

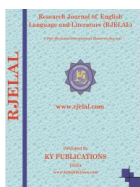


REMEMBERING TO RESIST: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF *CURFEWED NIGHT* AND *THE COLLABORATOR*

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Abstract

The contemporary Kashmiri Writing in English emerges as an oppositional discourse that explores the social and political conditions of the militarily dominated state of Kashmir and subverts the policies of representation adopted by the subjugating country. Writers like Basharat Peer and Mirza Waheed attempt to rewrite their native history and challenge the colonial dominance by foregrounding violence, military aggression, dispossession and the resulting alienation in their respective works, *Curfewed Night* and *The Collaborator*. These works provide the reader with a conceptual framework for understanding Kashmir conflict and the dilemma in identity formation as the existing socio-political conditions prevent the colonised subjects from coming to terms with their violated pasts and disturbed presents. Basharat Peer's memoir, *Curfewed Night*, and Mirza Waheed's novel, *The Collaborator*, offer active resistance to the obliteration of Kashmiri identity by reviving and rewriting history through a conscious recall of individual and collective memories. The paper shall attempt to analyse the writers' depiction of various hegemonic rigidities and their critique of the colonial oppression that results in the alienation experienced by the colonised subjects. By employing theoretical assumptions of postcolonialism and exploring various complexities of colonial situation, the paper shall endeavour to examine how memory is central to the assertion of identity and revival of history in the works of Peer and Waheed.

Keywords: alienation, conflict, identity, memory, resistance, rewriting.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon describes colonialism as "a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity" (200). Fanon believes that there is an urgent need to contest the legacy of colonialism and recover a pre-colonial history through forging of a national consciousness and an identity untainted by colonial influence. Postcolonial writing confronts the cultural eradication and marginalisation of the colonized by the imperialistic power by establishing an authentic

identity that debunks the Western image of the "other" constructed to justify colonial domination. Postcolonial writers, therefore, challenge the fabricated discourse about the colonized people by deconstructing the European texts, revisiting their past and rewriting history. They construct historical narratives through a recollection of the past lives of the individuals and community which helps them maintain continuity with their cultural identity. According to Dennis Walder, postcolonial writers manifest a "renewed interest in family history,

memoir, and heritage, and the commemorative mania that seems increasingly a feature of contemporary cultural life in the postcolonial world" (*Postcolonial Nostalgias*. 4). He believes that remembrance of past helps in the self-definition of the postcolonial individual whose identity had been erased by the colonizer through the eradication of his culture and history.

Kashmiri Writing in English emerged in response to the repressive discursive and political strategies of the Indian domination that deny the socio-political freedom of Kashmiri community. It analyses the oppressive means employed by the Indian army and the Government to subjugate Kashmiris and reflects on their sufferings, anxiety and fear of persecution by the oppressor. Basharat Peer and Mirza Waheed, in their works, resist against the violence and oppressive methods used by the Indian military to crush the rebellion of people and attempt to come to terms with their identity that the dominant power seeks to erase. Basharat Peer's memoir, *Curfewed Night* (2009), and Mirza Waheed's novel, *The Collaborator* (2011), strive for the affirmation of Kashmiri identity through the delineation of violent history of armed resistance and military repression which shaped the consciousness of the individuals and community. Through a conscious recall and involuntary remembrance of the past events, the writers chalk out transition of Kashmiri society from a peace-loving community to the disappointed rebels whose aspirations for political freedom are thwarted by the military force.

Curfewed Night and *The Collaborator* are a part of the new form of resistance offered by the Kashmiris who have chosen their pens as weapons to fight against oppression after about two decades of armed rebellion. Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night* is a reconstructive attempt to interweave memory and history to provide a vivid understanding of the socio-political identity of Kashmir. The memoir engages with the social and political situation of Kashmir after the armed rebellion of the early 1990's and is dedicated by the author to "the memory of the boys who couldn't come home". Peer considers writing as a revolutionary practice to tell the stories and narrate experiences which have been silenced

and relegated to the background by the oppressive State. The memoir, therefore, salvages the past from the ruins and attempts to resuscitate the forgotten experience of Kashmiris during the colonial rule. Peer draws an epigraph from James Baldwin's essay, "Stranger in the Village" to stress the necessity of coming to terms with the historical reality. "People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them", wrote Baldwin. Peer reiterates Baldwin's statement to express his intention to give voice to the story of his people by retrieving it from the annals of the past.

In the memoir, he recalls his personal experiences and gives them a historic validity by contextualizing them within the collective experience of his people. By moving back and forth in time, he explicates the collective struggle of Kashmiri people against the military domination by India and portrays their sufferings caused by the violence of the State machinery. The brutal methods used by the Indian army to sabotage people's resistance are witnessed in the Gaw Kadal massacre when the Indian army fired indiscriminately on the crowd protesting against the mass arrests of innocent people. As the news of killings reaches far and wide, the author participates in one of the processions condemning the massacre. Peer's recollection of the rebellion is corroborated by the engineer's rendering of his own experience on the fatal day of 20th January, 1990. Farooq Wani, the engineer, cringes with fear as he recalls the horror of the massacre that he survived due to sheer luck. Wani had feigned death which saved him from the wrath of the military who made it sure that everybody lying on the ground was dead.

The author writes about how resentment against the mainstream government after the rigged elections of 1987 triggered an armed uprising and " ... every Kashmiri ... was a Farhad, ready to dig a stream of milk from the mountains for a rendezvous with his Shireen: Freedom" (*Curfewed Night*. 17). The author records that the news about deaths, arrests and self-determination became a routine and the army became an overwhelming presence in every part of Kashmir. He relates his parent's close-shave with death when a mine detonates on their way to some village. He details the psychological

predicament of the students caused by setting up of a military camp inside the school campus. The students would conjecture about the kinds of torture meted out to the arrested militants and commoners lodged inside the camp and would wish for their rescue. The author also writes about the influence of the Libyan chief, Omar Mukhtar and the young Afghan, Ali who rebelled against the Italian forces and the Soviet invasion respectively. Chitralekha Zutshi, in her essay, "We Must be Mad", confirms the author's assertion when she writes about how the documentary, *Lion of the Desert*, which recreated Omar Mukhtar's struggle, mobilized Kashmiri masses. She writes:

The spontaneous youth protests that broke out in Srinagar ... after the screening of the film, *Lion of the Desert* ... about the Libyan resistance ... to the Italian occupation in the years leading up to World War II—were portentous of things to come. Amid calls for Azaadi (freedom, variously defined), an insurgency against the government of India followed the rigged elections of 1987. (n.p.)

In keeping with this, the author feels a strong sense of resentment against the Indian occupation and realizes that even his village Seer, which had no political inclination so far felt alienated from the Indian state:

Despite the rather sleepy existence of our village and my ignorance about the political history of Kashmir, I had a sense of the alienation and resentment most Kashmiri Muslims felt and had against Indian rule. We did not relate to the symbols of Indian nationalism—the flag, the national anthem, the cricket team. (10-11)

The author remembers how identity cards became their inseparable part and army became a perverse presence in Kashmiri existence. He also records his own failed attempts to join the militant organization and how, in his adulthood, he finds writing a better means to resist the forced occupation of his people by the Indian government. In order to represent the actual lived reality of his people, he feels that he needs to write about the "violence-stained lives [which] was painful but ..."

liberating for him (81). He believes that the revival of his personal memories must be facilitated with the collective experience of his people in order to give his story a historical value. He interviews the survivors of the massacres, the former militants who were detained and tortured in the infamous Papa-2, the migrant Pandits, the relatives of the forcibly disappeared persons and the rape victims like Mubeena Gani to present an overall picture of the atrocities committed on the Kashmiri masses by the Indian army. The author finds it very difficult to distance himself from the intense experience of Kashmiris but nonetheless confronts his fears and attempts to write against the erasure of his memory and forgotten history of his people.

In *The Collaborator*, Mirza Waheed explores the psychological fragmentation of the colonized Kashmiris created by being torn between their compulsion to obey the colonized and their aspiration to resist colonial domination. The unnamed protagonist in *The Collaborator* is marginalized and distanced from himself and is forced in complicity with the politically and ethically opposing elements. The novel set in Nowgam, the last village near the line of control, explicates the profound implications of the brutalities of the repressive army which causes the vulnerable Gujjar community prefer migration over a living death. The community living on the periphery is not safe from the ensuing effects of the armed conflict and is, perhaps, more vulnerable because of its close vicinity to the border area. Many villagers who earlier ridiculed the idea of cross-border training soon see themselves as a part of it all when their own young men go for arms training to fight against the oppression. With hundreds of boys crossing over the border and the movement in full swing, nothing else occupies the protagonist's mind but to follow his friends and be a part of the movement. He envies the militant status of his friends and their decision to leave him out makes him more resolute in his secret endeavour to join them. "I blunted the feeling of left-behind-ness by starting a pursuit of my own", he says (*The Collaborator*. 116). He would fantasize about his possible militant career with JKLF wearing a fatigue jacket and a short beard and carrying a small pistol. Ready to make sacrifices for a greater

cause, he would fend off all thoughts of remorse at leaving his parents and breaching their trust in him. "I was, by now, beginning to imagine myself as a member of an underground outfit ... a freedom fighter ... on undercover missions ... privy to secrets that none of these old men of the village, these moribund fuddy-duddies, could comprehend", he recalls (114). The cry for freedom was heard everywhere and the protagonist did not want to be left out of such a revolutionary thing. In his essay, "Making Art Under Siege", Mirza Waheed writes: "A revolution had erupted, and that hallowed dream, *azadi*—independence—was expected to be just around the corner. People were willing to make the hardest sacrifices. People were willing to die; people were willing to kill" (n.p.).

The protagonist's father, Baba, is troubled by the fact that his son had been friends with the boys who left for militant training and is, for some time, apprehensive about his own son's leaving. Moreover, the beginning of the cross-border venture in his own village gives a major jolt to the organized life of his people and his efforts to prevent their dispersal prove futile. He gets an unpredictable temper as he begins to lose control of things around him. His anxious mother would stay close to him and would always inquire about where he was going. She becomes very conscious about his safety, would let out a suppressed sigh every time he moved out and would beam with pleasure on seeing her son return home. The protagonist is unable to realise the full import of the situation when the entire community comes to the final decision. The world of his childhood ends in a moment: "I looked at the familiar faces in some kind of half-conscious daze, as if they were walking past me one by one and then disappearing into the background" (245). However, the protagonist believes that the irony of the situation lies in the fact that his people, although escaped the continuous scrutiny of the border forces, were in no way safe from the Indian army which was scattered throughout the valley.

As the protagonist fails to join his friends, he seeks a reunion with them in his memories but his every attempt to belong to his community is doomed as is depicted by the blood smeared bodies of his friends:

I close my eyes and wade on. I realize I have company the moment I submerge my head. It's a party, all of them together, moving towards me in a choric huddle ... Hussain. He has blood smeared all over and his throat is slit ... Mohammed ... appears to have lost his eyes. And hands. Oh, Gul Khan ... [his] face is missing below the nose ... Ashfaq ... [who] had predicted the end of the world a long time ago ... 'All this is going to be destroyed, ruined; it will all meet a rotten end' ... [he] has holes all over his body. (19-20)

When the entire community leaves and only his family is left behind, the protagonist is hired by the army captain to collect ID's from the dead bodies killed by the army in the encounters. As the protagonist is consistently worried about discovering his friends among the dead, there also lies, somewhere deep inside him, his morbid anticipation to see them, albeit dead and dismembered. When not visiting the Captain, he goes to visit the valley and look at the newly encountered men closely. The violence develops in him a perverse inclination towards the valley of the dead where he frequents to check their belongings and decides to read their messages and cards someday. His rucksack becomes an inseparable part of him that he keeps very close so as not to drop anything from it.

Further, he is denied the life of an ordinary man thereby suffering an inner crisis which is made intense by his working for the military captain, Kadian, whom he condemns. On the one hand, there are protagonist's friends and the army working against each other in antagonism while, on the other, we have the protagonist interacting between the two extremes and positioned in-between in a liminal space. He is infuriated by the Captain who shows no concern about the discovery of the corpses by the media for he is certain that till the time the bodies are found, they must have decayed beyond recognition. The possibility of a human rights catastrophe which the protagonist feels cannot go unnoticed is mocked at by the Captain who assures him that the encounters and fake encounters would continue forever and never be questioned by anyone. The protagonist is much trapped in the

Captain's game as he has collected enough ID cards from the dead and cannot deny his participation in the bloodshed. While, on the one hand, he feels like a "collaborator" working against his people and his friends, on the other hand, he believes that someone had to be there to drag the mutilated bodies into slightly honorable positions and pay those respects and, if possible, give them proper burials.

In his attempt to give the dead men a burial, the protagonist digs five graves that look like pitiful abandoned mounds speaking of desolation and dismay. He deposits irises at the feet of each grave in the hope that someday someone might spot them and discover the ID's and photos placed over their bodies. He even wonders if there is someone else in the world, in solidarity with him, paying respects to his own unknown dead—the victims in some unknown unlucky country. In his loneliness, he tries to strike a bond of affinity with that stranger who might be going through the same ordeal as him.

The novel punctures the Indian representation of Kashmir and renders the tragic history of Kashmiris in a work that is driven by the motivation of asserting an identity different from the one imposed by the colonizer. Both *Curfewed Night* and *The Collaborator* express the need of the colonized people to react against the perceptual framework of the colonizer and assert an individual and collective identity that could invest Kashmiri existence with a meaning. In order to confront alienation and reinforce a relationship with the cultural history, the colonized rewrite their history in order to overcome the fractured consciousness and assert a positive identity which is at odds with the colonizer's value system. These works are, therefore, an authentic rendering of the conflict and present an alternative history which is shaped by the sensibilities witness to every aspect of the conflict.

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