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Kashmir in the writings of Agha Shahid Ali and Rafiq Kathwari

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In September 2017, Jammu and Kashmir Tourism department released a short promotional film about Kashmir. The film was released at Tagore Hall by the Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti but it was circulated mainly on Facebook. The film shows a couple from Delhi or elsewhere in India on their honeymoon to Kashmir. The couple orders a cab on phone and on the way they see an old man who they assume is their driver Mir. The old man takes the couple in his vehicle and shows them around. In the couple finds out that the old man whom they mistook for their driver had left home for market to buy some sugar but unable to resist some kind of misplaced sympathy had spend the whole day with the couple pretending to be their driver. The film says in the end this is real Kashmir. During the whole trip Mir constantly puts his phone on halt when his wife keeps calling implying that a 'good Kashmiri' has to put himself and his priorities at hold or halt in order to be acceptable to the Indian tourist imagination.

The video has a song playing throughout but the song though in Kashmiri, the accent clearly shows it isn't sung by a non-Kashmiri. When it comes to Kashmir then, the landscape, music, the culture in Kashmir can be Kashmiri but the voice has to be non-Kashmiri. In the film the old man has no urgency to go anywhere, the lone musician plays *rabab* in the meadows. Everything is laid back and people are happy. There is not a single hint to the troubles or conflicts thus in order to allure the tourists the illusion of 'Happy Valley' is kept alive. There is nothing new in the promotional film, right from the beginning the imagination about Kashmir have been that of a tourist heaven whose inhabitants are either devilish and unwanted and undeserving of the beautiful valley or at a subordinate or subservient position fit only to serve the tourists, ignoring himself.

The engagement of creative literature with place is not a new phenomenon. Various literary discourses have pre-eminently foregrounded place to weave human narratives. However, not very often does a given place transform itself into a metaphor for a lived human experience. A writer always has an urge to describe the place around his/her as vividly as possible. This urge is to make his/ her reader experience his/her life and the surroundings imaginatively. Writers who by circumstance, chosen or forced, are driven away from the place of their birth, have a stronger desire to relive that place. And if the place they belong to is at a

point of historical disadvantage, the desire to document every around becomes all the more intense.

This paper tries to look at the various historical representations of Kashmir which has created various stereotypes or rigid binaries around the Kashmiri identity and aims to highlight how Kashmiri writers have tried to subvert such narratives by way of producing a counter discourse. To this aim the paper focuses on the writings of Agha Shahid Ali and Rafiq Kathwari. Though Shahid started writing much earlier in his life while as Rafiq chose the poetic medium for expression very recently, the two writers nonetheless share a common poetic sensibility vis a vis Kashmir.

Both these writers who have been close friends and have dedicated poem to each other, were born in Srinagar, lived in the same neighborhood in Rajbagh and both moved to the US for their higher education and in the US too lived in close vicinity. These two writers have time an international visibility, both write in English and therefore offer a representation of Kashmir which is quite different from the representation made by people from outside Kashmir.

The historic representation of Kashmir has undergone many changes yet certain stereotypes have recurred. One such term is the idea of a 'Happy Valley'. The term Happy Valley is derived from the title of W Wakefield's travel book, The Happy Valley: Sketches Kashmir and Kashmiris (1879). Wakefield in the very opening of the book writes that during his service of Her Majesty the queen , as a medical officer to the forces, he had the opportunity to listen to tales about Kashmir from his friends who had visited Kashmir. He further says that he was well acquainted with the subject he has put on the pages of the book till he had the good fortune to visit the "Happy Valley." To Dear Companion of my favourite wanderings both in India and Kashmir, this volume is affectionally dedicated by her husband. Notice that Wakefield mentions the 'Happy Valley' as separate from rest of the India.

The idea of Happy Valley however does not begin with Wakesfield it can be traced way beyond his book, however mid 1850s marked the emergence of the idea of Kashmir as a Happy Valley in the Western Imagination following Thomas Moore's imagery in his famous romance *Lalla Rookh: The Oriental Poem*(1812). In fact Wakefield uses the lines from Lalla Rookh :

Who has not heard of the Vale of Cashmere,

With its roses ,the brightest that earth ever gave ,

Its temples , and grottos , and fountains as clear

As love lighted eyes that hang over their wave ?

The question mark after the end of the line is quite intriguing. Was Moore not very sure of his description? It is ironic that Moore who lured much of the Western visitors to Kashmir, never himself visited the Valley. Before Wakefield many Western travellers came to Kashmir with the imagery and imagination ignited by Moore's famous Romance. Moore in turn drew his idea and imagination of Kashmir mainly from the two very early travellers to Kashmir. Francois de Bernier a French physician named, who visited Kashmir in 1664–1665 and George Foster who was in service of the East India Company. While as Bernier 'his majesty's most humble a loyal servant' as he calls himself in the book, came to Kashmir as part of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb's Royal assignment, George Foster stealthy came to Kashmir in 1783 during the Sikh Rule, in the garb of a Turkish merchant. It would not have been possible otherwise for him to visit Kashmir because it was out of bound to foreigners at that time to come to Kashmir. Bernier's travelogue is widely recognized as the first authoritative source on the description of Kashmir. Bernier described Kashmir in the letters which were later published as Travels in the Mogul Empire, AD 1656–1668 (Paris, 1670). George Foster on the other hand isn't a very well known traveler to Kashmir , though his letters on his journey to Kashmir were first published in 1798.

The Persian Kings and Princes who had come to India had made Kashmir their summer capital and it was the Mughals who gave Kashmir the name of Paradise which is still quoted by people to describe their awe of the natural beauty of Kashmir.

Agar Firdous beruhe Zameen ast/hame ast hame ast hame sat

If there is paradise on earth, its here! Its here! It's here!

This paradisal description of Mughal emperor have since centuries been resonating and forming a perception of Kashmir in the popular imagination. The famous gardens of Kashmir of Nishat and Shalimar were put to the present shape by the Mughals. They also build the fountains and minarets around Srinagar and other places. Mughal engagement with the place remained primarily an engagement with the geographical location which did not factor in human life that informed the place. They failed to give a human representation to the people of Kashmir.

Mughals introduced certain maxims which misrepresented Kashmiri people and formed stereotypes about them.

Same was the situation in the English imperialist period. The most referred to book for Kashmir is Walter Laurence's *The Valley of Kashmir* (1895).This book written by a British Settlement officer, is considered to be one of the most definitive account of the history of the Valley. Like any other travel writer, Laurence writes about the snow-clad mountain peaks, lush green forests, the bewitching meadows. And while describing the people of Kashmir, he portrayed them as deceitful and lazy. Thus reinforcing the stereotypes linked to the natives from a purely colonial perspective.

Aldous Huxley however, in his travel book *Jesting Pilate : The Diary of a Journey* (1926) not only compounded the matter by rubbishing the so called paradise that was presented by Mughals. Huxley draws a comparison between the Mughal gardens in Srinagar with Villa de'Este at Tivoli and Villa Lanti, near Viterbo. Huxley maintains that the Mughal gardens are disappointingly inferior to any of the Italian gardens. Comparing the fountains in the Mughal gardens to those of the European ones, he says that these are just nozzles and that he shuts his eyes to imagine those Bolongese mermaids with their spouting breasts ;those boys and tortoises at Rome(1926,p.24). Huxley says these fountains in the Mughal gardens are not worthy of calling fountains, giving little respect to the socio-cultural context of the Kashmir. Huxley's disappointment is also perhaps because of the popular paradisal image of Kashmir. However, Huxley does give some sympathetic account of the people of Kashmir:

> It is cheaper in this country to have a wagon pulled by half a dozen men than a pair of oxen or horses. All day, on carts creaking slowly along behind their team of human draft animals. …That men should be reduced to performance of such labour which, even for beasts, is cruel and humiliating, is dreadful thing. Ah, but they feel things lesser than we do, the owners of motor-cars, the eaters of five meals a day , the absorbers of whisky hasten to assure me; they feel them less, because they are used to that sort of life. They're really quite happy (p,22)

Whether in a sarcastic of imperialistic humour, Huxley declares that the people of Kashmir are happy in spite of being in an abject inhuman condition. He draws on Rumi the eastern mystic to elucidate his point quoting :

> 'The opposite of light shows us what light is….God created grief and pain for this purpose'…..These Kashmiri draft coolies, who are unaware of comfort, culture, plenty, privacy, leisure, security, freedom, do not in consequence know that they are slaves, do not repine at being herded together in filthy hovels like beasts, do not suffer from their ignorance , and are resigned to being overworked and underfed(P,22-23)

Though Huxley gives a sympathetic account of the plight of Kashmiris, as one turns a few pages one can see that Huxley makes very sarcastic, stereotypical, generalized judgement about Kashmiris, 'saying these people have a genius for filthiness' based on his observation of a couple of people. Reinforcing the imperialist image of the lazy native undeserving of the colonized space /place.

After the partition of the subcontinent Kashmir became all the more desired , because there was now a contender to play on the other side of the tug of war. In *The Blazing Chinar* the autobiography of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, while describing to the readers the characteristic traits of Jawahar Lal Nehru, the first prime minister of independent, "He (Nehru) easily fell to the charms of the fair sex , and melted away at the sight of a petite face and the sound of a fascinating talk. He was in his elements when in such company. …Hence top ranking congress leaders made insinuations about this proclivity of his temperament . A great many women found way into his life and intruded into his mind. But such women had talent besides physical charms. They included Sarojini Naidu, Padamja Naidu, Miss Mridola Sarabhai, Lady Edwina Mountbatten, and scores of other ladies. Besides women he was crazy about Kashmir". Sheikh narrates that its interesting that Nehru perceived Kashmir's charms in terms of feminine beauty. Sheikh relates that Nehru thus described Kashmir,[Kashmir is] like an exceedingly charming damsel whose beauty is impersonal and beyond human reach-one aspect of female beauty. The feminine charms of her beauty overwhelms me and I almost fall into a swoon. This beauty is like the beauty of a beloved , which is seen only in a dream but which vanishes from sight as soon as one wakes up.

It is interesting to note here that before Sheikh comes to describe Nehru's craze for Kashmir, he mentions half a dozen women. By mentioning Nehru's fascination for women and Kashmir in the same breath, Sheikh is also succumbing to attributing femininity to Kashmir which he himself perhaps despises while relating to us the description of Kashmir by Nehru . Thus the idea of the Kashmiri landscape being compared to a beautiful woman who is to be possessed and protected is retreated. Now one may argue that the beautiful landscapes

have always especially in the literary discourse been compared to feminine charms. It is worth mentioning that Sheikh further says that he sometimes wonders, " if Jawaharlal's fondness for Kashmir was a psychological inversion of the rivalry he felt for me because I was the darling of the Kashmiri people? May be, since he couldn't imagine Kashmir unless he did so in terms of a metaphor-Woman. Was he then wishing away psychological rival when he made a move to dislodge me?" Sheikh is writing this while ruminating the circumstances under which he was dislodged in the year 1954.

The above paragraph not only draws light on the fact that Nehru saw Kashmir as feminine landscape which appealed to his masculinity , even Sheikh Abdullah who according to his own statements at many places in the book was the representative of masses in Kashmir did scum to drawing further the analogy thus retreating the very idea of Kashmir as woman for whom he is the better and able contender.

Edward Said, in his famous book Orientalism (1978) puts forth the idea that while constructing a discourse about the orient, how the occident is attributing among innumerable binaries, feminine and masculine qualities to orient and occident respectively. It needs mention that Edward Said draws the idea of binaries following Foucault's concept of power. This would mean that the viewing of the colonised/ marginalised/ orient is not based on the ethnicity or nationality but is determined by what side of the power equation you are. So one attributes feminine qualities to things places, people one seems to have control over and this can be applied to binaries beyond east and West and beyond coloniser and colonised. It is worth mention here that both Sheikh and Nehru were ethnically Kashmiri. Sheikh had also made himself as the undisputed representative of Kashmir who took all the decisions by himself on the pre-text of being saviour of the valley.

As illustration of the concept, Said used the example of Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan, "which produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was 'typically Oriental'" (Said 1978: 6). Said's argument was that Flaubert's situation in relation to Kuchuk Hanem illustrated a parallel situation to that between the Occident and the Orient. In becomes imperative therefore for the writers who are native to the place to offer a counter representation which is not just about the place but gives a fair share of representation to the people inhabiting the place.

One of the most prominent voices of Kashmir outside Kashmir is Agha Shahid Ali. Shahid was born and raised in Kashmir, but left in 1976 to receive his higher education in the United States. He composed poetry that has an anguish of displacement following his self inflicted exile. Yearning for home remained the primary concern i his creative experiences. He tries to recreate Kashmir in his poems while he is away from Kashmir. In the poem "Postcard from Kashmir," he says:

> Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox
> my home a neat four by six inches
> I always loved neatness. Now I hold
> the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.

Rafiq Kathwari, recipient of the Patrick Kavanagh Award. In the blurb Susan Shapiro said about his poetry that is was "as if you put Derek Walcott, Salmon Rushdie and Jhumpa Lahiri in a blender." Kathwari and Shahid were born both in Kashmir lived in Rajbagh Srinagar and in New York city. Kathwari's poetry clearly reflects his rootedness in Kashmiri tradition and literature yet his acceptance of that heritage is never singular. His poems explore the inner conflict between native culture and that imbibed from books and his stay in the West , in this case America. In his poems by making the narrator, his mother who is a schizophrenic women whose husband remarries and she is left at the mercy of servants in Kashmir and in America . Kathwari dramatizes both a personal and historical quest for identity, mother sometimes becomes metonymy for homeland, in this case Kashmir. In "Rooms are Never Finished", Shahid expresses the grief over loss of his mother which is conflating with his grief for loss of homeland. This from the last poem in this last collection, "I Dream I am the Ghat of the Only World":

> I always move in my heart between sad countries.
> But let it not end "IT WON'T" this grief for you mother.

Themes of exile, estrangement and isolation predominate I'm Kashmiri writers writing from outside of Kashmir. Although Kathwari's consciousness of his poetic obligations towards his homeland spurs reflections in his poems, he also gives a multifarious description its landscape. Both these writers have an uneasy relation to history and they take recourse to ancestral myths and memory in order to subvert the history of the dominant narrative.

In his poem "Beyond the Ashes," Shahid thus expresses his unease with history, "desert refused my history" and he says he is "singled out for loss." Ali returns to his Homeland in dreams. In Shahid's poems, he uses Srinagar metaphorically to reflect his yearning, disillusionment, and his search for self. In the poem, 'I see Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight', Shahid is chased by his memories of Kashmir. In the poem he gives a realist account of incidents happening in Kashmir lending a surrealist aura to the places where these incidents take place.

From Zero Bridge
a shadow chased by searchlights is running
away to find its body. On the edge
Of cantonment, where Gupkar Road ends,
It shrinks almost into nothing

Shahid, recounts a dream about zero bridge in the poem depicting reality that is more surreal than a dream but the dream or the nightmare is always about Kashmir. Similarly Kathwari in his poem "Fire Tree" In Another Life (Kathwari,2015,p.66) recounts his dream about Kashmir which tries to highlight that underneath the embroidered *shikaras* and green gardens, there are also many shades of barrenness :

Last Night I dreamt I went to Kashmir again.
I was being rowed in an embroidered *shikara*
to the Garden of Rajas who had vanished
The garden was a sea of hell;our tin roof
collapsed , our fire tree submerged , and
barrenness had become a thousand things

The fractured identity leads to a divided self finding echoes in various shades of his consciousness — Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir, Cashmir, Cashmire, Kashmere, Casmir, Cauchmar, Kacmir, Kaschemir, Kasmere, Kachmire, Kasmir, Kersemere. The resonance of the word Kashmir spelled differently may reflect the poet's urge to come to terms with the fragmentation of his national identity. By not settling with one spelling, the poet conveys that Kashmir remains a tempting yet elusive goal, symbolic of a future deferred forever.

As a poet in self- inflicted exile, Shahid consciously eschews identity of self and assumes the collective identity of place rooted in history. He creates cultural experiences to overcome his sense of displacement. Shahid as a poet takes on himself the job to recreate collective history through individual memory. The history that Shahid wants to resurrect is not the documentation of history as just events in past but the details of a living present.

He also talks of the process of history getting distorted in narratives and counter-narratives. The individual stories or 'mini -histories', as Lyotard (1984) would call these, are at ideological crossfire with the authorised versions of 'History' with a capital 'H'. In this poem "Farewell" Shahid writes:

Your history comes in the way of my memory.
I am everything you lost. You can't forgive me.

Shahid bemoans that his history is not recognised, that it has no authenticity, in his poem , "Beyond the Ash Rains".

When the desert refused my history,
Refused to acknowledge that I lived
There with you, among a vanished tribe,
You took my hand, and we walked through streets
Of emptied world, vulnerable
To our suddenly bare history in which I was,
But you said won't again be, singled
Out for loss in your arms, won't ever again
be exiled, never again, from arms.

The story of women in case of Kathwari is not just dwelling in past and celebrating Habba Khatoon and Lal Ded but also the women who are fighting now against odds to make the ends meet.He is talking about the half windows who are also in a state on perpetual uncertainly as to if they are still married or windowed because there is no clue if their husbands are alive or dead.

An ancient Sufi shrine oddly gutted,
its rich latticework lost.

New architecture
showed no awe for Nature.
Half-widows wailed,
clawing at mass graves,
yearning for their disappeared

Similarly Shahid's poetry swings between America and Kashmir, giving his readers a multiple mediation of his experience. It also interrogates his position vis-à-vis these two cultures. Shahid envisions a future that has no scars left from history. Although this seems a far-off dream, Shahid's art situated both in Kashmir and the United States seems to set a movement from both ends of the continuum. In the poem 'A Pastoral' he thus imagines a future for his beloved city Srinagar:

We shall meet again in Srinagar
by the gates of the Villa Of Peace,
Our hands blossoming into fists
till soldiers return the keys and disappear.

As against the writers from the past in the Writings of Agha Shahid Ali and Rafiq Kathwari have tried to look at the place as location for human habitation rather then just a tourist place. Rafiq Kathwari mocks the tourist's imagination of Kashmir which reduces it either to places or dead objects. In one of his poems he is asked about his native place and when he answer Kashmir, the person in all possibility a Western person asks, The poem is called Geography (In Another Country, 2015, p. 74)

Where are you from
I am often asked
Manhattan, I answer
Or I play it straight .
"From Kashmir"
" Is it where the Wool Comes from?"
Sometimes I say, " Exit 18,
M1 Hang a right In the Himalyas
my roads diverged

O Blow -In
outsider in a land of insiders
embrace the craic
Not, where are you from,
but where are we going
together?

They have brought about the anxieties and apprehensions of the people. Both Shahid and Kathwari have drawn on the human dimension of the place. Their very presence in their poetry and the bits from their stories and their poet personae are essential in understanding their agency as poets. Both these poets have necessarily had to speak for their regions, peoples and cultures, alternately celebrating and resisting the burden of representation, imposed on them by both their own people and by the outsiders

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