

RESEARCH ARTICLE



APPROXIMATING HISTORY AND EXPERIENCE THROUGH FICTION: A STUDY OF MIRZA WAHEED'S THE COLLABORATOR

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ABSTRACT

The Kashmir conflict seems unending, having now entered into a third decade. The discourse on Kashmir, and its protracted conflict, has evoked a whole spectrum of writing—both literary and non-literary. Owing to many contending discourses, most of these writings have come up with their own subjective perspectives regarding the conflict, especially in terms of experience and reality. Written from various positions, both hegemonic and participatory, these writings are preoccupied with rhetoric that results in the non-rendering of many significant aspects of lived experience. However, with the emergence of many indigenous voices now, we are witnessing fresh perspectives as these voices aim to portray their lived experiences of the conflict, and hence offer a break from the previous narratives. In the light of the analysis of the novel *The Collaborator* by Mirza Waheed, I argue that how an indigenous voice endeavours to portray the many shades of experience of this conflict. I aim to examine how the novel falls within the ambit of “resistance literature” as it tries foreground many complex issues like identity, justice, struggle, and oppression which are usually absent in the mainstream narratives on/of Kashmir. In doing so, I draw the attention to the fact that how the novel gives an alternative and heterogeneous account of the history and experience related to the conflict.

Keywords: Armed Conflict, History, Resistance, Oppression, *The Collaborator*, Literature.

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The contentious historical, social, cultural, and political perceptions of the Kashmir conflict have evoked myriad responses and endeavours of exploration in both the literary and non-literary realms. Since the violent conflict in Kashmir, among many other factors, has its roots in political factors, any political approach to the event gives rise to the possibilities of partisanship and partiality. Therefore, any purely political interpretation or approach to the experience of the conflict might fall

in the line within these contending parameters. The vast majority of writings on Kashmir, written from these positions, come up with their own monolithic projections regarding the realities of the conflict. However, we are now witnessing the emergence of many indigenous voices which endeavour to portray the many shades of experience of this conflict. Prominent among these voices/writers are Mirza Waheed, Basharat Peer, Shafi Ahmad, Rahul Pandita, and Siddhartha Gigoo, all of whom write in

English. This paper tries to argue, in the light of its analysis of the novel, *The Collaborator* by Mirza Waheed, that how it offers a fresh perspective on the reality of the conflict through literary imagination by attempting to foreground the humane and profound aspects which are absent in the mainstream narratives.

Born and brought up in the Srinagar of the 1980s and the early 1990s, Mirza Waheed witnessed the transition of Kashmir from calm to calamity. This experience in his home state, along with his perceptions of it as a journalist, sensitised him to the sordid, subtle realities of life in Kashmir. *The Collaborator* is his debut novel. This novel is set in the Kashmir in the early 1990s, in the village of Nowgam, near the Line of Control (LOC). The novel has a nameless, 17 year old narrator as its protagonist, who is the son of the village *Sarpanch* or headman. This young boy has four close friends—Hussain, Gul, Mohammed and Ashfaq. In the relatively peaceful times preceding militancy, the narrator spends an enjoyable childhood with these friends, playing cricket on lush green fields and swimming in fresh waters. They do not have a care in the world. With the armed uprising, the narrator's friends, like other Kashmiri youth, cross into Pakistan for armed training imparted by various militant organisations. Their aim is to return as trained fighters and join the insurgency against Indian rule. The narrator is a solitary figure left behind who recounts past memories of the times spent with his friends. As militancy gains momentum, and the Indian army intensifies its operations against militants, arrests and encounters become routine for Nowgam's inhabitants. In the confrontation, the army arrests, tortures and kills two residents of Nowgam for their suspected links with militants. Fearing reprisal and persecution by the soldiers, almost all the families in the village flee to places outside the valley. The narrator can only dwell sadly upon the isolation of his family and the novelist brings out the narrator's stark contrast between the joyful past and the desolate present. The physical beauty of the landscape is rendered irrelevant. The narrator's memory of the idyllic Kashmir is subverted through the description of macabre ugliness that abounds in the landscape.

This recounts what Edward Said says at the very beginning of *Culture and Imperialism*:

Appeals to the past are among the commonest of strategies in interpretations of the present.... The main idea is that even as we must fully comprehend the pastness of the past, there is no just way in which the past can be quarantined from the present. Past and present inform each other, each implies the other and, in the totally ideal sense, each co-exists with the other. (1-2)

This becomes apparent in the novel when he goes down the valley to identify the militants killed by the Indian army, and describes the present scene around him as that of "almost inhuman postures and a grotesque intermingling of broken limbs... Bare wounds, holes, dark and visceral, and limbless, armless, even headless, torsos..." with "wretched human remains [lying] on the green grass like cracked toys" (8).

Waheed tends to use the protagonist's perceptions and his persona to convey the larger picture of contemporary reality. The anonymity of the narrator makes him the representative image for his people, and it is through him that Waheed depicts the brutal realities of the conflict. The young narrator's anonymity and isolation foreground the loss of personal and social identity in a situation of military oppression. Compelled by circumstances to stay on in the deserted village, he is left with no choice but to enter into collaboration with the very force that has oppressed others into fleeing from their roots. Living on in Nowgam at his father's insistence, the narrator's life of complete isolation and estrangement from the world is highlighted in the stark image of "the militarized wilderness" (11). It is a reflection of Kashmir's rural hinterland in the early 1990s when the military intruded into and controlled people's lives during its anti-insurgency operations.

The ruthless Captain Kadian is the figure created by the novelist to highlight this intrusion and control. He approaches the narrator's father, asking for son to work for the army. It is an offer he dare not decline: "I knew, and my father knew, too, in that very first moment, in that very first meeting with the Captain, that we had to do exactly what

we were told. We just knew" (256). Survival was more important than resistance as the narrator became the reluctant collaborator. His job was to identify militants killed by the army as they tried to cross into Kashmir over the LOC and also to pick their belongings in an area having explosive mines. He also fears the possibility of coming across his friends' dead bodies. It is this tragic irony that the title symbolically reflects.

Ambiguities and contradictions mark the narrator's character and actions. For one, he constantly wavers between filial responsibility and the desire to join the militants; his mind alternates between a questionable loyalty to the Indian army and his undiminished love for his friends-turned-militants. While at his frightening work involving dismembered corpses, his thoughts vacillate between macabre present and idyllic past. On one hand, he sees his employer, Captain Kadian, as one who "has sinned, and done horrible, horrible wrong", but on the other, he is jolted by the knowledge that Kadian "may have killed hundreds, thousands of us, this man who makes people disappear, this man who cannot do anything but kill" (287). Though he is a witness to horror, he is helpless in resisting a complex situation that summed up the dilemma of Kashmir's populace in those days.

As the narrator grows up in his frontier village, he gradually comes to terms with the idea that the border dividing Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) and Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), is not really a border in the conventional sense; it is an arbitrary demarcation which has not only divided the state between India and Pakistan, but has also been a scene of terrible confrontation between the two countries in the form of three wars. The arbitrariness of this de facto border, as perceived by the Kashmiris, is reflected in the novel in the words of an elderly man named Shaban, who speaks of the land as one territory, one place, one landscape that opened up to all its inhabitants, and which now stood inexplicably fragmented, a space that two nations vie for occupation. His thoughts are reminiscent of an episode in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* where Tai marches to the border where India and Pakistan are fighting over Kashmir, and asserts "Kashmir for Kashmiris" (36).

Before getting killed in the battle, Tai decries this forcible initiation of Kashmir into a seemingly irreversible imbroglio and becomes a symbolic martyr in the cause of resisting intervention in his identity. In an almost ironic reversal of Tai's situation, *The Collaborator's* protagonist, however, is caught in a situation where he has completely lost the sense of his identity and is suffering from psychological scars. Claire Chambers observes that the novel is "a dark take on the *Bildungsroman*" as "the novel charts the boy's 'progress' from shock and revulsion at the dead bodies, to communing with the dead people, even lying beside them; to not really noticing them as he becomes inured to the work" (11).

The novel transcends the narrator's story by fictionally re-creating people's lives under the shadows of insurgency and oppression. The story is as much about the narrator as about himself as the space/place he occupies. His tale becomes the story of his people, his voice echoes their voices, his descriptions resound the perspectives of both the oppressor and the oppressed. Thus, every character can be seen as a participant in a regional and political history. In this respect, Mirza Waheed's novel approximates Barbara Harlow's assertion that

Resistance narratives embedded...in the historical and material conditions of their production and [contain] the allegiances and active participation of their authors...in the political events of their countries, testify to the nature of the struggle for liberation as it is enacted behind the dissembling statistics of media coverage and official government reports....They challenge the very effort to isolate literature and literary works from other "spheres of influence" which have characterized much of western literary criticism and practice. The resistance narrative is not only a document, it is also an indictment. (98)

Kashmir's armed conflict also brought in its wake tremendous changes in the socio-cultural life, especially human relations. Kashmiri cultural ethos has always placed a premium on deference to elders. The narrator is shown to be caught in a dilemma. His life has run its course on three distinct

and markedly different levels. One is his existence of living through the uncertainties and the terrors of militancy; another concern is that his family life is marked by the father-son tussle; the third is his fascination for the militants who have chosen to confront oppression. He has had to reconcile all three as the reality of his existence, which symbolises the larger political and social conflict that has overwhelmed Kashmiri society. Instrumental in this situation are the political and military pressures brought about by the armed conflict. It is the narrator's father who disapproves of the violent resistance of the militants: "I have seen this before, son, seen it all, nothing happens in the end, you know, nothing" (27). His words bring out generational difference and also outlook, and points to how the older generation, including politicians, tends to be more conciliatory, more willing to endeavour within peaceful and democratic channels; this is in stark contrast to the attitudes shown by the young men who are drawn towards violence and see it as a quick solution to the problem. The position expressed by the protagonist's father represents a large section of Kashmir's older generation which is lost in the veneration of Sheikh Abdullah, and tends to be more pacifist in its attitude. The elders' traditional values, like deference and consensus, had served as symbols of social authority that sustained and perpetuated the sense of community and solidarity. It underlined a social structure primarily based on filiation where a regard for shared ancestry and lineage largely shaped social relations. In the conflict, however, such traditional structures of authority were radically modified by the prevailing circumstances of gun culture. The younger generation had attained a political awareness and orientation that was far more affirmative and confrontational. The novel contains a father-son duo who symbolise this dichotomy. The father, Iftikhar Ali Karra is described as an old "Congress-wallah" who constantly disapproves of militancy because of his political inclination towards India. The son, Zulfiqar Ali, despite his father's disapproval of his father and the prospects of a luxurious life, becomes a top militant, only to be killed in a fake encounter. This is after being lured into surrender, a common trap by the army to do

away with militants. In this episode the gun attains a symbolic significance as it is the shared weapon of both militant and the state in the armed conflict besides its palpable utility as a weapon. It was the political struggle for a common goal and the possession of the gun which now brought a sense of solidarity based on the bonds of affiliation. When the narrator says that "Everyone carries a gun nowadays" (72) it points to how the armed conflict enables an alteration in the traditional hierarchical structures of Kashmiri society.

Many significant events which happened in the early 1990s during the peak of the militancy are referred to in the novel with an aim to re-inscribe and re-present them because in official records they have either been distorted or inadequately described. Notable among these events are the incidents of mass-rape in Poshpora, the massacres of Gaw Kadal and Sopore, the fake encounters on the LOC, or the issue of mass graveyards. The incident of Gaw Kadal, the narrator speaks of nearly 50 people being killed by the Central Reserve Paramilitary Force (CRPF) in broad daylight when the newspaper headline "The River of Blood" said "Young and old, men and children, dead, all dead, dead on a bridge" (117). Tragically, the government version given of the same incident in the text downplays the entire event: "There was a breakdown in the law and order situation and the police were forced to open fire on the out-of-control mob; as a result thirty-five people were killed" (117). In one of the incidents described in the novel, Farooq Khan of Nowgam is first tortured and then brutally beheaded for being an associate of the militants. During another search operation in Nowgam, Khadim Hussain is killed by the army for allegedly helping the militants. The mass burials of the people killed by Captain Kadian's army unit on the LOC are closely associated with the enforced disappearances. Waheed is alluding to a recurring case in Kashmir—issue of enforced disappearances and custodial killings. This gruesome reality is reflected in the formation of the APDP (Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons) which puts the number of enforced disappearances in Kashmir between 1989 and 2009 to be between 8,000-10,000 people.

In the novel, the descriptions in media about the conflict are keenly scrutinised. The Captain's various references to media, in his conversations with the narrator, serve to establish the dichotomy between the actual happenings on the ground and the reportage in media. The language of propaganda in the media about the conflict is subtly satirized. The narrator's father dismisses Doordarshan News, India's national broadcasting agency, as "all lies, *sarasar bakwas*, and utter nonsense" (112). Whenever the army clashes with militants, many deaths result, and the narrator describes how such episodes are trivialised as "an encounter" or a "skirmish" (5), almost as if nothing had happened. There is also the description of fake encounters which are usually stage-managed and reported through media partisanship or indifference. When some journalists come from Delhi to cover the situation on the border, Captain Kadian brags about his skill of stage-managing the operations when he tells narrator: "I can make any maderchod look like an Afghan. The dead don't speak, remember, and I still have plenty of old photos and clothes" (9). The other notable scene of stage-managing things through media occurs towards the end of the novel when the Governor visits Nowgam on the occasion of the Indian Republic Day. He is to address the very people on whom he had ordered a crackdown. It is during the intense mountain cold of January that the old and the infirm, the women and the children, had to listen to his words after having endured earlier three days of curfew incarceration. A menstruating woman weeps, having faced that incarceration, but the irony is that the media persons accompanying the Governor give coverage only to his address and his distribution of gifts to the people. What goes totally unnoticed, and therefore remains unreported, is the fact of the people's agony and privations during a long curfew when they were housebound. The idealised reportage does not notice their agony under curfew.

Women are often the worst victims in any violent conflict because of their vulnerable position in the society. The worst kind of violence is committed on their bodies during violent times. This includes various forms of sexual assault like rape, which has frequently been used as a weapon

of war and a tool of political repression. In the novel, Waheed has created the character of Dasrath Singh, who invariably accompanies Captain Kadian during the latter's dreaded sessions of interrogation. While on the look out for militants in a search operation, Dasrath Singh ferociously kicks a pregnant woman in her belly. Consequently, this hapless woman gives birth to a baby with fractured limbs. The Captain reserves high praise for Singh, whose ranking as a lowly subordinate makes the Captain lightly dismiss the man's brutality as a "procedural error" (265). In the Kunan Poshpora village mass-rape incident in Kupwara, North Kashmir, 40 women were raped by the Indian Army's 4th Rajputana Rifles. This was done while holding the village men captive in a field while search operations for militants were being carried out. Numerous national and international rights organizations have investigated and verified the gruesome incident. The Indian government, however, has denied that any such incident ever took place. In a reflection on this incident, Waheed's narrator sarcastically remarks: "A brand new Minister for Kashmir Affairs from Delhi was also quoted as saying that no place by the name of Poshpur ever existed on the map" (26). To add to the irony of these words, the novelist creates a group of women, hailing from Poshpur, who embody the inhuman vagaries of curfew and are termed as "Milk Beggars" in the novel. Having been under curfew for more than three months, these young mothers arrive in Nowgam searching for milk to satisfy the hunger of their hungry babies. They symbolise the state of utter desperation and helplessness of mothers who are so starved by weeks of curfew that they stop lactating and are willing to adopt extreme measures to eradicate the hunger of their children. In the novel, this oppression of women is manifested in the perpetual state of silence in which they find themselves as their "stories dried up some time ago" (113).

Waheed also traces a differential history of the armed struggle by reflecting on its underlying contradictions. These contradictions are the role of Pakistan and the acts of oppression committed by the militants while they claim to be the liberators of their oppressed people. The role of Pakistan in

fomenting the armed struggle against India cannot be denied; it aims to engage India by means of a proxy war. If the novel is blunt and scathing in portraying the brutality of the Indian army or the Indian state, it also takes a critical and sarcastic view of Pakistan and the militants. Pakistan is described as “that goddamn country a few kilometres across the border which is never at rest and will never let anyone else rest in peace either” (152). It is described as the place from where the militants come with arms training to fight against Indian authority in Kashmir. Pakistan is said to view Kashmir as a conflict that can be resolved only through the prism of Jihad and securing territory from India. Waheed’s novel foregrounds the contradictions within the armed struggle. This offers multiple perspectives which serve both to contest the dominant versions of mainstream writings and also to give voice to the people who have long been deprived of the right to speak for themselves. Militants who claimed to be the liberators of the people are shown to be engaged in brutalities themselves. This earns them the ire and derision of many Kashmiris, one of whom is the narrator’s father who often condemns them for their violent methods. In one such instance, when Rahman Khan narrates the brutality of the militants, the narrator’s father indulges in a tirade against militants who, according to him, are bereft of any “religion” and whom he regards as a “slur on Islam” as they have no principles (208).

In the novel, Kashmiri militants groups are also denounced for their role in the atrocities. An example is the narrator’s description of the tongue of Shaban Khatana’s wife being cut out and her son, Rahman’s arm being disfigured because both are seen to have betrayed the cause of the movement for Azaadi as well as the militants. Interestingly, Rahman is shown as a former guide who used to scout for recruits to whisk across the LOC into Pakistan for training as militants across the LOC into Pakistan. Militants in the novel are shown issuing threats to those who are seen as betraying the cause. A real life incident, like the kidnapping of Rubaiyya Saeed, the daughter of a prominent politician in Kashmir, is also referred to in the novel. Extremist militant groups, seeking to enforce an Islamic code of behaviour, launched violent attacks

on women. In an oblique reference, the narrator once says:

I can’t help thinking of this new group, Allah Tigers, who broke video rental shops and torched cinemas in the city and dragged frightened little girls out of school buses and checked their hands for any signs of nail polish and sent them back home to wear floor-length burqas. (90)

Besides the Indian army, militants are also shown to be guilty of committing human rights violations several times.

Waheed is blunt in reiterating his political stances while writing *The Collaborator*. He is of the view that “Fiction should agitate people, make them sit up and think,” (Silverman 2011). This is corroborated by the notes, acknowledgements and the dedication contained in the novel. In the latter, Waheed writes, “For the people of Kashmir.” In the afterword, he quotes figures of “70,000 killed in Kashmir since 1989 as well as the number of people disappeared, orphaned, and imprisoned” while also noting that “the government of India disputes these figures” (305). In a fictional rubric, Waheed’s novel has a distinctiveness and specificity that underlines the fact that he, to quote Harlow, has considered “it necessary to wrest that expropriated historicity back” (50), through a process where “one requires taking sides” (Harlow 40). In this context, the novel can also be seen as manifesting a struggle for the historical and political record as it contests the distorted official versions and biased media reportage. The fictional narrative becomes a microcosm of the Kashmir of 1990s. It is a representation that merges event, idea, and arena of conflict. The text insists on historical reality that can be the ground of fictional depiction. In seeking to do this, the narrative brings to the light the silent or marginalised aspects of armed conflict and its experience from the victims’ perspective and point of view. Many hitherto untold stories and aspects are brought to light through the differential history of the conflict by using the literary imagination as the mode of expression. In giving voice to oppression through fictional voices and situations, *The Collaborator* aims to delineate itself from the path of characteristic rhetoric of Indian and Pakistani narratives on Kashmir. By offering a

discontinuity from the dominant discourses of India and Pakistan, the novel can be said to reflect Salman Rushdie's view on how literature can contest the contorted truths of power structures in the contemporary world:

It seems to me imperative that literature enter such arguments, because what is being disputed is nothing less than what the case, what is truth is and what untruth. If writers leave the business of making pictures of the world to politicians, it will be one of history's great and most abject abdications... there is a genuine need for political fiction, for books that draw new and better maps of reality, and make new languages with which we can understand the world. (Rushdie 5)

The novel brings to fore the voices and aspirations of a people numbed into silence by a brutal conflict. The fictionalised stories in the novel flow from the creative pen of Mirza Waheed's lived experiences in the Kashmir conflict. The individual and collective conscious are made to merge in this narrativisation. These stories can also be seen as testimonies documenting the horrific conditions dictated by life in areas of conflict. In this respect, literature can be said to approximate history. The special merit of this novel lies in evoking the most significant point of the Kashmir conflict—the perspective of the unheard victims. In doing so, Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator* aims to re-draw the map of reality, and re-define political fiction by approximating history and experience.

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