their stories to. It may in fact be argued that they intended for those wanting to learn more about their stories and in the process Kashmir itself to learn its native tongue, that they considered its language to be a large part of their own and Kashmir's collective identity and that an active physical engagement with this identity and thereby the individuals who ascribe to it was central to truly understanding the Kashmiri aesthetic in its entirety.

Politically however it was in opposition to the hugely popular 'Progressive Writer's Movement'. Formed in 1936 in Lucknow, the driving force behind this organization, whose Urdu name was Anjuman Taraqqi Pasand Musannifin, was Sajjad Zaheer. The other writers in the forefront were Dr Mulk Raj Anand, Dr Joshi

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Parshad, Pramod Ranjan Sengupta and Dr M. D. Taseer. Initially Urdu writers were at the forefront of 'Anjuman Taraqqi Pasand Musannifin', but eventually writers of nearly all Indian languages had similarly oriented organisations with largely similar aims: rebellion against the British Crown for the liberation and sovereignty of India; struggle against crony imperialism by Zamindar's and other such feudal landlords and a repatriation of the land for its farmers. Socialism resultantly was the cornerstone of its economic ideology. Munshi Premchand, Rabindranath Tagore, Maulvi Abdul Haq, Chiragh Hasan Hasrat, Abdul Majeed Salik, Maulana Hasrat Mohani, Josh Malihabadi, Professor Ahmed Ali, Dr Akhtar Hussain Raipuri, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Professor Majnun Gorakhpuri, Dr Rashid Jahan, Sahibzada Mahmood uz Zafar, Professor Manzoor Hussain and Dr Abdul Aleem were some of the stalwarts who supported Anjuman Taraqqi Pasand Musannifin either actively or in a contrived fashion.

The progressive movement in pre partitioned India influenced all spheres of human growth and cognition. It stood for liberation, sovereignty and democracy inspired in part by the French and Irish revolutions. It was a movement for freedom-loving writers who were opposed to hegemonic feudal Indian societies. Having writers like Krishan Chander, Ismat Chughtai, Saadat Hasan Manto, Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi, Ali Sardar Jafri, Sibte Hassan, Ehtesham Hussain, Mumtaz Hussain, Sahir Ludhianvi, Kaifi Azmi, Ali Abbas Hussaini, Makhdoom Mohiuddin, Khatir Ghaznavi, Raza Hamdani, M.Ibrahim Joyo, Sobho Gianchandani, amongst its galaxy of literary giants made it a literary movement to behold through the ages. Due to their largely similar aims and views the writers of this movement presented a view of their home-lands as an idealistic, near fantastical realm of infinite possibility and potential shrouded in near impenetrable enigma. This effect in some part was contrived to prop up the ideology of a homeland, a golden sparrow that had suffered endlessly under 'the Raj' but given wings of freedom and self rule would fly again on the winds of development and progress.

The later writers of the Kashmiri Literary Movement however seemed to feel no such compulsion. The Kashmiri short story chose instead to deeply engrave itself within the socio-political landscape of Kashmir and Kashmiri ethnicity. An ethnicity which found itself struggling to establish a unique ideological space of its own, to explore its unique identity amongst the two larger wholes of Pakistani and Indian identity that battled each other and it, to constantly claim it as themselves.

Kashmiri prose was forging ahead by quantum leaps in terms of expression-narrative, descriptive, expository and emotive- soon after 1950. This was apt as there was long -felt need, for there are a thousand things in life which could not be expressed by the poetry alone.

The two stories that were the first to appear in print were followed by more, like Nadim Rai ('Blight') and Sheena Pyato ('Keep Falling Snow'), Aziz Haroon's Zoon ('Moon') and 'Bram' (Illusion), Noor Mahammad Roshan's 'Neh Gata', Mirza Arif's

'Nanreare'. Rehman Rahi's 'Yeli Su Thana Pyav' ('When He was Born') and others. All the stories mentioned above belong to the progressive period coinciding with the raid on Kashmir by Pakistan. Naturally, they have some pervasive characteristics. There were only twelve writers of Kashmiri prose, most of whom had written earlier in Hindi or Urdu before switching over to Kashmiri. This necessitated the importing of new themes and new styles which were unknown during this period. However, the short story that developed in Kashmir despite a few temporary foreign plumes, was firmly rooted in its soil. Prose was now being used for the first time to portray characters from various strata of Kashmiri society, both Hindu and Muslim. The task these new writers faced was thus a challenge. They had to search for new words and phrases, to clothe new thoughts and feelings, to use old words and native colloquial idioms and apply them to new contexts and connotations, and to develop incisiveness and dialogue.

Mohiuddin's short stories are very brief. The language is simple and flows off the tongue, and all figures of speech are drawn from the everyday lives of common people. The first period of Kashmiri short story came to an end in 1955, with its most prominent new comer Akhtar Mohiuddin setting off a new trend. As T.K. Raina states:

"For in his short stories you find for the first time a realistic portrayal of characters and situations and deftly woven plots, unlike what the unreal world of progressiveness had presented. There is freshness of theme and style and a marked sensibility. His diction is remarkable, fresh and these are unforgettable characters. One also finds a vein of satire as in Dandivazun and Daryayi Hund Yazar." "Akhtar Mohi-u-din's short story is at once related to its time and environment, Kashmir's age old tradition of story-telling and modern fiction, and yet it remains in a fundamental sense Akhtar Mohiuddin's own story. Above all each of his stories emerges ultimately which comprehends a wide variety of experience and insight turned into genuine works of fictional art in which traditional and modern elements are organically fused together. Man is a Strange Breed 'reads like a virtual fairy-tale while stories like. The Hourie of Paradise' and Red Silken Pajamas' are bitterly realistic."

Kashmir and its unique culture and customs are given their due importance within the Mohiuddin's prose. He paints the cultural entities of Kashmir in colors that seem indivisible from its portraiture; painting scenes from everyday Kashmiri life that are highly evocative. He depicts mourning rites with the same deftness and sensitivity as he does a festivity. He enhances scenes by invoking the rhythms of the Kashmiri *tumbaknari* and *nout* as women prepare to dance the *rouff*. Even a depiction of making tea in a Kashmiri *samavar* seems like a paean to the land he loves so deeply.

Arnold Van Gennep a Belgian folklorist and the formulator of the liminal concept examined rites of passage in many cultures, and found them to have a three part procedural structure; even when those rites lacked continuity and were isolated from one another by time and reason. He defines '*rites de passage*' as "*rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age.*" wherein state is used as a metonym for the other terms and refers to any type of pervasive cultural condition. The three

stages are as follows : Stage 1 : Separation , Stage 2 : Margin or (*limen*), Stage 3 : Re-aggregation. The first and the last stages are self explanatory they engender a detachment of ritual subjects from their old places in society and return them internally and externally transformed to new places. Consequently perhaps the 2nd Stage ie the marginal/liminal is the most interesting in itself, but perhaps on account of its socio-cultural implications even more so as a framework for socio-cultural processes. The *limen* (liminal space) is often represented as a threshold, however in the case of prolonged transformative processes this threshold is a protracted one. The purpose of this research is to underscore and highlight the indefinite protraction of this liminal stage in the context of a collective Kashmiri identity, through the lens of Akhtar Mohiuddin's translated works.

Kashmir finds itself in the unique geo-political position of having its land divided into not two but three conflicted territories separated into themselves by three political powers with combatively different visions for the Kashmiri landmass as a whole. Between Pakistan Occupied Kashmir/Azad Kashmir, Jammu and Kashmir and Aksai Chin are borders and border walls, between which are No Man's Lands, a phenomenal liminal space, that has been rendered such by a conscious transformation of political identities on either side.

Kashmir as a liminal space is an idea easily observed and felt even when pointed out to the layperson, but as elusive a concept to critically underscore. This in part is due to the fact that Kashmiri literature or at the very least socialistic, activist, anarchic litterateurs and their narratives have either been persecuted with special discretion by the Indian army or their writing exists in one of the three colloquial tongues spoken most popularly amongst the people of the Valley.

In defence of his accession to India, Sheikh Abdullah, Civil Leader, Chief Minister and eventual convict explained himself to United Nations thus : "It was because I and my organization never believed in the formula that Muslims and Hindus form separate nations. We neither believe in the two-nation theory, nor in communal hatred or communalism itself. We believed that religion had no place in politics. Therefore, when we launched our movement of 'Quit Kashmir' it was not only Muslims who suffered, but our Hindu and Sikh comrades as well." Sheikh Abdullah seems to be saying that his decision to accede to India was based on a perceived ideological congruity with the Indian political ideology which supports a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multifarious identity at its core, or 'Unity in Diversity' as it is more popularly known. This identity is not concrete it constantly and continuously undergoes a process of transformation from one thing to another, this process of change and upheaval often viewed as a '*rite of passage*', from a formative ideological identity to a more tangible political one; is central to the concept of liminality itself as defined by Gennep and subsequently by Turner.

Victor Turner defines the constant cyclical process of order and chaos as is seen through the narratives of Mohiuddin, as *structure and anti-structure* wherein he sees these two phenomena as existing in a contentious relationship which contributes to

the creation of a social structure that exists somewhere between absolute draconian order and absolute anarchic chaos. As the only Muslim majority state in India, Jammu and Kashmir is constantly asked to assert either its political identity as post-partition India chose to do, or assert its Muslim identity as did Pakistan. So far Kashmir has chosen neither entirely.

So complex is this issue that it has been defined as a *triadic-nexus* between Indians, Pakistanis and Muslims of Kashmiri origin. A nexus that is exploited frequently in the politics of Kashmir. As is seen in Akhtar Mohiuddin's short story *Wannum Ma Banyim (I Can't Tell)* included in his book "*Wannun Ma Banyim*" and within Syed Taffazul Hussain's translated anthology. Within this tale Qaddir Chaan a government strongman accosts people without provocation in heavily policed areas, post the arrest of Sheik Abdullah an ex-Chief Minister of Kashmir. Eventually it is discovered by the writer himself that Qaddir is a mere pawn in a politician's larger schemes of inciting violence and fomenting trouble to justify the heavily militarized police presence consisting of an amalgamated police force from several states of India within Kashmir. Concurrently Qaddir Chaan's helpless obligation as a father also inspires the writer to enthuse his readers to fight for Kashmiri sovereignty for Qaddir's sake. This seems antithetical at first glance; why after all should one seek to make a seemingly detestable turncoat like Qaddir Chaan, a rallying call for the Kashmiri cause? But upon closer inspection it becomes apparent that Chaan's helplessness is in fact emblematic, his indecision is Kashmir's, as is his inability to control his destiny.

Akhtar Mohiuddin writes of this Kashmir, of a land and its people struggling to coalesce an identity. This idea is encapsulated beautifully in an instance where in his short story *Daag (The Stain)*, about the incendiary nature of human love and humanity that burns brightly in Kashmir during the horrific riots and communal tension of October 1947 when tribesmen invaded Kashmir in the hopes of liberating its Muslim population. The tale is an affirmation of the simple goodness of the Kashmiri that is central to the aesthetic of Kashmiriyat i.e. the sense of being Kashmiri. A triumph of humanity over communal evil, in this story a Punjabi refugee fleeing with his baby son has to ask a woman if she really is Muslim after she has breast-fed his starving baby boy. When both the boy's adopted parents and his biological Sikh father lament his loss to illness, the society questions the son's religious identity yet again, but not critically, instead it seems to dismiss the need for such identifiers altogether. And it does so yet again in the general debate over the offerings on his grave and their origins. Humanity continuously prevails and transcends all borders of race and creed in this beautiful story. Themes of death and massacre are dealt in a matter of fact way with the poet attempting in no way to eulogize these events or use an literary artifice to represent the subsequent loss. It is what is. Instead Mohiuddin's unique abilities are brought to the fore in his representation of individuals, vivid characterizations of people that typically delve beyond a fundamental representation that would perhaps have been more easily accessible to his audiences.

Kashmiri's have fought wars older than the history of the new world. They have fought Greeks and Romans and Persians and the Great Khan, and like its famed willow, Kashmiri's have only sprung back stronger. Each time a hope of a Kashmir rises to the air on wings of demilitarization and ethnic currency and each time it is shot down, by personal hubris and the needs of the military industrial complex and the politics of creed and caste. Kashmiri's have always fought for what they think of as theirs and others have always opposed, therefore since millennia of historical precedent exists on either sides of the conflict over Kashmir's identity, it is not unreasonable to believe therefore that post partition Kashmir exists neither as the Kashmir it used to be due to historical causality nor as Kashmir it wants to be due to severe geo-political opposition but as a Kashmir somewhere in between. The establishment wants to engender this uncertainty as well as it serves their purposes. This view is espoused in Mohiuddin's short story *Election Kashur Tarz* {Election Kashmiri Style}; wherein the day before the election the mob targets the house of an ethnic Kashmiri minority it sees as the other as they have red hair. Upon the declaration of the elections however the party with the red flags wins, Kashmiri's hoist red flags to show support and the persecution of the red-headed minority stops altogether. The process of othering however does not, with mob simply making another Kashmiri minority the target of their ire. The writer seems critical of this need to give vent to legitimate frustrations towards the central government of India a body seemingly more powerful than the Kashmiri collective, through a process of infighting and communal strife. This in turn is emblematic of a liminal process wherein identities in flux coalesce and disseminate literally at the press of a button several times over, and finding no outlet for its wrath chooses the path of least resistance. It shows a flaw in character that is at its core a microcosmic representation of the attitudes of the macrocosmic Indian identity towards Kashmir itself. The oppressed have become the oppressors and this to the writer is an egregious flaw.

Jalla Hind Dand Phalye (Jalla's Teeth) is perhaps the most evocative story within the collection, a two page story that finishes within the turn of a page. Its brevity however speaks volumes towards the impotent rage the average Kashmiri feels every day. Within this story Jalla who is a recently graduated student of law tries to defend her father who is accosted unnecessarily by a soldier while trying to cross the road. Her protesting only causes her to be beaten mercilessly by the soldiers as well. The next morning the father is seen scabbling on the road, he claim's he's looking for Jalila's teeth. This story is a highly nuanced representation of the brief glimmers of hope that a newly educated and seemingly empowered youth brings to the hope of a realized Kashmiri identity, only to run head-first into the immovable object that is the draconian hand of the Armed Forces Special Power's Act. Jalila's teeth are symbolic of the naiveté of the Kashmiri who would seem to have the audacity to believe an education warrants her the respect to cross a road without being beaten like a stray dog. That the writer offers no resolution but the tragic image of Jalila's father the donkey driver picking her teeth of the road, that the reader is not even informed whether Jalila is dead or alive are all symptomatic of the current plight of Kashmiri

youth who may be branded terrorists and anti-national at the whim of a stranger, who makes a value judgement on the basis of biases and rumours. The horrible of supposed liability that always seeks to point the finger at the man across the road or room in light of tyrannical ideals like those espoused by the AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) are a detriment to the realization of Kashmir's identity. There is a lack of accountability and a disrupted chain of command, both within the framework of the story and outside of it with respect to Kashmir as a whole politically, socially and economically speaking.

Kashmir's identity does indeed undergo change as do all political and cultural identities, but through Akhtar Mohiuddin's prose it is evinced that this change is glacial, especially when compared to the rest of the country.

In conclusion one would like to only add that the Kashmir we know of from our collective experience as tourists, outsiders and news-viewers is an identity that has been prescribed to it. To delve a little deeper one can glean with some effort the true natures, hopes and aspirations of this stunningly beautiful state. Kashmiris are not terrorists or revolutionaries, they are simply ordinary people trying to live ordinary lives to the best of their capabilities despite all the hurdles, as Akhtar Mohiuddin's prose demonstrates repeatedly. The constant and egregious interferences in its governance by the larger political ideologies of Pakistan, China and India leave it befuddled and stagnate, it goes nowhere and develops into a nothingness that cuts through the core of anyone who looks closely enough.

The march towards a realization of a collective Kashmiri identity is deeply enshrined within the liminal space between its political and religious identities. Such that the words of Mahjoor a famous Kashmiri poet, written nearly half a century before Independence and Kashmir's accession to India, still speak of the same yearnings that could one day form a foundation for the edifice of Kashmiriyat that exists now only in whispers and fevered dreams. His words are as follows :

Wala ho Bhagwano
 Nav Baharuk shaan paida kar
 Pholun Gul gath karan Bulbul
 tithee saman paida kar
 Chaman varan, wadaan shabnum
 Tchatith jamay, pareshan gul
 Gulan tay bul gulan andar, dubaray jaan paida kar.
 Gar wuznaawhakh basti gulan hunz traav zeerobam
 Bunyul kar vaav kar gagray kar toofan paida kar Arise.

O Gardener!
 And usher in the glory of a new spring.
 Create the climes for 'bulbuls to

Hover over full blown roses.
 Dew bemoans the garden's desolation.

Harassed roses have torn their garments.
Infuse New life into flowers and 'bulbuls'.

Root out the stringing nettle from The garden; it will harm flowers.
Wave after wave of hyacinths are coming, let them laugh.

Total immersion in the love of the motherland behooves man.
If you create this faith, surely you shall attain your goal.

Who will free you, O 'bulbul', While you bewail in the cage?
With your hands, work out your own salvation.

Power and pelf, bounties and royal grandeur are all
Within your reach reach and grasp.
You have only to identify them.

In the garden many birds sing but their notes are varied.
May God harmonize these into one effective melody.

If you must awaken this rosy habitat, give up the harp.
Bring about earthquakes and thunder, raise a tempest.

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