



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## Fear-filled Valley: Basharat Peer's Curfewed Night

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**Abstract:** Curfewed Night is the first English language narrative by a young Kashmiri Muslim that describes Kashmir's tumultuous history as lived experience. The present paper explores the living conditions of Kashmiris in 1990s on physical, social, psychological and political level.

**Index Terms – Militants, Brutality, Torture, Military, Maim, Kashmiri Pandits.**

### I. INTRODUCTION

Simone de Beauvoir notes that the "fundamental function of literature" is "to communicate and share human experience." (p.94). Through literature writers find a way of communicating a particular experience which also has a universal appeal. Thus, a creative work can lend a universal dimension to individual experience. This universal dimension serves an important function of engaging readers. Basharat Peer's novel *Curfewed Night* mixes a mosaic of memories with reportage and history to present an intimate and gut-wrenching account of one of the most tragic conflicts of our time. The chronological presentation of the past events shows Peer's awareness of the temporal dimension of his existence and of the importance of history. This sense of historicity which is the state of being involved in the actual world as a concrete existent so as to possess a history is crucial, representing a lived experience. Khushwant Singh says the novel is "Beautifully written, brutally honest and deeply hurtful. Peer paints a harrowing and intensely moving picture of Kashmir and its people. It is the first English language narrative by a young Kashmiri Muslim that describes Kashmir's tumultuous history as lived experience. "Except for Agha Shahid Ali's poetry, there are very few literary responses from Kashmir that evoked the fear, the tension, the anger and the hopelessness of the people of Kashmir." (p.95). Peer felt that the memories and the stories of Kashmir would fade away. So, he chose to write and thus "save memory from the callous varnish of time" (p.96). For writing, Peer returned and revisited the people and places that had haunted him for years. Writing was an attempt to understand his milieu and project it to the world. It had a healing effect too. Peer, the journalist, visited people and place and the writer, lingered on. His novel deals with the most singular experience to communicate the universal dimensions of the human condition. The novel seems to be a genuine quest on the part of the author to reconcile the irreconcilable moments of human experience, for words fight against time, death and separation. Beauvoir views language as a powerful tool of social integration, for in exchanging language we reintegrate our selves into the human community. She argues that each individual is composed of all other individuals and can only understand him or herself through intersubjective communication and understanding. The task of literature in this context is to render the singularity of individual experience as transparent to other human beings, to safe guard the human dimension of experience from alienation by bureaucracy and technocracy.

Set in early 90's the novel laments the loss of lives, love, trust and understanding between Kashmiri Muslims and armed military forces, which became the dominant aspect of politics in Kashmir. The peace of Kashmir was marred by firing on protestors, arrests, disappearances, custodial killings, kidnappings, assassinations and torture. The cruel torturing of the prisoners left them maim and unable to lead a normal life again. It left a scar forever, both physically and emotionally. It destroyed lives and families. Their masculinity was attacked and it left them vulnerable even after the prison sentence was over. "Those electric shocks led to impotence in many, and many lost their kidneys." (p.144). As sexuality is rarely discussed in our culture, the sufferers found hard to talk about their impotence. Peer tried to convince them about the medical correction of torture-imposed disorders, corrective urological surgeries, about the drugs, about psychiatric counselling, about faith, about Prophet Mohammad saying that hopelessness is a sin. Despite facing brutality and ostracism, tortured and broken men and women had built new lives. The painful stories shadowed by death and loss, also had feats of resilience and fortitude.

The conflict in the valley of Kashmir is a human tragedy and has raged in for more than seventy years and has put the entire South Asia at risk of war. Both India and Pakistan have failed to find out a viable political solution to an ancient conflict. So, Kashmiris are stranded between two rival states, militants on the move, and a monstrous military machine patrolling the beautiful valley of mountains, lakes, gardens and orchids. As a teenager Peer remembers his journey from “I to we “ marching for “Aazadi!” with his community members transformed him from a shy, bookish boy to a fearless fighter. In the school Kashmiri pandit students went missing, Muslim students refused to chant Indian national anthem, carried cricket bats inside their pherans in the manner of militants carrying Kalashnikov rifle. Young students were fascinated by the beautiful green dress and Kalashnikov rifles of the militants. They appeared to be heroes fighting for freedom thousands of young Kashmiri men crossed the Line of Control for arms training in the Pakistan-controlled part of Kashmir. They returned as heroes. Fighting and dying for freedom was much desired, “like the first kiss on adolescent lips”. (p.24).

Peers father motivated him to read a commentary on the Quran in English to understand religion. He asked Peer to read, to change the history of Kashmir as rebellions were long affairs led by educated men like Nehru and Gandhi. Conflict intensified and fear and chaos ruled Kashmir. Fathers wished they had daughters instead of sons. Sons were killed everyday, mothers prayed for the safety of their daughters, people dreaded knocks on their doors at night. Men and women who left home for the day’s work were not sure they would return; thousands did not. Graveyards sprang up everywhere and market places were scarred with charred buildings. People seemed always to talk about the border and crossing the border; it had become an obsession, an invisible presence.

Homecomings were fraught with danger for Peer and his father. The fighting had changed the meaning of distance. Military and paramilitary trucks drove on the roads throughout the day, carrying supplies between various camps or going on raids in the villages. Guerrillas hiding in the fields by the road would open fire at convoys or detonate land mines planted in the road. Soldiers would retaliate after such attacks, firing in all directions, and beating anyone they could lay their hands on. “...death and fear became routine like going to school, playing cricket and football”. (p.47). The soldiers set about their work of “area domination” – patrolling the roads, crackdowns in villages, arresting suspected militants. Most schools remained closed almost all the time. The troops continued setting up campus in school building, militants burnt down many others fearing they might be converted into military camps. Going to school was fraught with danger pretty much like every kind of travel. As a solution, children were sent out of Kashmir to study. Peer was also sent to Aligarh Muslim University and later on he became a journalist in Delhi. “Kashmir was the text and sub-text of my professional, personal and social worlds in Delhi.” (p.70). It is the news of his parents escaping a mine blast that forced Peer to return to Kashmir. He finds people living in fear and anticipation of death. Those who escape from the clutches of the militants also live in fear of again being fallen a prey to them. Even friends and relatives are mistrusted and thought to be conspiring against. Due to the loss of trust and fear Peer’s father stopped visiting their relatives in the villages and travelled outside Srinagar only when necessary.

In 1990 Srinagar had become the city of protests, the city of massacres. It became the city of bunkers and the city of absences. Temples, mosques, ponds and few apricot trees were replaced by military. Peer mourns lost Gods and worshippers. Women were worst affected and were converted into waiting wives, weeping mothers and half widows. Militant leaders lived in big houses and drove big cars bought from the money that came for the movement. But they were not willing to help those who destroyed their lives for the cause. Days were fear-filled and the nights curfewed since 1990. Minds were undone by the constant uncertainty and fear of almost daily humiliation. Old harmonies were tragically undermined by the atmosphere of suspicion. This led to an entire generation of Kashmiris who had grown up with no concept of security and individual families. This led to a whole society falling apart under the strain of a seemingly endless turmoil.

## REFERENCES

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