

Literature of a War-Zone: Tracing the Evolution of Literary Traditions in Kashmiri Literature

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Abstract

The literature of Kashmir, the most militarised zone on the earth, has a long history. Every aspect of Kashmiri literature, from language to the theme of the texts, has seen an evolution with time. While the oldest works were composed in Sanskrit, Kashmiri literature has been written in various other languages such as Koshur, Persian, Urdu, and Hindi: the contemporary writers use English as the mode of expression. Kashmiris have been suppressed and subjugated by various arbitrary rulers since the beginning of history, and it has impacted the literature of the region as well. Kashmiri literature in itself is very complex: there are accounts of oppression and forceful conversions into Islam, the impact of subjugation on the psyche of a Kashmiri, there also exist sagas that celebrate the beauty of the landscape and the eternal love that blossoms in such an atmosphere. The literature created after the onset of insurgency in Kashmir has a common theme: the impact of the tussle between the militants and the Armed Forces of India on a native Kashmiri. One cannot also ignore the Kashmiri Pundits who were forced to take exodus from the valley: their literature sings of the pain of separation from their beloved homeland. The paper attempts to portray the way in which Kashmiri literature has evolved timelessly while studying the temporality of the themes that the writers picked up at different points of time:

Jis khaak ke zamir mein ho aatish-e-chinar

Mumkin nahin ke sard ho woh khaak-e-arjuma

(The dust that has in its conscience the fire of chinar trees

That dust, celestial dust, will never become cold)

— Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah (*Flames of the Chinar*)

Kashmiri language is the outcome of an over-laying of a Dardic base with Indo-Aryan elements. Suniti Kumar Chatterji in his extensive book *Languages and Literatures of Modern India* traces the origin of Kashmiri language in “Dardic section of Aryan or Indo-Iranian” and writes that Brahmanical Aryans during the Vedic Age and Buddhists during the Mauryan empire, made Kashmir “in spite of a Dardic substratum in its people and in its speech, became

a part of the Sanskrit culture world of India” (256). Very fine literature has been composed in the Kashmiri language, which contains traces of both Brahmanical and Islamic cultures.

Initially, Kashmiri literature began to be composed in the Sanskrit language: names like Damodara, Abhinavgupta, Kalhana, Bilhana and others find eminence in the Kashmiri Sanskrit literature. One can divide the history of Kashmiri language as well as Kashmiri literature into three periods, which are:

- a. Old Kashmiri (from 1200 to 1500 A.D.)
- b. Middle Kashmiri (from 1500 to 1800 A.D.)
- c. New or Modern Kashmiri (after 1800 A.D.)

Old Kashmiri Period

Chatterji contends that the old Kashmiri was a language with a phonetic character, but from the times middle Kashmiri came into being, there were some extensive changes in the vowels, “through *Umlaut* and other sound-laws being operative”, and this was responsible for changing the nature of Old Kashmiri and making it almost a different language (257).

Belonging to the period and religion of Abhinavgupta, Chatterji recognises the earliest compositions that are available in Kashmiri language as the 94 four-line stanzas found in a highly abstruse Sanskrit work called *Mahanyaparakasa* (trans. “Illumination of the Highest Attainment or Discipline”) by Sitikantha Acarya, dealing with Shaiva-tantric philosophy. Another work supposed to be dating back to the age of *Mahanyaparakasa* is *Chumma-Sampradaya*, a verse collection of 74 verses.

The biggest name in the 14th century in Kashmiri literature is of the great woman-saint Lal Ded, famous both among Hindus and Muslims. About 110 of her poems, passed mostly by word of mouth, have been “edited and translated by Sir George Abraham Grierson (Royal Asiatic Society of London, 1923), and some more have been collected by others” (Chatterji 259). Lal Ded born in 1335 A.D., lead an unhappy married life: became a *sanyasini* singing poems about the mystic perception of the supreme Shiva. The Muslims believe that she had converted to Islam after her meeting with the Sufi saint and preacher Shah Hamdani, as both mutually appreciated the mystic qualities of each other. The amalgamation of Shaivism and Sufism is evident in her poetry, for instance:

I was passionate,

filled with longing,

I searched

far and wide.

But the day

that the Truthful One

found me,

I was at home. (Translated by Jane Hirshfield, *poetryfoundation*)

During the second phase of the old Kashmiri period, there existed another great Muslim saint named Shah Nuruddin (Hindus call him Nand Ryosh or Nanda Rishi). Born in 1377, Nuruddin became a patron saint for the Kashmiri Muslims, but was held in high respect both by the Hindus and the Muslims. His verses, mostly didactic in nature have been collected in a book form. Named *Rishi-namah* or *Nur-namah*, his verses show his extreme love and dedication to God. The following short poem of Shah Nuruddin is an apt trailer of his writing style:

He's beside me and

I'm beside Him,

Blissful I feel with Him,

In vain, I went a—seeking Him

In strange lands, for

My Friend Himself graced me

in my own House! (*poemhunter.com*)

The Golden age of the Kashmiri literature can be acknowledged during the reign of Zainul Abidin, the ruler of Kashmir for most of the 15th century (1420 to 1470), who was a great patron of arts and literature. Himself a learned man, he encouraged Hindu rituals and philosophy and developed the artistic crafts of Kashmir. Chatterji enlists a few of Kashmiri poets who decorated the court of Zainul Abidin:

Uttha-soma, who composed a series of lyrics in Kashmiri, besides a biography of Zainul Abidin, and a treatise on music called the *Manaka* : an unknown poet who wrote the *Banasura-vadha*, the first narrative poem so far known in Kashmiri: *Yodha-bhatta*, who wrote a biography of his patron, the *Jaina-carita*, and a drama also on his patron, the *Jaina-prakasa*: and there was also Bhatta-avatara who was a distinguished Persian scholar and who composed another work on this royal patron of letters in Kashmiri, the *Jaina-vilasa*. (*Languages and Literatures of Modern India* 260)

A large number of literary works were translated from Sanskrit into Persian and from Persian into Sanskrit, for the first time under the patronage of Zainul Abidin, for example, the *Rajatarangini* by Kalhana and Jami's romantic poem *Yusuf-Zulaikha*, respectively. One can even say that the fifteenth century in Kashmir saw the transformation of the Kashmir, and the Kashmiri literature in turn, into a predominantly Muslim culture. The overall atmosphere that permitted this transformation was the Sufi version of Islam, which was non-iconoclastic in nature and appreciative of the ongoing Brahmanical Shaiva mysticism of Kashmir at the same time. During this phase, the Kashmiri language also underwent a lot of changes and took the form of what we see today as the modern Kashmiri.

Middle Kashmiri Period

The Middle Kashmiri Period can be divided roughly into three stages: up to 1586 A.D., Kashmiri Sultans ruled in Kashmir, who gave way to the Moghuls: during the first half of the sixteenth century, the family of Zainul Abidin stayed in power. After the rule of the four Muslim rulers of the Chak dynasty and the Moghuls in the medieval era, the Afghans had conquered Kashmir till 1820. The evolution of Kashmiri literature saw a substantial development in the Middle period, and Persian was the language that emerged as the most prominent language to be employed for literary purposes. Islam had fully established itself, and the place of Sanskrit as the language of the masses was taken by Persian. Under the influence of Sufism, efforts to create a harmonious relationship between the Hindus and Muslims were made, which can be easily noticed in the literary works of the era. One of the major names in Kashmiri poetry in the sixteenth century is Habba Khatun. Habba, a simple village girl of great beauty and with a very refined poetic sensibility, was married to an uneducated villager. Her singing and poetic talents were never appreciated by her in-laws, and she was caught in an unhappy marriage. Captivated by her beauty and her talents, King Yusuf Shah Chak married her after getting her divorced from her husband and she lived the next six years of her life as the queen of Kashmir, until the emperor Akbar imprisoned her husband by deceit. Consequently, the songs of Habba Khatun are laden with the yearning for the thus parted husband, for instance:

The one who dazzles - have you seen that one?

Upon him look!

A sleepless stream in search of him I run,

A restless brook.

In far off woods, a lonely pine I stood

Till he appeared,
My woodcutter, and came to cut the wood.
His fire I feared,
Yet though he burn my logs, behold I shine,
My ashes wine! (Translated by Nilla Cram Cook, *poemhunter.com*)

King Yusuf neither saw the light of the day again nor was he able to meet his beloved again. Habba Khatun spent the rest of her life reciting songs for her beloved husband which are famous even to this day in the Valley. Chatterji names the following important literary people of the Kashmir during the Moghul and Afghan periods:

Khawajah Habibullah Naushahri, who died in 1617, wrote a series of beautiful lyric poems in Kashmiri: the Hindu poet Sahib Kaul, who lived during the time of Jahangir, wrote the *Krsna-avatara* and the *Janam-Carita*, both on Hindu Puranic themes: the poetess Rupa-bhavani (1624-1720) wrote a number of religious poems : her language, as that of a Hindu religious writer, was highly sanskritized: Mulla Fakhir, who died about the close of the 18th century, composed songs and odes. (*Languages and Literatures of Modern India* 262)

During the second half of the eighteenth century, lived the third (the other two being Lal-Ded and Habba Khatun) great Kashmiri poetess named Arani-mal, whose name literally means a garland of yellow roses. Wife of a Kashmiri Brahmin and a learned Persian scholar, her married life was unhappy like that of Lal Ded and Habba Khatun. Deserted by her husband because of his love for other women, Arani-mal pours forth her frustration and yearning for the estranged husband in beautiful love lyrics:

Wreaths of flowers I wove for my husband
Would that he were to accept it
Cups of wine I filled for him
Would that he were to come
I yearn to clasp him in my arms. (*Kashmiri Pandit Network*)

In yet another poem written in Kashmiri, she sings out the agony of her tormented heart:

Shamosondran Paaman Laegis
Aamataavae Kotah Gaejis
Naama Paegam tas Kusniye
Kar yiyey darshun diyey (wikiupdates)

The above lines reflect the pain of Arani-mal who says that now she has become an object for the people who taunt her all the time. It has made her feel lifeless, weak and ill. She is afraid that there is now nobody who will come and take her message to her beloved, so that he may come and show her the blessed shine of his presence. The eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century saw an increase in the number of poets who composed their poems in the way of the Persian narratives: not only that, they had also started writing adaptations of the Persian classics in the Kashmiri language, therefore naturalising Persian as the language of the Kashmiri literature.

Modern Kashmiri Period

The period of the Afghan rule in Kashmir beginning in 1748 was extremely unpleasant for the Kashmiris, which ended with the intervention of Ranjit Singh of Lahore, Panjab. The modern period of the Kashmiri literature began with the onset of the rule of the Sikhs in Kashmir, where Urdu and English started gradually influencing the language and literature in terms of ideas and thoughts. Persian was the language of the court, therefore, literary works continued to be composed in Persian. After 1848, the formation of the state of Jammu and Kashmir took place under the Dogra-Rajput dynasty from Jammu: with this, the condition of the Kashmiri Hindus improved greatly. Meanwhile, Chatterji writes about the evolution of the language, which:

[. . .] had developed a quantitative meter in the Persian style, side by side with the native Kashmiri meter of strong stresses which still characterizes popular poetry. In vocabulary, in the common epithets and in phrases and imageries, the Kashmiri language, like Urdu in India, came entirely under the spell of Persian: but Kashmiri nevertheless preserved a good deal of its native character. (*Languages and Literatures of Modern India* 264)

The Muslim poet Mahmud Gami (died 1855) with works like *Yusuf-wa-Zulaikha*, *Laila-Majnun*, and *Khusrau-Shirin*, and the Hindu poet Parmanand (died 1879) with works like *Radha-svayamvara*, *Sudama-carita* and *Siva-lagan*, composed works of high literary merit in Persian and Sanskrit, and therefore, dominated the stage at the onset of the Modern period of Kashmiri literature. After 1880, English and Urdu languages came into foray. But in the whole process, Chatterji claims that the native Kashmiri language is lost somewhere, as it does not possess a suitable alphabet:

It is now generally written in the Perso-Arabic script which is very unsuitable for the genius of the language, and the old sharada alphabet, which is confined to the

Kashmiri Brahmins, represents an archaic tradition in its orthography. (*Languages and Literatures of Modern India* 265)

There have been efforts made to revive the Sharada script in contemporary times, but it is quite difficult to be adapted in the modern times in spite of the scientific endeavours. Anagha Raviprasad writes about a group of Kashmiri Pandit youth (born post-exodus) have formed an organisation named Kashmiri Youth Movement, which is making tremendous efforts to revive the Sharada script: the group on its Instagram account @sharadascriptkashmir encourages people to send their names to the account in order to participate in the movement. In turn, the name written in Sharada script is sent back to the participant, who is asked to put it as his display picture to generate curiosity among people and awaken the masses about the lost glory and heritage of Kashmir. (*Kashmiri Youth Movement*) Apart from it, various rallies and programmes are also held at various places in the country to spread awareness about the script and a hope to revive it.

Another important name in the history of the Kashmiri literature is Abdul Wahhab Pare, who translated the historical work *Akbarnama* into Persian, also he wrote an adaptation of Firdausi's *Shah-namah* in Kashmiri from Persian. Suniti Kummar Chatterji contends that with Pare's death in 1913, the older period of the Kashmiri literature can be said to come to an end, but some other poets of the older tradition whose names should be mentioned here are:

Rasul Mir, the author of a number of beautiful songs and ghazals: Azizullah Haqqani, a poet: and besides a number of Sufi mystic poets like Qalandar Shah, Abdul Ahad Nazim, Mohiuddin Miskin, Khwajah Akram Rahman Dar, and Maulavi Siddiquallah (died 1930) who translated the *Sikandar-namah* of the great Persian poet of the 12th century, Nizami. (*Languages and Literatures of Modern India* 267)

The poet Pirzadah Ghulam Ahmad Mahjur (born 1885), can be hailed as the forerunner of the most recent period of Kashmiri literature. His poetry is an amalgamation of multiple themes, and he writes on passionate love for the beloved, beauty of the natural landscape, and on political and national issues as well. The Hindu poet Zinda Kaul is an important name: a social reformer and a mystic, he is an awardee of the prestigious Sahitya Academy Prize for literature, 1956. Other people who deserve a mention are Nandalal Kaul, Mana-Ju Attar, Dayaram Ganju, and Pandit Narayan Khar. Chatterji enlists the most noteworthy modern Kashmiri poets: Abdul Ahmad Azad, Dinanth Nadim, Rahman Rahi, Mir Kamal, Chala Rasul Nazki, Abdul Haqq Barq, and Nur Muhammad Roshan. (*Languages and Literatures of Modern India* 269)

Nowadays, writers from Kashmir are also trying their hands at different forms of prose: also they are experimenting with English, Hindi and Urdu languages. One can notice a number of novelists that have come into the domain. But one thing that is common among the contemporary novelists is that the common theme that binds them all together is the struggle of Kashmiri people to get *azadi* (freedom) from the Indian occupation. The Kashmiri native always sees the Indian occupation as something which is forceful, humiliating, exploitative, and what binds all the Kashmiris together into one brotherhood. An in-depth analysis of the various fictional work written post-1990 shows the transition of the political struggle of the Kashmiri native for self-determination into a kind of a religious battle, which, in turn, is misunderstood by the outsiders as jihad. Also, some of the reasons of the renaming of the political struggle as Kashmiri jihad are the entry of the religious scholars in the foray, and the deliberate use of the term by the political leaders, etcetera.

Contemporary novelists who write on Kashmir weave the plot around the religio-political conflict of Kashmir, the tussle with the Indian Army and its impact on the daily lives of the Kashmiri natives. The famous names in Kashmiri fiction and non-fiction prose literature are those of Basharat Peer (*Curfewed Night*), Mirza Waheed (*The Collaborator* and *The Book of Gold Leaves*), Shahnaz Bashir (*The Half Mother*), and Shafi Ahmad (*The Half Widow*). Feroz Rather has published a series of interconnected short stories titled *The Night of Broken Glass*. The common theme that runs in all these fictional or non-fictional narratives is the brutality of the Indian Occupation, the role of Pakistan in exacerbation of the conflict, and the Kashmiri reaction to it.

The earliest ripples in the communal situation of Kashmir had already formed around the 1960s, and around 1990, the situation had totally worsened. Kashmiri Pandits were forced to leave their homes by the Islamic militants, and the men killed and women and children raped and abducted. Writers like Siddharth Gigoo (*The Garden of Solitude*) and Rahul Pandita (*Our Moon has Blood Clots*) write about the feeling of up-rootedness and exile from their own motherland in their narratives, which are marked with a peculiar autobiographical tone. The beginning of Pandita's *Our Moon has Blood Clots* provides a stark reality which strikes like almost a shock to the reader:

They found the old man dead in his torn tent, with a pack of chilled milk pressed against his right cheek. It was our first June in exile, and the heat felt like a blow in the back of the head. His neighbor, who discovered his lifeless body in the refugee camp, recalled later that he had found his Stewart Warner radio on playing an old

Hindi song: *Aadmi musafir hai, Aata hai, jaata hai* [Man is a wanderer, he goes, and he comes: *my trans.*] (googlebooks).

Such accounts and narratives of the Kashmiri Pandits are chilling: they are the actual accounts of the castaway lives that they were forced to live. One can even say that it was not the loss of the Kashmiri Pandits, but the loss of the Valley in the exodus of the Pandits, who were the soul of the Valley. They faced oppression from both sides, they were exiled from their homeland by the Islamic militants, and at the same time, they were not offered any help from the Indian government, apart from humiliating resettlement in refugee camps, the living-conditions of which are known to all through the multiple narratives of the Kashmiri Pandits themselves. Till now, no efforts have been made by the Government to relocate the Pandits back to their homes.

Conclusion

Kashmir, the “Paradise on Earth” has been converted into a war-zone in the contemporary times, and as the literature of any place is reflective of the conditions prevailing at that time, the literature is also bound to evolve. The literature which once described the beauty of the natural landscape in Kashmir is now employed as a tool for the writers to express their opinion so that the message of the Kashmiris could reach a wider platform. The transition of the choice of issues that the literati of Kashmir from romantic to ideal/realistic can also be seen as a sign that the youth of Kashmir is now choosing pen over the gun to solve the decades-old Kashmir dispute.

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