

Kashmiri Short Stories: Tales of Anguish and Alienation

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Kashmir is the crown of India known for its heavenly beauty of transparent streams, tall Chinars, well decorated houseboats and chiselled features of men and women garbed in colourfully embroidered *Pherons*. The melodious notes of *Santoor* echo the alleys of memory and remind the people of the magic words of poets like Kalhan and Lal Ded. Shalimar and Nishat gardens are imprinted on the imagination of the generations who were taught the lesson of Kashmir and grew up with the dream of spending some time in this heavenly abode of which it was so aptly said by the poet, "If there is heaven on this earth, it is here, it is here, it is here."

Rich in the bounties of Nature, Kashmir is a land of philosophical treatises, historical accounts and poetic outbursts. The history of creative writing in Kashmiri goes back to eleventh century when *Chhumma Sampradaya* was composed by an unknown author in some old form of Kashmiri. In thirteenth Century a classic called *Mahanaya Prakash* was composed by Sitikant. The fourteenth century is known by the great saint poet Noor-ud-din Wali and the great mystic poet Lal Ded.

G.R. Malik, in his foreword to the collection *Looking into the Heart of life* traces the history of short story in Kashmir to Gunadhya's *Brihatkatha*, Somdev's *Kathasaritsagar* and Kalhan's *Rajtarangini* which he describes as 'not entirely history'. He however, admits that novel has not yet bloomed as a favourite genre among the writers of Kashmir. The first attempt at written short story was made in the mid of fifteenth century in the form of *Banasur Katha* by Avtar Bhatt. Habba Khatoon (1553-1605) and Arnimaal (1737-78) are poets of immense lyrical intensity. Their evocative love poetry and Sufi strains have made them transcendental. Masnavi, a genre in Kashmiri poetry, which is a form of storytelling in verse, came into being towards the end of eighteenth century. Prose writing appeared only in the nineteenth century in the form of translation or propaganda pieces.

It was the beginning of the twentieth century that the short story in Kashmir started marking its presence. It was born with the progressive movement in Kashmir and it accepted the standards and values dictated by the movement unquestionably. Nationalism and the desire for reaching out to people inspired most of the writers to switch over to Kashmiri, even though they had started writing in Urdu. Dinanath Nadim's "Javabi Card" (Reply Card) and Somnath Jutshi's "Yeh Phol Ghash" (When there was Light) are the first two short stories written in Kashmiri published in the journal *Kong Posh*.

Neeraja Mattoo in her introduction to the short stories collection edited by her *The Stranger Beside Me*, talks of the psyche of the writers attempting to write short stories in Kashmiri at that time:

The beginnings in the genre were tentative and self-conscious, not only because most of the practitioners of the craft owed allegiance to an ideology, but also because of the direct influence of the "Progressive writers" of the sub-continent who

wrote in Urdu and Hindi. However, it was a strange love- hate relationship with the leading lights of the "Progressive Movement". On the one hand they were admired, even imitated, but on the other, their portrayal of Kashmir as a "beautiful land and its equally beautiful, innocent but poverty stricken and victimised people," provoked resentment as it generated stereotypes and its tone seemed to be condescending. (Mattoo 6)

The Kashmiri short stories written recently also follow the stereotypes which are criticised by Neeraja Mattoo. However, they do not have the condescending tone which is so offensive to the people of Kashmir. In fact, the idea of *Kashmiriat* or the Kashmiri identity is so intrinsically woven with the topography of the land that no account of Kashmiri life would be complete without the description of its streams, lakes, hills, trees and snow-clad peaks. The dresses, chiselled features of men and women, their attachment to their land and traditions, the passionate association with the folk and Sufi strains of music are the characteristic of the life of Kashmiri people captured by the writers of short story in the twentieth century also.

There is also a distinct voice of anguish and alienation in the short stories of the contemporary Kashmir. A land so glorified as a heaven on earth became in the mid of the last century the abode of suffering and pathos. Was it some evil eye or the curse of some saint that turned the lives of people of Kashmir into tales of woe is not known. The partition of India into India and Pakistan, the dilemma of the state of Kashmir and the ultimate merger with the Union of India were some of the historical events that sowed the seeds of an unending era of distrust, apathy and oppression leading to the alienation of the people of Kashmir.

This feeling of anguish and alienation is reflected in most of the stories of the collections *The Stranger Beside Me* (1994 rep 2007), *Looking into The Heart of Life* (2010) and *Faith and Frenzy* (2012).

The Stranger Beside Me (1994 rep 2007) is a collection of short stories translated and edited by Neeraja Mattoo. The collection carries fifteen short stories written by contemporary Kashmiri writers namely Hari Krishan Kaul, A.G. Athar, Hirday Krishan Kaul, Banshi 'Nirdosh', Nayeema Ahmad, Rattan Lal Shant, Ghulam Rasool 'Santosh', Nazir Jehangir, Akhtar Mohi-ud-din, Amin Kamil, Ali Mohammad Lone, Anees Hamdani and Avtar Krishan 'Rahbar'. *Faith and Frenzy* (2012) is a collection of seventeen stories written by K. L. Chowdhury, who is a physician by profession. He is a well-known Kashmiri poet and short story writer. *Looking into The Heart of Life* (2010) is a collection of twenty six short stories written by late Akhtar Mohi-ud-din compiled and edited by his son Azhar Hilal and the book has a foreword by Prof. G. R. Malik. The stories of these collections have been translated into English by a number of translators.

Hari Kishan Kaul's story "The Mourners" depicts effortlessly the impact of loss of employment opportunities in the state leading young men to adopt an apparently callous and indifferent attitude to life. The characters Tarzan, Pedro and Dakter appear to have become insensitive and alienated towards their families and society but the author makes us realize the plight of these people through a master stroke towards the end of the story when the two characters Tarzan and Pedro return after the funeral of

Pedro's mother, "Tarzan drew Pedro to himself and hugging him, said, "You lit your mother's pyre today with your own hands, but I was too small at that time-just six or seven months old, I could not even do this.

Both Tarzan and Pedro burst into tears." (Mattoo 25)

His story "Tomorrow" beautifully depicts the innocence of childhood and the playful life sometimes overshadowed by political clouds.

A.G. Athar's story "The Enemy" is a brief remark on the artificial divisions of national boundaries and the price the commoners have to pay in the wake of political hostility. "The Stranger Beside Me" is written by Hirday Koul Bharti. Its importance is evident from the fact that the title of this story has been chosen as the title of the collection. More than this the connotations of the title have a strong bearing upon the relationship between India and Kashmir. Though an integral part of India, Kashmiri people feel that the Indian Nation treats them as aliens, as strangers. Similar feelings are expressed in relation to the North East. The story raises the issue of identity which is so fervently raised among the people of this country. The monarch once pronounces that whoever has a mole is not a part of "their" fraternity. The narrator undergoes a painful treatment of stinging by a scorpion to get his mole removed since it symbolises a stigma. Sometimes later, the name monarch pronounces the mole as a beauty symbol and the stranger beside the narrator undergoes similar treatment to obtain a mole on his cheek. The concluding lines of the story are pregnant with several contemporary connotations, "From his appearance no one could doubt his breed or authenticity. Afterwards he went his way and I mine. But he and I remain similar in one report. There is venom in him and there is venom in me."

Bansi "Nirdosh" 's touching story "To Slavery Born" depicts the predicament of modern man oscillating between misery, hope and disillusionment. The expectation of an older generation from the younger one to provide security and comfort in their old age is thwarted on the latter seem to be acting on the individualistic self-centred capitalistic model of life where individual comfort and satisfaction is all that one cares for. The disconnect created by this self-centred approach within the protagonist Sansar Chand's family touches the heart of the readers. Nayeema Ahmed's story "I am Still Alive" seems to echo the hopelessness of the modern man so magnificent expressed by T.S. Eliot in his epic poem "The Wasteland". The metaphors of vultures, crows, "dead bodies" destined to live for a thousand years, desert with plenty of drinking water but the unquenchable thirst of the narrator all of these remind the readers of the "Life in Death" of the modern man. Rattan Lal "Shant" 's story "A New Triangle" talks of the clash of ego among middle class educated couple, their alienation and ultimate reunion. The author succeeds immensely in exploring the psyche of the strife-torn couple. "The Voice", written by Ghulam Rasool 'Santosh', is a story woven around myth, fantasy and bizarre. The name of protagonist "Karma" is also symbolic, touching on the philosophy of determinism.

"The Boy Is Guilty", written by Nazir Jehengir, presents sarcastic account of the way in which passions are roused on flimsy grounds leading to violence and riots-leaving the innocent people suffer. The story succeeds immensely in presenting a realistic way the rise of pace of the progress of events with the rising passions of the

people driven mostly by ignorance, high headedness and hypocrisy. This collection of stories has a story called "The Second Meeting" which vaguely reminds the readers of W.B. Yeats. "The Second Coming", written by the master storyteller of Kashmir Akhtar Mohi-Ud-din the story delves into past with all its glory and laments its loss in the present. The symbolism is deeply embedded in the narration that flows almost breathlessly. Amin Kamil's "The Grave Robber" is set in the typical Kashmiri background. The description of places and people, the names and language of conversation – all are drawn from the life of the people of Kashmir. The story describes a village which is hit by a menace of a grave robber who steals away the shrouds from the graves. Once he is dead people heave a sigh of relief. But soon report of robbing the shrouds start appearing. The worst part is that how the corpses are left naked outside the graves. The people who had cursed the earlier grave robber now bless him and curse the latter consigning him to the flames of hell in their Ali Mohammed Lone's story "The Void" illustrates explicitly the existential anxiety of the modern man alienated from his surroundings, relatives, friends and also from his own self. There is a void within and gets manifested in a hollowness that is seen in all aspects and contours of life. The author attempts to express this:

As for the vacuum –what can I do about it? It keeps growing day by day-rippling out in ever-widening circles to the extent that the whole universe appears like an atom within it, even smaller. But who can explain this? What can be done about it?

Perhaps your existence has meaning for you. But what use am I? Why do I exist? Or perhaps, I Should ask, why do I not exist? (124)

Amin Kamil's story "The Cattle Pound" is a satire on the governance which even in today's democracy is not much different from the monarchy in which the monarch wielded absolute power and exercised it at his will and whims. Through the example of cows being driven to the cattle pound simply to implement an arbitrary order of a police officer, the author remarks at the despotic state and the helplessness of the people who are subjected to large scale injustice with no one willing to listen to their woes Avtar Krishna "Rehbar's story "Anguish" also depicts the lost glory Kashmir through the water of Jhelum which is polluted and the narrator, who had been in love with the river does not have the heart to take a dip in its water now. The stories in this collection record the spectacle of the lives of the people of Kashmir as witnessed in the post-independence period – Neerja Mattoo's illuminating introduction and lucid translation of stories helps one understand the ethos of Kashmir of today.

Akhtar Mohi-Ud-din, whose story "The Second Meeting" is included in the collection *The Stranger Beside Me* is a celebrated short story writer of Kashmir. His stories translated by a member of people, have been compiled in the form of a collection titled *Looking Into The Heart of Life* compiled and edited by his son Azhar Hilal. There are some twenty six stories which depict different facets of Kashmiri life, sometimes symbolically but often in realistic tone. The first story of Mohi-ud-din's collection *Looking into The Heart of Life* is titled "Man is a Strange Breed". This story narrates the infatuation which the people of Kashmir have towards their land. The protagonist Mallah Subhan's experience of losing his son and later the daughter of one of his old-time clients conveys the extent of maddening obsession developed in these characters who chose to end their lives in a moment which they think's full of

the :ultimate bliss". The final words spoken by Memsahab reveal this state of mind, "I have found the way.....Ramzan is the guide.....to set one's spirit free and lose one's breath in beauty is life. I too will find life (Mohi-ud-din 30)

Talking about the stories of Akhtat Mohi-ud-din G.R. Malik says, "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"(Mohi-ud-din 7)

The stories have an ending which is often abstract and mysterious. The action is not logically concluded. In many stories the author/narrator seems to reflect upon the future possibilities, mostly in abstraction. One feature that surfaces most strongly in all the stories is the locale and culture of Kashmir. "The Houri of Paradise" shows the typical feudal atmosphere in which a little happening in the feudal lords' family appears to affect the entire population of his territory. It also shows the fear among the masses that was inspired by the supposed wrath of the land lord. It seems to be no less than the fear of divine wrath.

Some stories like "Thus Spoke Baba" are more or less caricatures of people who might have impressed the author. The stories like "Growth" and "Destiny" are like monologues through which certain impressions are represented in a lurid and fluid stream of prose. The absence of episodes or events is not felt due to the pace of narration. "The Soldier" and "My Lips are Sealed" are stories that reflect the angst and disgust towards the agencies of state, particularly the security forces which are depicted as tools of oppression, tyranny and torture. The lips are sealed yet the protest cannot be silenced, seems to be the message of these stories.

The stories collected in *The Stranger Beside Me* and *Looking Into The Heart of Life* reflect the suffering or joys of Hindu or Muslim population. There is another collection of short stories by Kundan Lal Chowdhury, a doctor by profession. He has focused on the issue of communal discord and the issue of the identity of Kashmiri Pandits who had to flee from Kashmir in 1990s. These stories add an important facet of the reality of Kashmir of the twentieth and twenty first century.

"The Poplar of Discord" is a story woven around a set of Poplar trees symbolising the old values that have characterised Kashmiri life. The discord is about the decision of the younger generation who has migrated from Kashmir and settled in Mumbai, to fell the trees. The discord, also involving matters of property takes the toll of the life of father in the family. The author's comment towards the end of the story sums up the message beautifully, "The pettiness that lies deep within us defies lineage and upbringing. It defies reason." (Chowdhury15)

Stories like "The Guru's Last Wish" and "Price of Lamb" are beautiful examples of human emotions ruling the characters and raising them to great heights of humanitarian values. Set in the infatuating background of the natural beauty of Kashmir, they provide an iconoclastic picture of the life in the "Heaven on Earth".

This serenity and joyousness is shattered the moment we come across the story "Faith and Frenzy", which is also the title of the collection. This is the story of the

strife-torn and troubled Kashmir where individual and communal interests reign over the essential unity of *Kashmiriat*. This story describes how innocent people are harassed, tortured and driven out of Kashmir in the name of religion. Also, it holds the young Zehadis responsible for the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits. How far this understanding stands the test of history is a matter of research. Other stories like "Premonition", "Saligram's Secret", "Gulla of Prang" etc. also depict the tales of anguish as Kashmir went through bad times. Though the author seems to be advocating the cause of Kashmiri Pandits, he is conscious of the fact that ordinary Kashmiri Muslims have no role in the militancy. Therefore he writes the story called "What Does a Pandit Look Like" in which the fear of the children of the valley is dispelled when they interact with the protagonist Mohan Lal. Not only this, the women of the neighbouring families come in the hall and join in a chorus singing the song about the return of the protagonist to the valley:

Do you know, Mohan Lal is back with us here?

Do you know, a son has returned to his mother?

Pray, who cast his evil eye on Kashmir? (Chowdhury152)

The three collections taken into consideration may not be successful in presenting the full or complete picture of the reality of Kashmir but they do reveal a slice of life which could be seen around even in the present time. The stories, though in translation, succeed in presenting the ethos of Kashmiri life through the description of landscape, characters and the situations. The plots selected are integrated fully with the mood of the surrounding. There are characters which seem to be alienated from the political system of the Indian Union and display a strong feeling of distrust. The authors have no hesitation in saying unequivocally that the people of Kashmir have been abandoned and left at the mercy of the armed forces on one hand and the militants on the other. The stories in these collections are modern stories written in the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty first century. They suggest that there is a need of a full time study of the literature of Kashmir by the people outside the state so that there is greater integration and development of understanding between the people of mainland and Kashmir.

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