



MIRZA WAHEED'S *THE BOOK OF GOLD LEAVES*: VOICING THE AGONY OF KASHMIRIS

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ABSTRACT

The Kashmir conflict has by now spanned over more than sixty years after India gained its freedom from British colonial masters in 1947 and vis-a-vis the subcontinent got divided into two separate countries. The root cause of alienation of the Kashmir is towards the central government of India simultaneously started to erupt soon after the partition which gradually snowballed into an intense dispute and came known to the world's eye. For the Muslim majority population in Kashmir the oppressed donned the role of the oppressor. Kashmir Conflict has evolved a wide range of writing from its own land as a kind of discourse on it. In the light of the analysis, Mirza Waheed's novel *The Book of Gold Leaves* (2014) provides an account of the history and experience related to the conflict.

KEY-WORDS: Oppression, History, Resistance, *The Book of Gold Leaves*, Resistance Literature.

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DISCUSSION

The history of Kashmir is replete with episodes like political un-stability, genocide, custodial killings, torture, arbitrary-arrests, arson, bloodshed, mass rapes, bloodshed, and enforced disappearances. However, people of Kashmir have demonstrated a distinct resistance for their existence and self determination. The dispute evolved over the unfulfilled promise of plebiscite regarding Kashmir's status that further strained its relation with India. In 1987, after the faulty elections were held in Kashmir, it was "ensured that the last viable avenue for the expression of political discontent was blocked" (Ganguly 92). The early resistance of 1990's "when massive demonstrations for *azaadi* (freedom) broke out in the city of Srinagar and other Valley towns, and panicked federal paramilitary police sent by New Delhi to contain the

unrest opened fire, killing hundreds of protesters" (Bose 179) led to the full-fledged resistance movement. Mirza Waheed's *The Book of Gold Leaves* brings alive the horrors of this period which have not yet ceased to haunt.

Mirza Waheed is a contemporary English writer and a native of Kashmir. Being born and brought up in Kashmir he has witnessed the turmoil first hand and as such his novel *The Book of Gold Leaves* supports Barbara Harlow's assertion 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 to the nature of the struggle for liberation (98).

The Book of Gold Leaves (2014) is Mirza Waheed's second novel after his highly acclaimed and well received *The Collaborator* (2011). The present novel under study is also a powerful one. *The Book of Gold Leaves* is set in the tumultuous and volatile phase of 1990's of Kashmir and executes through a Sunni-Shia love story during a harsh war. The novel is divided into four parts namely – *Shadows by the River*, *Echoes, In Another Country*, and *A Terrible Beauty is Born*, through which the book traces the trajectory of Kashmir conflict and the associated resistance movement. The focus of the novel is on its characters and how they deal with their outer world.

The Book of Gold Leaves begins with introducing Mir family of the downtown city called Khanqah. They belong to the Shia sect of Islamic faith. Their son Faiz, is a papier-mache artist whose life encompasses politics, war and romance. We are also introduced to Roohi, her family and finally to the fervent relationship between Faiz and Roohi.

Faiz, a twenty year old boy is the protagonist of the novel whose passion is to create *Falaknuma* (like the sky) – a painting of real imagination and beauty. Faiz supports his family by earning whatever he can from painting pencil boxes which gets shipped to Calgary in Canada.

[H]e paints deer, cypresses, tall rose bushes, chinar leaves, Mughal princes on hunting trips with their high elephants, on the pencil boxes ... Five hundred boxes in thirty days. Eight rupees per piece (Waheed 3).

Roohi, the female protagonist, is twenty one year old young woman, who unlike Faiz is well educated and has just graduated. Roohi is a Sunni girl, a dreamer of dreams and one who always prays for true love in her life. Waheed writes:

Roohi is prostrate before her God. ... she begs Khoda Saeb to make her one wish come true, for the boy of her dreams to come and take her away. Roohi wants a love story (Waheed 8).

Faiz sees Roohi for the first time, across the courtyard of a shrine, when Roohi is letting her long hair down by the window. But both meet each other at the holy shrine of Khanqah- e-moula which is

situated in the Srinagar city called Khanqah and instantly fall for each other. The beautiful love story begins but unfortunately in the disturbed land and at the time of war. Since the backdrop of the novel is the early 90's of Kashmir – the decade which turns the beautiful valley into a militarized fort, when thousands of its men and women either die or disappear forever. At this time their relationship also gets affected by the engrossing war outside. On the one hand is the love story evolving between the two lovers and on the other is brutal war engulfing Kashmir and its natives.

During the course of novel the routinely life of Srinagar gets threatened. For instance the local conversations at a road-side shop, the long night walks which Faiz often takes by the Jhelum banks, the gossips of little school-girls like Farhat, the familiar sight of Pandit Madan Koul, all of them get disturbed and engrossed by the events outside.

With the rise of the conflict the Indian occupational forces start pouring into the region of Kashmir. The author at this point introduces other important characters like Major Sumit Kumar, a military officer known for his anti-insurgency tactics, educationists like Professor Madan Koul, a former principal at the Gandhi College and his daughter Shanta Koul who is a principal at a local girl's school. It is Miss Koul's school which is first taken by the Indian soldiers for setting up their barracks. Though it is informed to be a temporary stepping in of army but it later becomes a permanent feature. The reference is to Kashmir being the highest militarized zone. Through this takeover we witness the Indian troops first entering the area. The students of this local school eventually stop coming to the school as by now violence, unrest, and torture increases and the omnipresence of army also discouraged the parents to send their wards outside their homes even if it meant at the cost of their children's education.

In one of the cross-firings, Faiz's godmother, Fatima gets killed along with many school children. This event further enhances the violence and turmoil both in the area as well as in the mind of Faiz who has now decided to join the uprising. Before leaving for arms training Faiz wants to meet Roohi but cannot do so because of curfew

that is imposed by the authorities. The inconvenience that Kashmiris face during curfews is brought forth through Faiz:

Where is Roohi? He wants to meet her and tell her everything. But they cannot meet, as Khanqah, the whole city, under a round-the-clock curfew now. All movement 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, on the empty roads and inside their many bunkers, in the school at Bohir Kadal, and at the temple in the water in Namchabal, by the ghats of the Jhelum and outside the gates to the shrine (Waheed 87-88).

Faiz's decision is firm as he says, "I might as well put myself to some use" (Waheed 108) yet he is also sure that his leaving won't affect his relation with Roohi. He is quite sure that Roohi will wait till he returns. "I will be back soon and Roohi will surely wait for me" (Waheed 108). Faiz's elder brother encourages him to leave because he is afraid that if not gone Faiz will be disappear through the "Zaal" like many other young boys and men did. Waheed calls "Zaal", to a vehicle "some kind of a military truck, very big, very fast, and very strange" (Waheed 101). It had a "jaw like grip" and is "like a net that arrests people on the street. No, not arrests, it captures them. Sort of swallows them. It's a Zaal" (Waheed 101). The reference is actually to the gruesome reality of enforced disappearances in Kashmir which started taking place from late 1980's.

Finally, the determined Faiz leaves behind everything to receive arms training so that when he comes back he can fight the oppressors and somewhat help his people. He considers it his duty. "It's not as if I am doing something unpleasant. It's my duty, too" (Waheed 128) says Faiz to the Engineer who himself has crossed the border to support the cause. While tracing the journey of Faiz in the training camps Mirza Waheed through his portrayal of characters like the Engineer reveal that how highly educated men had joined the resistance

struggle to relieve their people from the clutches of oppressive masters.

While both Faiz and Roohi are miles apart yet both of them manage to send letters to each other confirming what the outer world and inner world of each is going through.

Roohi writes to Faiz:

I listened to the radio every night for two months in case you'd sent me a message or a song ... too much has happened here since. ... Lacks of people are out every day. You know what I miss the most? The waiting. ... I miss you. When you come back to me, I will tell you everything (Waheed 173-175).

Faiz replies:

I am sorry I left you. I did not have a choice. ... It's the nights that are difficult here, Roohi. I do manage to sleep now but it takes time. ... I am dying to see you. The silliest thing I have done is not to carry a photo of you (Waheed 181-182).

Meanwhile, violence increases day by day and countless innocents get brutally murdered. This is evident in one of the Roohi's letters to Faiz:

People are being killed like flies. I mean, these are actual people killed on the streets every day. ... they read out the toll on the evening news as if they were talking about the amount of rainfall during the day. ... The city is like a lightless prison now. No one can stir without the permission of the soldiers. I sometimes imagine we are in a vast coop with thousands of them circling around it, and they hit out at my hand if I try to get some air (Waheed 209- 210).

After completing his training of handling weapons Faiz returns back his home and to roohi and fights against the oppressors. He is now known as the "artist-turned-militant". While the war is still going on and the Kashmiri Muslims are undergoing colossal suffering, Kashmiri Pandits too had to face the brunt of the conflict in terms of mass exodus from their roots. The exodus of Pandits from valley during 90's was another level of shock and pain that Kashmiri Muslims had to face. Mirza Waheed refers to the Kashmiri Pandit mass exodus in the novel

through Master Dinnath's family and Principal Shanta Koul's leaving. This unfortunate consequence of the conflict is also powerfully evoked by the author. The novel exemplifies this reality that how Kashmiri Muslims were pleading their Pandit brethren to stay back. In the novel Mir Zafar Ali while requesting to Dinnath not to leave says:

"Dinanath! Come on, please don't leave.

This is your home. ... Please don't punish us all for the sins of few" (Waheed 262-263).

Mirza Waheed through this novel – *The Book of Gold Leaves* makes the traumatic experience of the life in conflict ridden zone like Kashmir quite evident. His novel reveals to the brutalities of his times that he is a witness to. The book is a distressing story that unfolds the agony of a region and culture under conflict. Its author has done a commendable job in voicing the agony which is interwoven by the gruesome conflict.

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