



The representation of Kashmir in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Following the partition of India in 1947 both India and Pakistan arrogated the claim of the erstwhile princely state of Jammu and Kashmir and the never-ending conflict came into being. Several narratives from the valley echoes ambiguously intertwined, crusading amongst themselves. This research offers a comparative analysis of the representation of Kashmir in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* with that of some inmate authors from valley; Sajad Malik's *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*, Pran Kishore's *Gul Gulshan Gulfam*, Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Nights* and Mirza Wahid's *The Book of Gold Leaves* and traces parallels amongst their narratives. Extending further to analyze the Kashmiri people's reception of violence and towards the very end, weigh the facts from these fictions with that of from the mainstream Indian media.

Keywords : Kashmir, fiction, comparative study, trauma, media

Introduction

Adjudicating the exact paradigm of J&K, N. Kaul begins her study with an above-board statement placing Kashmir beyond a mere India-Pakistan or Hindu-Muslim issue, and admonishes that if we continue to operate by these, acerbic will be the outcome (Kaul). M. Gangahar went on to explore how there is violence even in the silence and how it continues to resonate in Kashmir. He asked the righteous question about perceptions,

impressions and understanding. There are notable works by Sameer P. Lalwani, Gillian Gayner, Md. Waqas Sajjad, Mahwish Hafeez on violence, deaths, and trauma in Kashmir. Warisha Farasat even talks about impunity in Kashmir. She charges lack of political will to reverse this situation and resolve the conflict. Religion has always been a major trouble. The framing the image of Muslims is nothing new in Indian context. Place them in Kashmir and suddenly, they are put into question on multiple level. Minorities in every culture are a disadvantaged lot and media treats them differently and not favorably as compared to the language, culture and social system of the majority that time and again gets reflected in the media (Kapur, 2011). While both the countries, India, and Pakistan, keep their eyes on the valley awake, both have a completely different eyesight. Pakistan defines it as the ‘problem of Kashmir,’ India on the other hand looks at the ‘problems in Kashmir.’ The problem remains undaunted in both the cases. This constant tug of war between the two nations has done them no good. Kaul says Kashmiris were bargained into nationhood when the Britishers left the region. Is it the Kashmiris or just the Kashmir the country cares for? Kashmir has always been a burning topic. With so much going on in the land all the times, not to mention the beauty of the valley, Kashmir appears to be a beautiful portrait with distorted strokes.

Reading *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* ignited a set of questions in my conscience. This 2017 novel spanning from 1950s to 2010s travels along the completed lives of various characters against the backcloth of contemporary India with Delhi and Kashmir at heart of it. The primary objective of this research is to study the representation of Jammu and Kashmir in Arundhati Roy’s fiction; *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. This 2017 novel by a non-expatriate Indian author, who is best known for her 1997 Man Booker prize winner novel ‘*God of Small*

Things,’ ignites many questions for an Indian citizen to introspect about Kashmir and its inhibitors. Most of the India’s population, backed by the central, unicolored, political powers are not just not ready to buy her narrative of the valley but are also accusing the author to be working under some agenda to defame the nation. In the times when the fourth pillar of democracy has already become a lap-dog, who should the citizens believe. Though this book (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*), as Zac O’Yeah (*The Hindu*) says, is a ruthlessly probing and wide-ranging narrative on contemporary India, and in words of *The Statesman*, has uplifted itself above any genre, but at the heart, it tells the truth that others cannot reveal. This study will

compare these intimate narratives of Kashmir and its day to day inside minuteness of life with the primary text, Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and take a quick glance at what the mainstream Indian national media has been feeding the viewers allocated far off from the valley.

Discussion

Set in the present-day India, Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* took 20 long years in the making but she made sure that those years reflect in her work. She unwrapped the controversial Kashmir in her fictionalization of reality foregrounding the aspirations of Kashmiris Muslims, their state (both mental and physical), the real meaning of 'Azadi' that the valley demands and the brutality that they are bestowed with in return. The Kashmir plot in the novel revolves around Tilo; a highly independent and mysterious woman who seemingly has no caste, no past and no family, Musa; Tilo's lover and who officially joins the Kashmiri resistance after his wife, Arifa, and daughter, Miss Jabeen, are murdered in a massacre on the balcony outside their home, and Naga; a successful mainstream journalist who once was a radical left student, and a temporary husband to Tilo. Roy explains Kashmir through Biplab (Naga's friend), high-ranking bureaucrat Brahmin, the first-person narrator of a major portion of the novel: ...That none of us who were fighting over it – Indians, Pakistanis, Chinese, or for that matter Pahadis, Gujjars, Dogras, Psthuns, Shins, Ladakhis, Baltis, Gilgitis, Purikis, Wakhis, Yaskuns, Tibetians, Mongols, Tatars, Mon, Khowars – none of us, neither saint nor soldier, had the right to claim the truly heavenly beauty of that place (Dachigam, Kashmir) for ourselves (Roy, *The Landlord*, 2017, pp. 167-168). Biplab, who displays himself as a fatigued bureaucrat, insensitive of the inhumanities of the war that takes place in the part of the place where he lives. He would want to return to Kabul because he is addicted to its 'battle of wits' is an agonizing access. As a government official he should be trying in every manner possible to reduce the violence that occurs in the city where he is posted. However, his stale appreciation for the violence attests not only how cold he and the government has become of the violence, but also how perhaps they might not be striving towards containing violence at all. In fact, Aijaz explains to Naga that the militants buy their ammunition from the army. 'They do not want the militancy to end. They are very happy with the situation as it is. Everybody on all sides is making money on the bodies of young Kashmiris.' (p. 228). A lot more comes from Biplab's narration. 'For all their religiosity, Kashmiris are

great businessmen. And all businessmen eventually, one way or another, have a stake in the status quo—or what we call the ‘Peace Process,’ which, by the way, is an entirely different kind of business opportunity from peace itself.’ (p. 170). At times, it becomes clear to the readers that those who seem to be struggling to end the conflict often profit from its continuation. The process of peace is different from peace. This suggests that in addition to profiting from the conflict, Kashmiri Businessmen are contributing to the myth complicitly that bullets, arms, and continuous fighting is for peace when they are destined to bring never ending dispute and deaths.

Reading Kashmiri fictions¹ after Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* only adds up to what she says in her book. Malik Sajad in his graphic novel *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* sketches some of the most gruesome brutalities of Kashmir minutely. The soldiers receive a harsh lash in the novel. When the soldiers came to Munnu’s shop, gripped his hand, and pulled it towards his belt; ‘The anatomy of his (soldier’s) crotch became visible as he rubbed Munnu’s hand against it.’ (p. 142) Munnu’s professional life working as cartoonist in local newspapers was restricted to less controversial cartoons only. Filled with factual data, both historical and political, *Munnu* makes subtle observations on various subjects like violence, the casual response to deaths in Kashmir, the identity card issue, frisking. Nobody is spared, not even the British, ‘You mean British people do not know that their government sold each Kashmiri for 2.5 rupees? And when India and Pakistan buy ammunition and F-16s from America, you think the U.S government Believe that India and Pakistan are going to celebrate Diwali and Eid with those weapons? (p.

221) Similar narrative and critical examination of Kashmir is found in *Curfewed Nights* by Basharat Peer. Kashmiri conflict echoes through the pages of any story set in Kashmir. Peer, being a journalist, fills his novel with stories and interviews from all those victims of the violence that the valley is cursed with. Explaining the LoC as the failure of subconsciousness he says, ‘The line of control did not run through 576 kilometers of militarized mountains. It ran through our souls, our hearts, and our minds. It ran through everything a Kashmiri, an Indian, and a Pakistani said, wrote, and did’ (p. 245). Pran Kishore limits his view to the more intimate

¹ Kashmiri fiction (in context of this research): Munnu by Sajad Malik, Gul Gulshan Gulfam by Pran Kishore, Curfewed Nights by Basharat Peer and The Book of Gold Leaves by Mirza Waheed.

family affairs. In *Gul Gulshan Gulfam*, Kishore explores the basic day to day experiences of the Kashmiris showing the other face of the life of the people in its minuteness. Subjects like family, business, parenting, marriage occupy the center stage but militarizing and militancy are often hinted upon, indirectly. Through this book, Kishore tries to pass on the hope that he seems to have kept alive in his heart. The last Kashmiri fiction of this paper is Mirza Waheed's *The Book of Gold Leaves*. How is it to love in Kashmir? With white snow and red blood in abundance, its either waiting in hope for your beloved, most of the times the waiting ends with death.

This book explains it all. The frustration and the reason that why the Kashmiris choose violence, or cross the LoC.

All the Kashmiri novels discussed are very similar in the plot. Same incident or situation is discussed in all these books. The way Roy defines Kashmir in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*; occupancy, violence, fake-encounters, disappearance, death of an 8-year-old child, rape, incompetency of the army, are found to be there in these Kashmiri fictions establishing the common thread between all the books and the author's portrayal of Kashmir.

The characters reception of violence in Kashmiri fictions is so cold. Being used to of such mishaps only explains how bad the things are in Kashmir. In *Munnu*, seven-year-old Munnu while learning to make a sketch from the newspaper says, '...and sketching the photos of unrecognizable, disfigured people from the newspaper was even harder. Even if you trace them' (p. 5) whereas in contrast, after a few years, the same boy after an interview with an old woman who since ages is waiting for her son thinks, 'She was a statue of ashes. How could he unsettle her with questions? He was unsure whether to wish her long life in case her son came back, or a quick death' (p. 229) Faiz, on the other hand, joined the militants to fight against the violence and ends up being a victim of it leaving behind the question, what should a Kashmiri do, resist or surrender,

they have the same fate (The Book of Gold Leaves). Kashmir reminds one of Fanon when he said, ‘the production of madness on a mass scale in colonial Algeria was ‘a direct product of oppression.’ Saiba Verma in her 2020 book *The Occupied Clinic* explains her attempt to understand the unfolding “epidemic of trauma” in Kashmir where people have been too worried about life and death to pay attention to trauma. The trauma in the valley is manyfold, ‘Kashmiris understand violence as both a traumatic event and traumatic environment, “the atmosphere that shape[s] one’s capacities to attach to the world” (Verma, 2020).

Saiba takes a jibe at Indian media too, calling them the puppet of the government. The aggressive and oriented approach of the media houses has been broken down by Roy when she notes, ‘If you’re not a Bushie, you’re a Taliban. If you do not love us, you hate us. If you are not good, you are Evil. If you are not with us, you are with the terrorists (Roy, Apr.2003). Stating with regards to Kashmir issue, both the Pakistani and Indian media have always been used by their respective governments to project official stances, Tahir (2016) asserts that Indian media’s approach is “biased and negative” towards portraying the issue. Pointing out that Kashmir conflict, affecting the peace of South Asian region, “is not treated as an international issue by the Indian press.” He further claims that the coverage remains “negative” and does not present any peaceful resolution of the conflict. However, Pakistani media focuses on “Indian brutalities and different statements of Pakistani politicians and others.” The focus on Kashmiris and a pathway towards conflict resolution is generally missing in the coverage. Studies assert that the damaging portrayal of the valley and the people by the various non-local media houses is not a new thing. Biased reporting by the Indian media ignites obstacles for the journalists who do their work honestly as people do not trust media anymore resulting in the lack of civilian perspective in the Indian press about Jammu and Kashmir.

Kashmir and its conflict seem to be a never-ending story where the flag bearers of change and peace prosper the most while the people of the valley suffer or take arms against the army. It does not seem impossible to change what is going on in the valley, but the question is will the army or India accept the Kashmiris with the same enthuse with which they claim that peace of land, Kashmir. Much work has been done about the problems of and in Kashmir and a lot needs to be done in order to solve them all.

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