

Crises in Literature: Exploring Environment, Memory, and Trauma in Select Kashmiri Fiction

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Abstract

The world's most ecologically diverse areas are increasingly threatened by conflicts. A major study on biodiverse regions in the world, conducted by the prestigious journal, *Conservation Biology*, identified thirty-four ecologically diverse areas which are also conflict zones. One of the thirty-four areas is the region of Kashmir. Sheltering a rich biodiverse environment, Kashmir is home to a four-decade conflict over its territorial ownership. This four-decade conflict has led to intense hardships for the residents of the state; the ongoing conflict has also greatly affected the rich beauty of the region. Military camps in forest areas, unceremonious dumping of arms and ammunition in protected ecological zones, uncontrolled cutting of trees has all impacted the soil fertility and agronomic production of the State. Since the beginning of militancy in 1989, Kashmir has lost over 59 SQ miles out of 7810 SQ miles of forest cover, stripping the land of old forested areas. Andrew Hoskins, in his pathbreaking essay, "Memory Ecologies", writes about the significance of paying attention to the particular environment in

which the actions of forgetting and remembering occur. The ‘ecologies’ in which memories develop therefore become immensely important as does traumatic events around the individual impacting those memories.

The present paper wishes to explore the interphase between environment, memory and trauma through a study of two Kashmiri novels, *Gul Gulshan Gulfam* by Pran Kishore and *Life in the Clock Tower Valley* by Shakoor Rather. Kishore and Rather depict, in their novels, the conflict ridden valley at different junctures of time; Kishore sets his novel at the very beginning of militancy in the 1990s while Rather portrays the war torn Kashmir of 2008. What is universally depicted in both novels, however, is the damaging impact of the trauma of militancy and occupation on the ecological environment of Kashmir, which, in turn, negatively impacts the memories of its residents. The beautiful valley has changed drastically in the last four decades and Kishore and Rather show how the ugliness in the external environment directly parallels the bitterness and terror within the residents of the valley. The present paper will attempt to show how memory is a connecting bridge between the past and the future; the characters in both Rather’s and Kishore’s novels depict the movement of memory through different ‘ecologies’, traversing Kashmir’s beautiful past, its wounded present and its uncertain future. The paper will explore the interlinked nature of memory and environment by focusing on questions of identity and trauma, for which, it will use the theoretical tools of Shoshona Felman and Dori Laub (*Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*) and Andrew Hoskins (“Memory Ecologies”).

Keywords: Environment, Crisis, Memory, Trauma, Kashmir

“It’s not Venice or Milan; it’s Kashmir of yore . . . When snow melted at the heart of spring, a stream of water would come down from the mountains and drain out through the canal. Nalah Maar protected Srinagar even during the great flood of 1903. . . The canal was

filled up in the 1970s . . . It had proved to be an ecological disaster for Kashmir, as it choked the lagoon and affected the entire water system of the city”.

(Life in the Clock Tower Valley, 10).

“. . . go on filling up the womb of our mother with clay. Go on and then watch how she shall become sterile, and we all shall die of hunger”.

(Gul Gulshan Gulfam, 81).

Ecologically beautiful and diverse regions have to be conserved with care, love and affection. The Kashmir Valley, in India, hailed as “Paradise on earth”, by the Mughal king, Jahangir, shelters a rich biodiverse environment; but like all rare ecological zones on earth, Kashmir’s beauty too is threatened by the implements of modernization. The two quotations given above, from the novels of Rather and Kishore, capture this threat to the valley that was once pristine and untrammled. But the threat to Kashmir’s ecology is not only because of growing industrialization but also because of the state being one of the most heavily militarized areas in India. Since 1947, the ownership of Kashmir’s territory has been at the heart of the dispute between India and Pakistan. The beginning of militancy in the early 1990s further complicated the situation for the state, which was rapidly brought under the power of draconian laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, the Disturbed Areas Act, etc. Kashmir is now categorized as a conflict zone; immense hardships are faced by Kashmiris everyday due to the twin problems of occupation and militancy. The ongoing violence has been disastrous for the ecocritical ambience of the state with military camps destroying forests, wastes being dumped in the Dal Lake and uncontrolled soil erosion due to unplanned cutting of trees.

Andrew Hoskins, in his pathbreaking essay, “Memory Ecologies”, writes: “Memory is egocentric yet deeply social . . . Without social frameworks, memories would flicker like dreams without anchors in the theatre of consciousness, in the paramount reality of everyday life. This is a key faultline between the human and the social sciences and humanities in

memory studies . . . Where does remembering and forgetting begin and end: in the brain, the body, the group, or the media? . . . One way to connect the individual and the collective is through affording greater attention to the environment in which remembering and forgetting takes place” (*Memory Studies* 9, 348-352). Hoskins emphasizes on the ‘ecologies’ or environment in which memory develops; in this context, the traumatic events impacting the environment of the individual also become immensely important. The term ecology foregrounds the relationship between organisms and environment. Recent studies of memory shifts focus on the multifarious interactions between cultures and generations. There is growing urgency of environmental issues, as concerns over climate change and planetary devastation has grabbed the attention of scholars under the rubric of the Anthropocene. Questions about the role of memory in addressing environmental problems and in imagining the human impact on the chemical and climate changes on the planet bring memory in proximity to the geological and natural realms. My paper wishes to explore the interphase between trauma, memory and environment as exemplified in two novels, Pran Kishore’s *Gul Gulshan Gulfam* and Shakoor Rather’s *Life in the Clock Tower Valley*.

Shakoor Rather sets his novel in 2008 Srinagar; the story follows the life of different characters who struggle with the emotions of love, longing, desire and loneliness amidst the curfews and the violence. We meet Samar, a college student torn between the ideas of patriotism, freedom and identity. Then there is Samar’s neighbor, Sheikh Mubarak, stuck in a loveless marriage and steadily attracted to the newly arrived tourist, Rosaline. Mubarak’s five-year-old daughter, Sana, is bewildered by the behavior of the adults around her, wondering why her parents fight ceaselessly and why ‘stones are often thrown’ by people marching in the city. What is common across Rather’s characters, whether young or old, is suffering which has been inflicted through random traumatic events; Samar and his lover Rabiya are scarred by the violence of the bomb blasts and the tumultuous relationship between their parents who prevent

their marriage because of opposing political views. Sheikh Mubarak is haunted by his memories of a Kashmir that has disappeared; a Kashmir of ‘Noon Chais’ or ‘Chillai Kilan’, of shikaras and of ‘nadru palak’. The Kashmir Mubarak lives in has subsumed all of his beloved memories into the reality of stone throwing and military occupation. Throughout the novel, the beauty of Kashmir serves as a backdrop, be it the mighty snow-covered Himalayas or the flowing waters of the Dal Lake or the Bulbuls singing in the Chinar trees. But this beauty is scarred by violence; the face of Kashmir that Rather shows us is a lovely face which has been disfigured. Hence, the snow-clad mountains are covered with blood, the waters of the Dal Lake teem with blackened waste materials and sometimes human corpses, and the Chinar trees are burnt and shelled by bombs. To cope with their trauma, the characters of Rather’s novel forge remembrance strategies which help them connect with the Kashmir of past years. Memory for Sheikh Mubarak, for Rabiya, for Samar, becomes a bridge that spans the years for them to take them back to a non-militarized Kashmir, a Kashmir of fresh air and green grass without a pall of grey smoke.

Trauma and memory are both meandering in nature. This is well explored in the work of the theoreticians, Shoshona Felman and Dori Laub. Felman and Laub, in their book, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, examine the crucial relationship between witnessing trauma and its impact on memories. Felman and Laub pertinently write: “A “life-testimony” is not simply a testimony to a private life, but a point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can *penetrate us like an actual life*” (1). Rather’s characters, be it Samar, Mubarak, or even the five-year-old Sana, are all telling their “life-testimonies”, which illustrate the tragic actual lives of Kashmiris. They are witnesses to violence as well as targets of violence; their environment, once a sheltered ecological paradise, has now transformed into a hell hole of blood and gore. In a crucial scene in the novel, Mubarak searches frantically for a vet for his pregnant cow and is mocked by his friends for

caring for an animal in a state where the lives of humans are tenuous: “The time of delivery was around the corner. It could be any moment now. Mubarak feared that in case of some complication, he may not be able to convince the vet to visit amidst the curfew. The vet was also an old friend of the family . . . he dialed the vet’s number again . . . To his despair, the phone services had been snapped without notice” (*Life in the Clock Tower Valley*, 62). Perhaps the most heartbreaking of all scenes, this incident illustrates the cruel degradation of the man-animal bond in war ravaged Kashmir. The unsettling of a familiar environment often contributes to the unsettling of memories; we see this happening with Mubarak, who slowly descends into confusion and chaotic recollections. Mubarak’s loss of the memories of his childhood may be traced to the chaos of his wounded present; memory studies scholars like Rothberg have written about memory being not fixed or a ‘zero-sum game’. The vivid descriptions of the seasons in the valley depict the tranquility that is now lost forever and the loss of this environmental tranquility is what contributes to the trauma of the characters and impacts their memories. There is co-existence between individual and collective experience in the Srinagar that Rather has created; thus Samar, Rabiya, Mubarak all become enfolded together in “connecting memories”. Their experiences, their remembering, their forgetting all start to overlap in the city that is their common refuge as well as prison; Rather’s Srinagar is a city of hauntings, a city that shelters its characters in a warm cocoon of nostalgia yet imprisons them in its curfews and sieges. For the characters living in this city, commonalities of experience are natural as is memories connecting them to each other.

A raging conflict of over four decades is bound to affect a state; Kashmir too has been affected. While we can see the visible violence and human deaths as signs of the affected change in the valley, what is (a) visual or invisibilized is the changes or degradations to the environment or ecology of the valley. Badri Raina writes of the changed Kashmir he visited in 2003: “The hotel that charges some 1,200 rupees for a room charged me but 600 accompanied

everyday by a bouquet of felt intimacies; the famous bakery establishment that makes giant *bakerkhanies* only upon order gave me all I wanted . . . the sisters, Neelofer and Ayesha, upon hearing me ask a boatman-vendor at Nehru Park in the Dal for a cup of *Nuna Chai*, dragged me and my wife to a dilapidated houseboat, whereupon the mother not only gave us the choice cup but a dear old familiar shower of the sweetest Kashmiri blessing . . .” (*Kashmir*, 43). The words of Raina illustrate all too well the rapid downfall of ecological occupations and of the ecology in Kashmir; Pran Kishore’s *Gul Gulshan Gulfam* is the story of the degradation of one such ecological occupation, that of the houseboat owners.

Pran Kishore’s *Gul Gulshan Gulfam* is a novel that revolves around the tumultuous events of the militancy. Kishore takes his readers into early 1990s Kashmir, where we meet the family of Malla Khaliq, who live off the income generated by their three houseboats, Gul, Gulshan and Gulfam. Kishore makes his readers glimpse the Kashmir of yesteryears, the Kashmir with its beauty and ecology undisturbed by military camps, tear gases or bombs. But this beauty is rapidly disintegrating; terrorism has started to sneak into the Valley and the growing terror impacts the livelihood of Malla Khaliq: ““Why can’t we discern the exigency of the time? Had we invested some money in other business, we would have doubled it by now. We were so quick to change the matting of this new houseboat, Gulshan, as though there were tourists queuing up to stay in it . . . How can we rely on this tourism business? We should have abjured this old occupation, and settled somewhere on land to start a new career. We should have been wise enough to ape others”” (*Gul Gulshan Gulfam*, 13). In following the lives of three successive generations of Kashmir in the early 1990s, *Gul Gulshan Gulfam* engages with the aftereffects of economic liberalization in a state at the cusp of conflict. What is clearly evident in the novel is the lack of a sustainable economy in the valley which makes the parallel industry of tourism the only dependable means of income; the nucleus of this cultural crisis centers around the Dal Lake, where the story takes place.

People across India are well aware of the cost that Kashmiris have had to pay, mentally and physically, because of the raging conflict. But very few of us realize how the conflict has impacted the livelihood of those Kashmiris whose occupations were associated directly with the ecocritical aspects of the Valley. Pran Kishore, through the character of Malla Khaliq, shows us the damage inflicted on the houseboat owners due to the rising terrorism in the State. Malla Khaliq is a man who shelters himself within the womb of the Dal Lake; the beauty of the river warms his very essence: “The little ripples on the wide expanse of the lake shimmered like flecks of gold in the afternoon sun. A smile bloomed on his lips. His eyes lit up at the feeling that the chilly winter was now in its last throes . . . Malla Khaliq, while ferrying people to and fro, mixing his sweat with the waters of the lake had watched this grand panorama. For seventy long years, he had borne witness to the changing nature of the Dal Lake” (*Gul Gulshan Gulfam*, 3-4).

Gul Gulshan Gulfam almost reads like an eco-memoir, a genre dedicated to capturing memories of people whose identities are dependent on the bio-diverse places they inhabit. In many ways, Malla Khaliq is one such character; his very life is made meaningful by the houseboats on the Dal Lake that he lives in. The question that Kishore explores, through the figure of Khaliq, is that of identity and belonging; if the very Lake that Khaliq inhabits starts to transform into an alien entity full of wastes and gun smoke, then where does he now belong? The trauma inflicted on the Lake directly corresponds to the trauma within Khaliq; the bewildered patriarch no longer understands the world around him. Khaliq is befuddled by the changing ambience of Srinagar; the army marching through the city, the militants dragging Pandit families out of their houses, the young boys with Kalashnikovs slung across their shoulders because they want ‘azadi’. This is a Srinagar that Khaliq does not recognize and the crises erupting in his beloved city tears through his memories and his livelihood. The well-off family now are struggling to make ends meet; no tourist will risk staying in a houseboat when

it may go up in flames any time. Felman and Laub have written about Holocaust victims who were traumatized and how these traumatized memories needed to be 'written' or 'witnessed' through literature. Kishore too makes the trauma of Khaliq a sort of 'witnessing', a testimony to the violence inflicted on the residents of the Valley.

As Khaliq traverses across the ravaged Srinagar, we meet other equally bewildered and lost characters: Narayan Joo, the Pandit whose family implores him to leave Kashmir and settle in Hindu Jammu and who detests the very thought of leaving his beloved Srinagar, Khaliq's wife, Aziz Dayad, who no longer recognizes her own sons with their talk of politics and freedom, Ghulam Qadir, who desires 'azadi' with a vengeance and whose hatred now dictates his life. There is Qadir who leaves his family driven by his selfish interests, there Vijaya Kumar, aspiring for a successful life beyond Srinagar and then there is Dilip, eager to come back to his beloved valley despite his fancy degree. The novel resonates with cultural symbols which designate cultural memory: 'qahwa', 'samovar', 'jejyier', 'kangri', 'nadir'. These cultural symbols are long since degraded because of the changed ecological ambience: the kangri is now seen as harmful for health, qahwa is rarely brewed any more, nadiry does not grow in its old abundance.

Gul Gulshan Gulfam is the story of Malla Khaliq, the man who exemplifies the vanished houseboat owners of the Valley. Today, there are no sole houseboat owners left; most houseboats in the Dal Lake are co-owned and co-managed by people whose main livelihood depends on other occupations. Like the houseboat owners, many other ecological occupations are now extinct in Kashmir: Apple orchards are no longer managed by local boys, flowers which were once specially cultivated to float along the Dal Lake are now often made of plastic, apricots, once grown locally, have to be imported from Afghanistan, and 'nodru palak', once a staple of the Kashmiri Pandit diet, is rarely cooked in Kashmiri homes any more. Memories are fluid and alive with time; that is something that all memory studies scholars agree on. Paul

Riceour, in his pathbreaking work, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, writes on the meandering nature of memory: “To memory is tied an ambition, a claim – that of being faithful to the past. In this respect, the deficiencies stemming from forgetting . . . should not be treated straight away as pathological forms, as dysfunctions, but as the shadowy underside of the bright region of memory, which binds us to what has passed before we remember it” (“Memory and Imagination”, 21). Riceour emphasizes the unreliable nature of memories and how because of the past being intrinsic to our survival, we automatically choose what we wish to remember. In a conflict zone, this is even more pertinent. Hence, the characters discussed in this paper, replete with “life-testimonies”, often gloss over troubled memories, forge new remembrances, and form new connections to reshape and to cope with the changing environment. Their trauma is often buried under layers of other traumatic memories to create a palimpsestic narrative of pain and survival.

The two novels this paper focuses on, *Life in the Clock Tower Valley* and *Gul Gulshan Gulfam*, illustrate the close connectivity between environment, trauma and memories. Both novels are odes to the beauty and biodiversity of Kashmir and both writers, through their stories, lament the impact that the years of violence has had on the collective Kashmiri memory. The characters of Samar, Mubarak, Malla Khaliq, show how crises impacts individual experiences and how one’s circumstances decides one’s fate or destiny. In the two novels, Kashmir, especially Srinagar, is a character in itself; charmingly pretty yet horribly bloodied. The damage done to the collective psyche of Kashmir, as a whole, is poignantly captured in the following words of the Kashmiri journalist, Basharat Peer, and it is with these words that the present paper will be fittingly concluded: “When pain makes it difficult to articulate coherently, quiet remembrance helps. Like many other Kashmiris, I have been in silence, committing to memory the deed, the date. The faces of the murdered boys, the colour of their shirts, their grieving fathers – these might disappear from the headlines, but they have already

found their place in our collective memory” (*Until My Freedom Has Come: The New Intifada in Kashmir*, 44).

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