

The Home Treasured:
Finding Kashmiri Life and Desires in *Kash*

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April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.
What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),...¹
He who was living is now dead
We who were living are now dying
With a little patience...
...Shall I at least set my lands in order?
...These fragments I have shored against my ruins²

In his famed 1819 poem, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” John Keats optimistically assigns high value to the aesthetics of beauty and its closeness with poetic truth that redirects the poetic mind to an advanced zone of consciousness:

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”³

Yet beauty and truth may not always inhabit together on a level plane; the contradictory nature and relationship of beauty and truth especially become manifest when we talk of social and existential issues. From a sociological perspective, beauty is often associated with a certain idea of taste, polish and superficial outlook that may conceal many dark underbellies of a society. This diabolical nature of beauty and truth characterises the developmental urban social system of any modern state.

In the Indian context, the state of Kashmir, famed for its pristine natural beauty, offers itself as a spatial text to be read where beauty and truth intertwine on very ambiguous terms. The land has been a battleground of political conflict between the states of India and Pakistan since 1947 when the Britishers divided the larger Indian state into India and Pakistan; and Kashmir’s princely ruler Hari Singh signed the Instrument of Accession with the Indian republic without considering public consent. Thus this paradisaical land widely acclaimed for its natural beauty, has given rise to several narratives of anonymity, dislocation, longing for belonging, pain, terror, violence and transcendence. For instance, writing about his Kashmiri roots, Saadat Hasan Manto iterates the conflicts and ambiguities of Kashmiri life in his inimitable humorous manner::

‘This isn’t hell; it is heaven.’
 ‘Gar Firdaus bar-rooh-e zameen-ast
 Hameen asto hameen asto hameen ast’
 If there is paradise anywhere on earth
 It is here, it is here, it is here’
 ... ‘That means we shall certainly take Kashmir.’
 ‘Sure.’
 ‘The UNO shall decide.’

‘Decide what?’

‘Our fate.’

‘God used to take such decisions earlier.’

‘Now earthly “gods” decide the fates of earthly paradises.’

... We are the rightful claimants of paradise.’⁴

This brief dialogue between two commoners introduces well the high notes of tension, repression and alarm that characterise the life of a Kashmiri. The initial reference to UNO in Manto has a vital significance in the current Indian context: it points out how the concerns of the land are often decided by political institutions that are not situated in Kashmir; it also foregrounds the high political tension that dominate the everyday life of this valley. Talking as late as 2017, Subhamoy Das ascertains that the very territorial location of Kashmir has made it a bone of contention between the modern states of India, Pakistan and China:

Kashmir, a 222,236 sq. km region in the northwestern Indian subcontinent, is surrounded by China in the northeast, the Indian states of Himachal Pradesh and Punjab in the south, by Pakistan in the west, and by Afghanistan in the northwest. The region has been dubbed “disputed territory” between India and Pakistan since the partition of India in 1947. The southern and southeastern parts of the region make up the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, while the northern and western parts are controlled by Pakistan. A border, called the Line of Control (agreed to in 1972) divides the two parts. The eastern area of Kashmir, comprising the northeastern part of the region (Aksai Chin) has been under the control of China since 1962. The predominant religion in the Jammu area is Hinduism in the east and Islam in the west. Islam is also the main religion in the Kashmir valley and in the Pakistan-controlled parts.⁵

As Manto knew well, the interests of commoners and governing states would not always be in consonance with each other. The dweller resident might have a perspective distinctively different from the political views and assertive expletives of earthly gods who decide the fate of an earthly paradise. Interestingly, this difference of perspective forms a major chunk of experience in all Kashmiri writers who have been forced to leave their motherland for a diverse number of reasons but still carry a vast trove of love and patriotism in their hearts for their endangered motherland. Manto's witty conversation also hints at the complex nature of relationship that a Kashmiri author subject shares with his Indian identity. The issue of nationality and patriotism in effect raise very pertinent questions about the civic life of cities like Jammu and Srinagar that are controlled by strict military codes of security. The presence of the militia restrains civic freedom and liberties of the valley for the sake of national security and this distances them from the commoners who reside in the valley. The sternness of the state policies has led to many writers becoming refugees whose spatial distance from their city space sprout forth complex narratives of security, belonging and nostalgia for the motherland. Complexities like these make us question the politics of representation inherent in Kashmiri narratives. How transcendental do these narratives become? What visions of belonging and expectation do these tales pass on to their readers? Thinking about the rights that define urban living and the role of global capitalism in constructing city life, David Harvey caution us that actors like criminal activities, migrant status and violence shape the current city life:

... [I]deals of urban identity, citizenship and belonging, already threatened by the spreading malaise of the neoliberal ethic, become much harder to sustain. The privatization of redistribution through criminal activity threatens individual security at every turn, prompting popular demands for police suppression. Even the idea that the city might function as a collective body politic,

a site within and from which progressive social movements might emanate, appears increasingly implausible. Yet there are in fact all manner of urban social movements in evidence seeking to overcome the isolations and to re-shape the city in a different social image to that given by the powers of developers backed by finance, corporate capital, and an increasingly entrepreneurially minded local state apparatus.

But surplus absorption through urban transformation has an even darker aspect. It has entailed repeated bouts of urban restructuring through “creative destruction.” This nearly always has a class dimension since it is usually the poor, the underprivileged and those marginalized from political power that suffer first and foremost from this process. Violence is required to achieve the new urban world on the wreckage of the old.⁶

Harvey’s musings on the issues of marginalization and civic rights foregrounds the fact that violence and repressive policies of the state become major factors in determining the contours of city life in Kashmiri cities. The passage also highlights the major thematic issues intertwined with urbanity that shape the Kashmiri tales that are read in this study: migration, security and belonging, the role of criminal machinery and state repression. Yet as this study shall attempt to demonstrate, the Kashmiri tales also strive to transcend the stern and depressing realities of Kashmiri life like death and violence by frequently shifting focus on dreams, imagination, idyllic transcendence, hope and idealism.

The conflict ridden and violent atmosphere of Kashmir in independent India raises a pertinent question as one tries to study the concept of home in these narratives: how have current Kashmiri writers responded to the daily violence that characterise the lifestyle of the valley? Since most of the original Kashmiris either live outside the state or are forced into exile out of it, how have they recreated

the experiences of their motherland in their writings? And finally, can we find elements of transcendence in these tales of violence? The current article reads a selective range of stories from *Kash*, a Bengali compilation of modern Kashmiri stories to explore these questions through analyses of the notion of home and belonging. The study also tries to see these texts go beyond the paradigms of repression, violence and apathetic negligence to articulate their dreams of freedom and the longing for roots and stability.

Arvind Gigoo's story 'Rain' is a study of the distressed Kashmiri psyche that has been trapped and victimised by violence. In the story, a Kashmiri engages in a dialogue with another as they pass through the Jawahar Tunnel which connects Jammu and Srinagar. The conversation, however, becomes strained as both are hesitant to talk about current affairs and indulge in memories of being survivors since 1990. In fact, to them, the present seems to be an everlasting regime of violence and repression which only invokes feelings of fear, trauma, psychosis, insecurity and suspicion in them. As the text progresses, it becomes apparent that to both, past memories are the only means of survival and their existence is sustained through the knowledge that they are survivors. The idea of urban space as a sphere of development and liberation is subtly interred and interrogated in the story as the two disembodied voices engage themselves in a chat:

'What have you left behind?

'My past'

'Where do you live?'

'In the caves of memory. I will never come out of it. Never ever...'

'Everyone seems to say the same. Can you say when this feeling became a widely shared feeling among everyone?'

'During the rains'

'The refugees are akin to water, they flow on and flow everlastingly...they have no clear destination in their front...'

their homeland remains in their back...in their memory...in the rains...'⁷

Notably tones of fear, scepticism and anonymity haunt these lines. The author very consciously gives a counter-narrative of urbanity where the experiences of belonging and territoriality seem to blur along the lines of insecurity and terror. We are also unsure if the text deals with the testimonials of a single survivor or treats the nuanced conversation of two personas to represent the collective angst and pain of all the denizens of Kashmir.

Gigoo's stress on retrogression, trauma and anonymity equally hint towards the larger themes of vulnerability, betrayal and obsessive disorders that haunt the commoners of Kashmir as their lives are continuously subject to governmental surveillance, forced manipulation and willful neglect. The author very acutely cancels out the specifications of time, individuality and space to suggest the horrific and all-pervasive nature of violence that continuously plague the daily life of a Kashmiri. Interestingly, the two specifications of the story are two objective referents, which act as conceptual metaphors that transform the tale into a nuanced text. The first referent is rain: rain seems to be both a metaphor of existence and of social repression that destabilise normal living. The other specification is the year 1990 when 1200 Kashmiris died in the Jawahar Tunnel: and this citation, in effect, seems to be only detail that keeps on haunting the speaker/s of the text. The crisis of existence and rootedness inherent in Gigoo's Kashmiri fiction can be explored in a more detailed fashion if one recalls here the notion of Agambenian "bare life" that present a deep psychological and socio-political link between sovereignty and subjectivity through the notions of birth, identity and citizenship. Note, for example, how Agamben connects these three major players birth, identity and citizenship into a single thread to define urbanity:

It is not possible to understand the "national" and biopolitical

development and vocation of the modern state in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries if one forgets that what lies at its basis is not man as a free and conscious political subject but, above all, man's bare life, the simple birth that as such is, in the passage from subject to citizen, invested with the principle of sovereignty. The fiction implicit here is that birth immediately becomes nation such that there can be no interval of separation [scarto] between the two terms. Rights are attributed to man (or originate in him) solely to the extent that man is the immediately vanishing ground (who must never come to light as such) of the citizen.⁸

The bareness of life that Agamben explores in the context of modern state becomes very pronounced in all the tales of Kashmir. The high incidence of violence in Kashmir due to the presence of the Indian security forces makes both the land and its citizens insecure and suspicious towards the Indian state as a welfare state. The civic needs of the Indian state in fact seem to overpower the daily needs of the Kashmiri people whose civic freedom become contested, restrained and negotiated by the larger territorial conflicts between the states of India, Pakistan and China for the territory of Kashmir.

Home—a free and peaceful abode devoid of trouble seems to be a recurrent theme in Veena Pandit Kaul's short tale 'Where is my Sky?' It details the story of the poor couple Vushan and Basanti who toil hard to build their own house in 1989. However, as the days pass the city becomes more unsafe and gory for Vushan and his family. Finally, after living in the house for a span of eight fear-torn years, Basanti convinces Vushan to sell off their home to procure money to send their children to safer zones. In the wager that follows, Vushan ends up selling both his house and his lands due to the callousness of his lawyer. The selling of all lands appears to Vushan as an uprooting of his own traces from his motherland and he becomes both paralysed and depressed. As Vushan dies, he continually mutters: "I have lost

my home. Where is my Sky?”⁹ Kaul seems to suggest gloomily that in Kashmir both trust and stability seem to be lacking from the lives of common men and they cannot evade their uprooted status even if they toil and create a home for themselves as the homeland itself is vulnerable and endangered. Kaul’s treatment of rootedness and home-obsessed death remind us how Arvind Gigoo switches between life and death in his story ‘Rain’ and suggest that life and death may seem more intertwined in Kashmir as the civic needs of life in the valley is inseparably connected with the urge to survive odds. The anxieties and crises featuring in Arvind Gigoo’s writings about the all-pervasive presence of death in the valley is, however, dealt by the younger generation of Kashmiri writers in a different manner. For instance, Ujma Falak’s story “A Story of Three Words” portray the artistic fervour of the imaginative Kashmiri mind through the use of subtle imagery, symbols and metaphors. It foregrounds rebelliously the desire of transcendence, security and liberation that ignite the hearts of the rebellious and young Kashmiris. Though Falak talks about the daily occurrences of bloodshed and death that characterise Kashmiri life, it is her layered romanticised narration that transmutes these horrors into beautiful artistic images of redness. In her tale, she hints at how Kashmiri people live a life of darkness and insecurity devoid of sleep and dreams, drenched in blood and death:

Time divorced of recollection and specificity is a common practice among them. We have learnt to keep our half-torn dreams around the corner of our eyes where they seem to reside forever... colours inhere here as couples whose tastes rarely match... and among us only one colour seems to overshadow our lives along with our window-panes: the all-consuming tides of redness permeates all of our stories.¹⁰

Falak’s incisive symbolism shows how death defines the everydayness of Kashmiri city life and still she contests the goriness of death

with the gift of her imagination. Thus, in Falak's vision, death does not become a mere reference that is the end of life's cycle; rather it becomes a bathetic reminder of how "safe" daily living in Kashmir is always threatened by the presence of the death drive. In fact, death and existential crisis emerge as major themes that recur in the daily urbanity captured in *Kash*.

Death-obsession, similarly, predominates in Shahnawaz Bashir's story "News of Death" that intriguingly reminds us of both Katherine Mansfield's "The Fly" and James Joyce's "Araby". Like Mansfield's boss in 'The Fly', Abdul Rashid Malik is a bossy editor figure who has become obsessed with the news of death: his obsession effectively shows the terror psychosis and paranoia that death has instilled in the literary minds that muse or write on Kashmir. Akin to the curious adolescent quester in 'Araby', the author introduces a fictional mirror image of himself of the same name, Bashir. This second fictional figure, in effect, tries to counterbalance the egotistical obsessions of Malik who continuously feels anxious as he fails to procure a direct news bite on the occurrence, death. The treatment of death in the story, firstly, lightens the idea of death as both an uncrossed border reality that separates Kashmiri cities from that any other Indian city; and secondly, it mocks the daily instances of death as a grotesque celebration of life that destabilises the idea of secure living. Note for example, the following section where Malik feels internally tormented as he finds no bites on death:

He minutely explored the weekly for the special news that ignited him...still he found no news on or about death. His despair increased as none of the pieces talked or even referred to death... [he despaired, Alas!] there is in fact, no article devoted to death, today. By Allah! No one died! How does this even be real? He remembered that a few months back, the media personnel did forget to print news on death, and it seems the case even today. He doubted highly if these concerns were professionals at

the very least. He mused, is it true that no one died on previous week? Malik's heart sank and he mused bewilderingly: 'How did this happen, no death tolls, how?????'¹¹

The character Malik's suspicion about the authenticity of the printed reports and the cautious calculative nature of the media world poses deep questions about the sanctity and security of urban and literary life in Kashmir. The high incidences of death and the reflexive nature of the tale simultaneously show how civic amenities like security, media, literacy, etc become contested domains in Kashmiri cities. Thus, superficially crafted fictional appropriation seems to give testimonial evidence of death and lack of normalcy where physical evidences are lacking. Another story that questions the Indian metanarrative of progress and welfare schemes is Adarsh Ajit's "Cancer". The story depicts the plight and trauma of a retired engineer Kanwal who develops Tuberculosis and is later revealed as a cancer patient. The story, however, stages Kanwal's story against his dream for a stable home in his motherland, Kashmir as Kanwal is a refugee Kashmiri Brahmin. The story ends with Kanwal's death but the rifts, beliefs, struggles and infections that ail the Kashmiris' search for a stable and secure home linger on. Kanwal's belief in the possibility of a stable home, though, an evasive and idyllic one, seems to be a survival strategy that can positively counter the traumas of Kashmiri lives. The final line depicts profoundly the narrow-minded individualism and self-interest that characterise the Kashmiri refugees against the idyllic assertions and willpower that the author celebrates in his protagonist Kanwal: "As they were standing in the cremation ground, before the infected corpse of Kanwal, everybody minutely examined their own body parts—they diagnosed if any infectious glands were detected: on their throat, neck or any other body parts."¹² As one reads the story, the inanimate corpse of Kanwal and its ideals seem to be more firm and influential ideologically than all the animated bodies that surround the former: thus, Kanwal's corpse is transmuted by Ajit into the status of a relic.

In contrast, the mass of the living bodies, bereft of vision and vitality, appears lifeless and vacuous. The tone of isolation and insecurity that characterise the lines quoted above, therefore, become a replacement for the romanticized sense of belonging that inheres deep within refugee hearts. Like invisible cancerous cells, the dream of homecoming and rootedness seem the only assertion that transform Kanwal into an anti-hero who transcends the tough reality of restraints through his death and becomes an icon for the traumatized author while others reject him as a deceased and infecting corpse.

In all the tales compiled in Kash, Kashmiri life exhibits a quest for emancipation and a hustle-free cultural identity that harks back to the pre-modern times that predate the birth of modern nation state. Interestingly, in these tales, death and transformation become the only means available to the Kashmiri subject—who is suspicious both to the sociological idea of modernity and to the political identity of the nation state—to assert his selfhood and lost identity against the technologically advanced republic of India, with a well-defined system of governance. These selective tales compiled together in Kash gives one glimpses into the creative flame that dwells in Kashmir, co-existing with horror, trouble, trauma and vulnerability. Though the occurrences of violence seem to be unstoppable in Kashmir even today, fictions that relate to Kashmir seem to reverberate a strong ray of hope in the human potential of dream, transcendence and fictional appropriation in the face of violence and terror. The imaginative vitality of these stories rekindles the hope that the quest of Kashmir for a peaceful, free and secure home devoid of violence and horror shall be realised someday.

NOTES

- 1 Thomas Stearns Eliot, "The Waste Land," in *T. S. Eliot: Collected Poems 1909-1962*, by Thomas Stearns Eliot (New York: Harcourt, Bruce and World Inc., 1963), 53.
- 2 Eliot, 66, 69.

- 3 John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in *The Complete Poems*, edited by John Barnard (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 950.
- 4 Saadat Hasan Manto, "Sliver and Silvereens," in *Naked Voices: Stories and Sketches*, by Saadat Hasan Manto, translated by Rakhshanda Jalil (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2008), 140–41.
- 5 Subhamoy Das, *Understanding the Kashmir Conflict* (n.d.), accessed 30 April 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/history-of-the-kashmir-conflict-1770394>.
- 6 David Harvey, "The Right to the City," in *The City Reader*, edited by Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2016), 276.
- 7 Arvind Gigoo, "Rain," in *Kash*, edited by Adway Chowdhuri and Abhishek Jha, translated by Abhishek Jha (Howrah: Boibhashik Prokashoni, 2018), 16. My translation.
- 8 Giorgio Agamben, "Biopolitics and the Rights of Man," in *Biopolitics: A Reader*, edited by Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 154.
- 9 Veena Pandit Kaul, "Where Is My Sky?" in *Kash*, edited by Adway Chowdhuri and Abhishek Jha, translated by Arvind Gigoo (Howrah: Boibhashik Prokashoni, 2018), 102.
- 10 Ujma Falak, "A Story of Three Words," in *Kash*, edited by Adway Chowdhuri and Abhishek Jha, translated by Ananya Singha (Howrah: Boibhashik Prokashoni, 2018), 19. My translation.
- 11 Shahnawaz Bashir, "News of Death," in *Kash*, edited by Adway Chowdhuri and Abhishek Jha, translated by Adway Chowdhuri (Howrah: Boibhashik Prokashoni, 2018), 145–46. My translation.
- 12 Adarsh Ajit, "Cancer," in *Kash*, edited by Adway Chowdhuri and Abhishek Jha, tr. Srijata Gupta (Howrah: Boibhashik Prokashoni, 2018), 114. My translation.