

Chronicling the Pain of Conflict-hit Kashmiris: A Study of Mirza Waheed's *The Book of Gold Leaves*

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Abstract

Kashmir being the most militarised zone in the world, has suffered miserably and its people are the most victimised as they are the worst casualties of conflict. Mirza Waheed being one of the native writers in contemporary times to speak of Kashmiris captures the painfully scattered lives of these traumatised 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. Waheed writes with a palpable affection for Kashmir and its peoples and gives glimpses of dozens of people whose fragile, fascinating lives are so ruthlessly marred by this conundrum.

The present paper is a study on how his novel *The Book of Gold Leaves* is engaged with the tumult and violence prevalent in Kashmir and how well it depicts the pain and sufferings of the oppressed Kashmiris who have been suffering since the onset of insurgency, counter- insurgency and other gory happenings.

Keywords: Kashmir, Victimised, Militarized zone, Contemporary, Conflict, Ruthlessly, Indian forces

Chronique de la douleur des Cachemires en conflit: étude du livre de Mirza Waheed sur <<Les feuilles d'or>>

Résumé

Le Cachemire, étant la zone la plus militarisée zone dans le monde, a souffert terriblement et ses habitants sont les plus victimisés parce qu'ils sont les pires victimes du conflit. Mirza Waheed, étant l'un des écrivains natifs de nos temps qui parle des Cachemires prisonniers, des vies douloureusement dispersées des gens traumatisés, qui sont obligés à vivre une vie difficile. Il raconte des histoires jamais racontées qui sont partie du conflit de Cachemire. Waheed écrit avec une affection palpable pour le Cachemire et ses habitants et jette un coup d'œil sur douzaines de personnes dont les vies fragiles et fascinantes sont si impitoyablement gâchée par cette énigme.

Le présent article est une étude sur la façon dont son roman *Le livre des feuilles d'or* est engagé dans le tumulte et la violence qui prévalent au Cachemire et comment il décrit la douleur et les souffrances des Cachemiris opprimés qui souffrent depuis le début de l'insurrection. insurrection et autres événements sanglants.

Mots-clés: Cachemire, victimisé, zone militarisée, contemporain, conflit, impitoyable, des forces indiennes

1. Introduction

The Book of Gold Leaves written in 2014 received good response from the readers and was recently Long-Listed for UK's Folio Prize. It is the second novel by the author set in early 90's of Kashmir; the book revolves round a love story between Roohi, a young Sunni (a sect of Islamic faith) woman, and Faiz a Shia (other sect of Islamic faith) Papier Maché artist, set in Srinagar. Najeeb Mubarki rightly says that *The Book of Gold Leaves* largely deals with Kashmiri human experiences during the darkest periods of the '90s, when violence so peaked, was so nakedly savage.' Since

Waheed is the contemporary native Kashmiri writer having witnessed the conditions of conflict first hand the assertions of Barbara Harlow are supported by his novel. Harlow asserts that:

Resistance narratives embedded...in the historical and material conditions of their production and [contain] the allegiances and active participation of their authors...in the political events of their countries, [to] testify the nature of struggle for liberation (98. As cited by Allaie Iram)

The novel provides “an insight about the everyday life as it used to be in war-torn Kashmir in the early 90’s, and particularly how conflict affects the normal life, and how military presence impacts on every affair of the life including the love affair.” (K.Towseef:2015) In the 1990s Kashmir was simmering with political strife and rebellion, and Srinagar was engulfed in the gathering storm. Mirza Waheed depicts beautifully how the security agencies were always crippling the normal cycle of life in Kashmir by instilling fear and threat into the common masses. It is a known fact that “there 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, p. 193) People are continuously killed, tortured and made to suffer disproportionately. The killings are unending and people are imprisoned. Roohi describes the situation to Faiz thus:

People are dying again. People are being killed like flies. I mean these are actual people killed on street every day... it seems the angle of death is taking away our people. (p210)The city is a lightless prison now. No one can stir without the permission of a soldier. I sometimes imagine we are in a vast coop with thousands of them...the soldiers kill everyday... (p.211)

The conflict of Kashmir affects every sphere of life where people of all ages are treated ruthlessly. Innocent people are shot dead in broad daylight. The course of love of youth in Kashmir is depicted as a pack of worries, miseries and unpredictable happenings. Lovers never enjoy the freedom they are usually believed to in conflict torn Kashmir.

2. Discussion

Mirza Waheed’s novel chronicles the love affair between Faiz and Roohi. It depicts a love story of these two youngsters who meet and fall in love in a war-torn Kashmir. Roohi who “looks like lightning” is a beautiful, educated, Sunni girl. Faiz, the talented, young Shia papier-mâché artist meets Roohi, one evening in the courtyards of their local shrine in the heart of Srinagar. They immediately fall for one another. She has a dream of her own and has rejected many marriage offers as she was looking for someone unique in her life:

The truth is that Roohi, in spite of all her bravery, was in pain. All these years of waiting at her window, her secret has been her secret. Except Naseem Aunty, who always had some idea of Roohi’s restless heart, she has never allowed anyone into her dream world. (p.27)

Waheed gives an in-depth detailed account of daily life in Kashmir in the 90’s usually called the dark days of Kashmiri history. Kashmir was known as the land of curfews and cordons where people lived a chocking life and all their day to day works were either suspended for days or they were forced to live an imprisoned life. The novelist has shown how the imposition of unnecessary curfews affected the lives of the lovers and the people in general:

...the whole city under a round-the-clock curfew now. All movements proscribed. All meetings banned. All life besieged. A deathly calm has spread everywhere, as soldiers circle the area from all the sides. They are near the houses and at the mouths of the lanes at the

waterfronts and on the bridges...in the school at Bohri Kadal... and outside the gates to the shrine. (p. 87- 88)

The killings of people in Kashmir forced their relatives to pick up guns as a form of revenge. Fatima and other children are killed in a bus by a soldier, who keeps firing his machine gun even when he sees the minibus. Faiz is disturbed by the killing of his godmother Fatima, whom he lovingly calls Fatee', which gives him sleepless nights and he "couldn't take it anymore," finally opted for arms training across the border. He describes his mental trauma to Roohi thus:

I am sorry I left you. I did not have a choice. It was physically impossible for me to remain the way I was in those last days. I did not know that being unable to sleep could drive a person mad. Perhaps I was mad. I couldn't forgive them for killing Fatee' Bajee'. How can I. (p.181)

In Kashmir, although people wanted to live a peaceful life, the oppression of the security forces compelled them to take painful routes, i.e. joining the uprising. All the other areas of life are affected tremendously and the romantic relations in conflict-torn Kashmir don't go unaffected. Since Waheed's novel keeps the bloodshed to the background of a romance, the romance is painted with innocence, passion and so much charm that it easily melts the readers' hearts for the two love birds. It describes nicely how Faiz and Roohi, were separated by the conflict but the separation could not damage the fabric of their relation. Faiz crosses over to the other side of the LoC to receive arms training to fight the soldiers who have inflicted personal and collective pain on him and others round him. He is the example of those Kashmiris who were suffering from both the inner and outer conflict –personal as well as national. Faiz narrates his painful feelings of separation to Roohi in a letter:

Things go round and round in my head. I try to picture you but your face appears only briefly and then vanishes. Then I get restless and drink a lot of water...I see your hair suddenly your hands, a glimpse of your neck, but I can't see your eyes ... I am dying to see you. (p.182)

Many human rights violations in Kashmir find a place in the novel like enforced disappearances, occupation of the schools by forces and gruesome violence. Being part of a terror campaign and torture, Miss Kouls School is taken over by the forces which deprives the children the right to education as they are not sent to school by the parents because of the presence of forces in the school. This is what happened throughout the whole valley in 90's. The *Zaal*, in the novel, with "its nose hound shaped" (p.98) is an embodiment of the terror and violence. Faiz is encouraged by his elder brother to leave, fearing that Faiz, like others, will be captured by the *Zaal* too. Since it grabs people and drops them in troubled lands "no one walks on the road anymore, lest the *Zaal* may appear again and swoop them away"(p.213), one is reminded of the enforced disappearances which were carried in Kashmir in quite mysterious ways:

There was a raid on the street. They ...took away people...it was strange. I don't know what it was. I can't describe it... There was some new kind of military truck, very big, very fast...They have sent some new kind of truck that drives very fast and grabs people. It is like a net that arrests people on the street. No, not arrests, it captures them. Sort of swallows them. It is a Zaaal.(p.101)

Kashmiris have been deprived of the right to enjoy life. They could not visit the places of their own. They were treated with suspicion and regarded as aliens in their own land. Waheed has depicted that the people especially the romantic lovers were denied the entry to the places of

recreation which shows how Kashmiris were made to suffer at every front. Roohi is much disappointed to say that:

The Palace of the Faeries and the Royal Spring, the Shankaracharya Temple and Takht-e-Sulaiman are all barred to us. Rumi says soldiers live their too, and only government officials, army officers, VIPs from Delhi and their families can visit. (p.213)

Descriptions of military domination and suffering of people are prominent in the story. Kashmir being the most militarized state had been changed in a garrison and the movement of the people had been restricted. Tassadque says that “hopes of ordinary people lie shattered... no one in the valley has any time to contemplate the future”(Tassadque:2015)A wave of threat and insecurity in the state is best described as:

People now leave the streets and the shrine to the dogs at night, no one comes out...lovers sundered as soon as the soldier from the plains begins his nocturnal vigil...The area's garrulous poets and satirists...stay indoors now not just when it is dark but during the day as well coming out only when it is essential, to buy bread and milk. It is said the ink in their pens has dried up. (p.106)

In the war torn state “the relationship of the two central characters is forged in the crucible of conflict and grows intense as the valley of Kashmir is gripped by violence and turmoil. Since the novel is set in the most turbulent, volatile and darkest era of Kashmir, it depicts the situation most faithfully. Kashmir of 1990's was a zone of such acute violence and militarisation and human rights violation that it mutates the lives of everyone around. All the routines of life got threatened and cordons, curfews, abductions and enforced disappearances were common. The mass killings were rampant. Dozens were killed mercilessly. Threats enveloped the valley as death was on prowl. Indian forces unleashed terrors of death. In a letter Roohi describes the condition of Kashmir to Faiz which sends a shiver down the spine:

The soldiers ensure there is a blood soaked headline in the papers every day. Two weeks ago, they killed seventeen boys across Zaine` Kadal Bridge, shot them all dead after trapping them in a lane...the soldiers were so blind with rage that they wouldn't stop firing even after the boys were all dead, mown down next to filthy drains. They continued shooting until no one was left standing...Zaitun's little brother Uzair was shot in the face...Zaitun slept for three nights by his grave in the Martyr's Graveyard...it is so mad here.(p.211-212)

Waheed, by writing this love story, and putting it in the backdrop of a violent, turbulent period, full of drama and pain deserves literary engagement and appreciation. He has fairly depicted that violence is becoming the norm, creeping into society, The novel captures the tragedy and senseless cycle of violence in Kashmir . This love story painfully sways in the backdrop of brutal Kashmiri violence during the 90s.It is a desperate tale of love, depicting worst casualties of conflict and chaos.

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