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## LITERARY EVOLUTION IN KASHMIR: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

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### ABSTRACT

Kashmir has a well established literary tradition of its own. It is also very well known that Kashmiri language is not the only language that Kashmiri writers take recourse to while expressing their literary imagination. Kashmiris have and continue to produce literature in various languages like Sanskrit, Kashmiri, Persian, Urdu, Hindi and now English. This implies that the linguistic interchange which is a characteristic of Kashmiri cultural has greatly benefitted its literary tradition too besides the interchange of communication. Over a long period of time, Kashmiri literary tradition has certainly evolved from different linguistic and non-linguistic influences. With its contemporary English writers coming up on the literary horizon, one can say, Kashmir's literary expression is undergoing a gradual linguistic shift from Kashmiri to English which is precisely the theme that this particular paper endeavours to explore but not without looking at the various phases of the broader Kashmiri literary tradition. It will also look at how the contemporary literary culture of Kashmir is being influenced by the specific historical contingencies that it is beset with from the last three decades.

Keywords:- Kashmir, Kashmiri Literature, Kashmiri Poetry, Mysticism, Tradition, Culture, Conflict.

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For centuries, Kashmiri literature was said to be characterized by its peculiar quintessence of mysticism in which the idea of Kashmiriyat was nourished and propagated. The Sufi mystic influence is evident in the poetry of early Kashmiri poets like Lala Ded and Nund Rishi. In its essence, Kashmiriyat was characterized by an emphasis on the universal values of pluralism and tolerance. Scholars have often alluded to the "sufi/mystic tradition in Kashmiri poetry" as a case in point of "exemplary tolerance between different sects professing various religions" (Dhar 44). The personality of Lala Arifa, or, Lal Ded, or, Laleshwari, as she is

commonly known among Kashmiris, is central to the memory of *Kashmiriyat* as it was through her poetry that the idea received its real essence. Outlining her universal mystical vision, Lala observes:

Shiva abides in all that is, everywhere  
Then do not distinguish between a Hindu and Muslim.  
If thou art wise, know thyself  
That is true knowledge of the Lord.  
I gave up falsehood, deceit, untruth,  
I saw the one in all fellow beings, and  
Preached the same doctrine to the mind.

What then is the inhibition in eating  
The food offered by a fellow human being? (Lal  
Ded qtd in Zutshi 22)

Lal Ded's tradition was carried forward by a tradition of mystics or sufis through successive centuries. These sages or mystics or sufis are revered by all Kashmiris regardless of their religious belongings. Sheikhul Aalam, or, Sheikh Nooruddin, or, Nund Reshi (b. 1378), is regarded as Lal Ded's spiritual heir. His personality, revered by both Pandits and Muslims in equal measure, is another vital figure indispensable to the connotation of Kashmiriyat. He took the universal ideas of Lal Ded to the realm of perfection. Following Lal Ded, Sheikh Nooruddin expresses his pluralist yearnings:

We bear no ill will to each other,  
  
Should our love bind us all alike, Hindu and  
Muslim,  
  
Then surely God is pleased with us

The eminent Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali acknowledges this fact in his poem "I Dream I am the only Passenger on Flight 423 to Srinagar":

She blessed her true heir: Sheikh Nooruddin  
  
He still speaks through five centuries of poets  
(TCWAP 19)

Following Lal Ded and Sheikhul Aalam, the sufi mystic tradition of poetry was carried forward by numerous poets like Rupa Bhawani, Arnimal, Ghani Kashmiri (who mainly wrote in Persian), Rahim Sahab, Shamas Faqir, Wahab Khaar, Socha Kral, Samad Mir, and many more. In between there were also poets like Habba Kahtun and Rasul Mir who brought their own unique poetic styles which may or may not be in strict correspondence with the peculiar mystic tradition.

As the course of history progresses through its typical mutability, each and every condition appropriately gets altered. Remaining oblivious to one's real historical conditions and taking sojourn into escapist terrains has a potential of creating self-indulging quietism. As the mainstream literary historiography counts, much of the Kashmiri literature,

for the most part, has not been able to cross this threshold particularly when the last four centuries in our history have passed under contentious circumstances. The concept of Kashmiriyat itself has under gone a great historical shift. Like other conceptions of identity, it is not static as our history has proved. As Chitrlekha Zutshi states in her book *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity, And The Making of Kashmir*: "To suggest that a Kashmiri identity, Kashmiriyat, defined as a harmonious blending of religious cultures, has somehow remained unchanged and an integral part of Kashmiri history over the centuries is a historical fallacy. Certainly, Kashmiri identities have followed a distinct trajectory depending on a host of factors, including state and economic structures, political culture, and the religious milieu at particular historical moments." (55) Agha Shahid's poem "Farewell", which he refers to as a "plaintive love letter from a Kashmiri Muslim to a Kashmiri Pandit", movingly alludes to this tragic aspect of the rupture in the Kashmiri identity:

At a certain point I lost track of you.  
  
You needed me. You needed to perfect me:  
  
In your absence you polished me into the  
Enemy.  
  
Your history gets in the way of my memory.  
  
I am everything you lost. You can't forgive me.  
  
I am everything you lost. Your perfect enemy.  
  
Your memory gets in the way of my memory...  
(25-31)

Lalita Pandit, another Kashmiri-American academician and poet, reveals this aspect in her poem "Anantnag" in these lines:

What of that? Now you are  
a stranger, an enemy. (38-39)  
  
Children stare with  
suspicion. They have learnt  
to hate; they are afraid.  
  
Hollow eyed ghosts  
walk the streets. (45-49)

Without appearing self-assertive here, at certain times, a need does arise for the greater commitment, engagement and sensitivity to the immediate reality and conditions for the artists and poets. In the mainstream Kashmiri literary tradition, Ghulam Ahmad Mahjoor, who wrote in more than one language, is noteworthy for giving a fresh impetus to Kashmiri poetry by his attempt to “free Kashmiri literature from heavy Persio-Arabic influence to take it out from literary stagnation.” (Handoo 145). It is debatable whether the revolutionary character of Mahjoor’s poetry has been critically explored enough or not? His famous poem “Call to the Gardener” (1938) in which he gives a graceful call to “create a new spring” has over the period of time achieved the standing of a celebrated revolutionary anthem:

Should you want to arise this land of flowers,  
Abandon your song and dance,  
Shake the earth, unleash raging  
Winds and thunderclaps  
Give birth to great storm!

Revolutionary poetry like this heralded the beginning of the Progressive influences in Kashmiri literature. It also coupled with the emergence of a new political awakening in the form of a plural nationalist movement against the oppressive Dogra regime in the Kashmir of 1940s. Mahjoor outlines this pluralistic appeal in his poetry as he says:

Mosques, temples, churches, hospices, and holy places:

To enter these many houses I will build but one door way

Literary giants like Abdul Ahad Azad and Dina Nath Nadim followed Mahjoor in the progressive tradition. They played a significant role in synchronizing the Kashmiri poetic tradition with the contemporary times. The revolutionary zeal combined with excellent creative skills is a hallmark of their poetry which transformed the Kashmiri poetic tradition. As Azad writes in his poem “The River”:

Life is nothing but the gospel

Of change and revolution.

I feel the pleasure in confronting with

The hardships and difficulties of Life

Continuing with his zest for social emancipation and giving voice to the suffering sections, Azad writes in his poem “Peasant”:

Look to our innocent children and their plight

See to our bodies, they are feasts for the rich

You neither heard nor did you see

What you gained of your labour?

In a similar instance, Nadim’s “My Hope of Tomorrow” invokes revolutionary hope for an emancipated future:

I dream of tomorrow

When the world will be beautiful !

O how bright the day, how green the grass !

Flowers paradisaal, earth aching with joy,

And dancing tountains of love in his breast !

The world will be beautitul !

A rare confluence of happy stars !

Wim my eyes sparkling wimout collyrium.

Rose-red nipples, breasts swelling with milk

The world will be beautiful !

In many ways, it provides a subtle reminder of Mahjoor’s “Call to Gardener”. Other notable poets and writers of the 20th century Kashmir who wrote either in Kashmiri or Urdu or sometimes in both, and were influenced by the Progressive movement are: Rahman Rahi, Ghulam Nabi Khayal, Ghulam Nabi Firaq, Prem Nath Pardesi, N.N. Raina, Ghulam Rasool Renzu, G. M. Rajpuri, Ali Mohammad Lone, Abdul Sattar Ranjoor, Arjun Dev Majboor, Mahender Raina, Kanwal Nain Parwaz, Akhtar Mohiudin, Som Nath Zutshi, Qaisar Qalandhar, Bansi Nirdosh, Nand Lal Ambardar, Prem

Nath Premi, Deepak Koul, Tej Bahadur Bhan and some others.

Rehman Rahi is arguably the greatest living Kashmiri poet who has created enormous poetic treasures like "Siyah Roode Jaren Manz" (In Black Showers) and other collections. He seems unmatched in his poetic greatness in the contemporary era of Kashmiri poetry. Initially, Rahi was strongly influenced by the Progressive movement and the revolutionary leanings. He commemorates the suffering of the peasants and workers by writing "Dried up the streams, they died by drowning", but yet his poetry transcends any narrow bracketing as it engages with the multitude of human reality where, at times, "Life is nothing but dark downpour." More importantly, in his verses he has poignantly captured the suffering of modern Kashmir which is now beset with conflict for the last three decades:

The melting of snow, a soft breeze, a garden in blossom  
Be my witness,  
O Spring, we dumbstruck too could sing ...  
We couldn't even close our doors,  
the dying voices never reached us  
The researchers kept recording us as history...

After 1990, the conflict created an atmosphere of fear and siege as the gun of the warring factions took the centre-stage. This aspect is poetically reflected upon by Rahi in the following lines:

Rahi, even the breeze spies on you  
You can't even greet someone here, and you  
speak of a dialogue Pity the times, when you  
have to sew your tongue! What to do when  
none has tolerance to hear!

The prominent Kashmiri fiction writer Akhtar Mohiuddin also captures this tragic reality in his various short-stories like *Waenji Manzuk Puj* (The Butcher in the Bosom), *Aatank Vadi* (The Terrorist), *Nav Bemaary* (New Disease) and a few others. *The Butcher in the Bosom* is suggestive of the internal contradictions within the Kashmiri struggle and also the rise of the native counter-insurgents who targeted the local population and militant sympathizers. *The Terrorist* is

about the new profiling of Kashmiris that the military apparatus was increasingly resorting to in the Kashmir of 1990s as it sought to quell the armed uprising. *New Disease* describes the adverse psychological disorders Kashmiris faced or are facing because of the conflict. It reminds of Frantz Fanon's well known work on the subject of psychological consequences of colonialism or militarization *The Wretched of the Earth*. It is noteworthy that Akhtar returned the Sahitya Academy Award to the Government of India in protest against the atrocities in Kashmir.

After its initiation into the tragic phase of 1990s with the beginning of the armed conflict, the contentious historical and political perceptions on the Kashmir conflict have evoked countless responses and endeavours of exploration in both the literary and non-literary realms as has already been alluded to. The conflict and violence of the recent times has evoked literary responses from Kashmiris in languages like Kashmiri, Urdu, English and Hindi. The promising young poet of Kashmiri language Nighat Sahiba, who has already won many laurels for her poetic crafts, recounts the tragic aspect of the enforced disappearances in Kashmir in the following verses:

Revealing their star-faces, to us by the evenings  
— Where did they go?  
Dazzling the hearts of this light-starved city —  
Where did they go?  
Those snatched by the bullets, are safe in their  
graves  
Sleeping those were, by their mother's side —  
Where did they go?

Another contemporary poet of Kashmiri language Naji Munawar laments Kashmir's political and cultural ruin after the conflict in one of his poems titled "Then and Now":

Now will you put out the lamp, and sleep?  
Why don't you sleep? \_\_\_ Why keep waking? ...  
You remember people used to keep  
Their lights on for the whole night,  
why are you irked by this lamp?  
Oh, then we were afraid of darkness

that it might devour us,  
and now it is light  
that really devours...

And the contemporary Kashmir's most prominent Urdu poet Hamidi Kashmiri also alludes to such description of siege in his poetry. In one of his ghazals (*Hum...*) "We...", he writes:

We desired to tell all of our tales

But for the silence by their chains

In one of his other ghazals (*Barham bahut hai...*) "at odds...", he symbolically writes of the repressive conditions which had engulfed Kashmir of 1990s:

Those old pirates have invaded us again

To quietness of our ocean is now at odds

In a similar instance, a young Urdu poet from Kashmir Faheem Iqbal reflects on the tragic conflict in Kashmir and the rest of the world's indifference towards it in his ghazal *Kashmir jal raha hai* (Kashmir is burning) in the following lines:

We implore someone raise a voice to the heavens, Kashmir is burning

We implore someone send a plea to the deaf gods, Kashmir is burning

Chandrakanta is a contemporary author from Kashmir who writes mainly in Hindi. Her novel *Ailan Gali Abhi Zinda Hai* (Street in Srinagar) wherein the pre-conflict phase characterized by relative harmony and peace and the post 1990 phase characterized by violence and disintegrated social order is portrayed through the metaphorical description of a congested street in the heart of the city of Srinagar.

The unending conflict in Kashmir is also seen as a site for two contending hegemonies—Indian and Pakistani. The vast majority of writings on Kashmir, written from these positions, it can be said, often come up with their own monolithic projections regarding the realities of the conflict. These writings often betray their own arguments by their indulgence in propagandist and rhetorical posturing. However, with the emergence of many indigenous voices now,

particularly in the literary realm, we are witnessing fresh perspectives as these voices aim to portray their lived experiences of the conflict, and hence offer a break from the previous narratives. In truly bringing Kashmiri literary tradition on to the international scene, the eminent poet Agha Shahid Ali could be seen as one such example. He was certainly one of the first true voices from Kashmir who produced fine poetry in English. Among the various prose narratives published in the recent years, many important novels which have caught readers' attention worldwide are Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator* and *The Book of Gold Leaves*, Shahnaz Bashir's *The Half Mother* and *The Scattered Souls*, Siddhartha Gigoo's *The Garden of Solitude*, and Nitasha Kaul's *Residue*, to mention a few. Memoirs like Sudha Kaul's *The Tiger Ladies* and Basharat Peer's *The Curfewed Night* is another literary feat. Poets like Subhash Kak, Lalita Pandit and Mohammad Zahid are also being increasingly recognized in the literary circles. All these writers mainly write in English as they yearn for a global audience to hear and read the narrations which tell the stories of their experience of a very complex lived reality. In many ways, these writings indicate the beginning of the phase of Kashmiri English writing tradition.

It has to be said that the contemporary Kashmiri English writing seems to have been more significantly influenced by the specific historical conditions pertaining to the conflict than the writings in other languages. This is in no way to demean the artistic or literary features in these writings which have retained the literary purity amidst all the topicality. On the contrary, it supposedly suggests a general historical reality wherein a literary culture is born and bred among certain specific historical and material conditions—conflict and violence in this case. Besides these poets and writers, many other young people are taking to different artistic expression like poetry, music, painting and graphic arts to express their profound angst at the existing conditions of the conflict. In significant ways, these writings provide witness to many profound issues like identity, justice, struggle, and oppression which are usually absent in the

mainstream narratives on/of Kashmir. In doing so, these writings provide an alternative and heterogeneous account of a reality that seems to counter the view of the “other” hegemonic discourses that neglect very basic and yet very important facets of Kashmir’s reality and experience.

In their own ways, the new generation of Kashmiri writers reflects on the situation of the Kashmir of the early 1990s when Kashmiris took up arms against Indian rule and ushered in the era of a full-fledged militancy. Agha Shahid Ali and especially his collection *The Country without a Post Office* can be regarded as the first modern chronicler of Kashmir’s current pain. Agha Shahid describes the calamity of the 1990s in the following words:

Summer 1992 — when for two years Death had turned

Every day in Kashmir into some family's Karbala.

This is the immediate historical backdrop against which the writings of our new writers are set as they endeavor to explore these realities by reflecting the perspectives of the people who face siege and repression from all sides. These new narratives can be seen as historiographies which sensitively bring to fore many unknown or unexpressed dimensions of the Kashmir conflict, thereby drawing attention to a long-neglected human story. In doing so, these writings represent a stream of writing which has grown out of the realities of armed struggle and conflict. Though the texts, under mention, grow out of a specific and critical historical reality, they convey a multiplicity of versions and facets that armed conflict in Kashmir has stimulated. This cannot be categorized as merely a “literature of protest” or “literature of propaganda” as some self-assuming critics would lead us to believe. The sensitive reflection of profound dimensions of human condition at a certain point is the real characteristic of literature. Through the art of fiction, these writers have attempted to give an outlet to the suppressed aspirations and collective memories of violence and loss of home. In their narratives, memory, identity and time play a very significant role. Finally, these works

also show how literature can intervene to challenge the contorted truths of power structures in the contemporary world. The idea of loss brought about by the memory becomes the new metaphorical ingredient of this type of literature. Out of its specific set of circumstances, it tries to develop a new aesthetic out of the elements of a lost joy and the current moments of suffering. For instance, in his poem “Exile”, Subhash Kak writes:

Memories get hazy  
even recounting doesn't help  
I need to look at pictures  
or listen to music to remember  
and sometimes walking through narrow lanes of  
my town a sudden perfume escaping from a  
window halts my steps and I am transported to  
my childhood years. (1-8)

As the conflict and conflicting opinions, pertaining to Kashmir, continue to perpetuate each other, writing and research is likely to unfold new perspectives in the time to come. This can be stated with some certainty as it is now an established fact that narration/narratives—whether factual or fictional—do not describe reality in absolute terms only; rather, they attempt to present fresh perceptions and dimensions that offer new trajectories of reality. This is happening because history is seen as an ongoing cultural process characterised by a constant flux, and literature is considered a reservoir of nuanced reflections on these fluctuations. Georg Lukacs, in *The Historical Novel*, visualizes the progress of humanity as “a historical process” and asserts that “a true historical novel” is one which comes into its own “by virtue of artistically portraying the rising awareness of man’s location in time ... [is] conditioned by social and economic development” (42). Consequently, he argues that historical novelists do not need “the re-telling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events” (ibid.). The writer of a work of literature does not aim at presenting historical facts in the same way that a historian does. Instead, he looks beyond facts to the spirit underlying those facts. This, however, in no way alters either the



value of the facts or the reality concerning them. Ralph Waldo Emerson succinctly sums this up by stating that “Fiction reveals the truth that reality obscures” (Wilson 10). This lends credence to the fact that an event, which might have a mere statistical importance for a historian or a journalist, could reveal many underlying angles of perception when presented in a work of fiction. To put it simply, what the historian finds irrelevant and unwanted, a writer might find fascinating and stimulating enough to transmute into literary creations. As Olive Senior puts it, “The purpose of literature is not to represent but to re-present, to hold up that mirror in a light that enables us to see reality both reflected and refracted” (Senior 2013). According to Barbara Harlow, the writers [in such contexts as Kashmir] consider it necessary to wrest that expropriated historicity back, reappropriate it for themselves in order to reconstruct a new world-historical order (Harlow 50). The aforementioned Kashmiri literary narratives can be seen as gripping histories as well as forceful tales of the human predicament in locales marked by violent conflict. In almost all these expressions, personal narratives have been unearthed, processed through the literary imagination, and re-crafted as the literary expressions of these writers. The creative imagination of these Kashmiri writers who write mainly in English is able to capture the different facets and perceptions of people caught in a situation marked by contestation and confrontation. The narratives are mainly structured round and alternate between the present / “now” and the past / “then”. The narratives do remember the Kashmir of the past in which the stream of life flowed smoothly, when militancy did not exist, and when life flowed along an even tenor. During the days of armed militancy, peace departed, and honour and security of life also took their leave. With their departure, a besieged people learnt to live under the shadow of the gun. The life and honour of people were at the mercy of the gun-toting armed forces and the militants. The sense of loss is especially made palpable through human loss that is defined and depicted in terms of killings, tortures, rapes, injuries, other forms of physical coercion, and even a huge displacement of a certain

section of population as portrayed in *The Garden of Solitude*. These losses are mostly the result of the oppressive actions of the military and compounded by the armed militants and their supporters.

All this brings to the fore the crux of the matter, that is, the issue of identity. In the context of the situation in Kashmir, the concept of identity is extremely crucial, complex and intriguing. Here, identity has multiple facets and also a differential composition; it operates also on many levels—the individual, collective, regional, and above all, religious. The complexity of the issue of identity becomes all too evident in the way events unfolded in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The aforementioned texts under study bring to prominence the fact that it would be fallacious to assume a homogenous conception of Kashmiri identity. In all these narratives, the protagonists seem to struggle for their identity at the individual level, but they find that it has a close bearing upon the larger collective identity. For centuries, Kashmiri culture was defined by its plurality and scope for tolerant practices of diverse faiths and ideas that wove people together in harmony. This interfusion of distinctive practices of belief led to the articulation of a new cultural identity which came to be known as “Kashmiriyat”. Kashmiri Muslims, despite being the majority, found themselves at a disadvantageous position in contrast to the minority Pandits. This was because of the disproportionate division of socio-economic privileges that favoured the minority Pandits. The construct of Kashmiriyat was manipulated to overlook the growing political and economic demands of Kashmiris. With the outbreak of the armed uprising against the Indian rule in late 1980s, the nature of discontent and resistance changed and Kashmiri Muslim aspirations aligned with the appeal to the religious identity. To bring this out, Siddhartha Gigoo, in his novel, alludes to the “reinforcement of a new cultural identity” (36). Mirza Waheed, in *The Collaborator* and *The Book of Gold Leaves*, and Shahnaz Bashir in *The Half Mother*, also recount the surge of people’s religious passions with the onset of the armed movement. The new Kashmiri identity is thus shown to recast itself in religious terms, and this has put Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits at

loggerheads and relations between them appear ambivalent as of now.

By sensitively bringing to fore many unknown or unexpressed dimensions of the Kashmir conflict, all these literary narratives under discussion here delicately draw attention to a long-neglected human story. In doing so, they represent a stream of writing which has grown out of the realities of armed struggle and conflict. Though the texts being examined grow out of a specific and critical historical reality, they convey a multiplicity of versions and facets that armed conflict in Kashmir has engendered. They are not mere accounts of victimhood; rather, their power lies in them being testimonies of humanity which forms the basis of literature. And also, by offering a discontinuity from the dominant discourses of India and Pakistan, the narratives, it can be said, do reflect Salman Rushdie's view on how literature can contest the contorted truths of power structures in the contemporary world:

It seems to me imperative that literature enter such arguments, because what is being disputed is nothing less than what the case, what is truth is and what untruth. If writers leave the business of making pictures of the world to politicians, it will be one of history's great and most abject abdications... there is a genuine need for political fiction, for books that draw new and better maps of reality, and make new languages with which we can understand the world. (Rushdie 5)

As has been explored through an exploration of works of the aforementioned Kashmiri poets and writers, in conclusion, it becomes evident that through the artistic medium of literature, they are attempting to give an outlet to the suppressed aspirations and collective memories of violence and loss of home. In their narratives, memory, identity and time play a very significant role. Against their backdrop, the aforementioned literary works and authors give an indirect account of the oppression and violence, the immeasurable pain of dislocation, and the agony and human loss arising out of a situation in which society is fragmented, home and homeland are lost, the immeasurable consequences of conflict are delineated,

and yet the profound and humane dimensions of a violent conflict are brought out. The individual and collective conscious are made to merge in their narrativisation. Their stories can also be seen as testimonies documenting the horrific conditions dictated by life in areas of conflict. In this respect, literature can be said to approximate history as it endeavours to re-draw the maps of reality and experience. And in doing this, it counters the hegemonic power structures in narrating history from the lived experiences of the people and bringing it to a global audience.

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