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RECONSTRUCTING THE HISTORY OF NINETIES OF KASHMIR IN BASHARAT PEER'S
CURFEWED NIGHT

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts at analyzing the plight, suffering and predicament of the people of Kashmir during 1990s. As a child, Basharat Peer viewed the turmoil in the state from close quarters. Later he transmuted those experiences in his memoir *Curfewed Night*. It presents the subject with highly sensitive and individualistic intellect, by giving a real account of the history of that period. The memoir will be studied from New Historicist perspective. Historicism believes all systems of thought, phenomenon, institutions and all works of art and literary texts must be situated within a historical perspective.

Key words: New Historicism, Predicament, Turmoil, Conflict

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The memoir will be studied from New Historicist perspective. Historicism believes all systems of thought, phenomenon, institutions and all works of art and literary texts must be situated within a historical perspective. It states a work of literature reflects its historical and socio-cultural context. A number of questions are raised in the mind after reading Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night*. What does this account tell us about the political agendas and ideological conflicts of the culture that produced and read the account in 1990s? New historical interest in the times itself would produce such questions as: at the time in which it all happened, how was this turmoil and conflict represented (in newspapers, magazines, tracts, government documents, stories, speeches, drawings, and photographs) by the Indian media and International media? What do these representations tell us about the conflict between Kashmiris and the Indian Army and how was it shaped by the cultures that represented it?

As one can see, the questions asked by Traditional historians is, "What happened?" and "What does the event tell us about history?" In contrast, new historicists ask, "How has the event been interpreted?" and "What do the interpretations tell us about the interpreters? In a similar manner, our *subjectivity*, or selfhood, is shaped by and shapes the culture into which we were born. For most new historicists, our individual identity is not merely a product of society. Neither is it merely a product of our own individual will and desire. Instead, individual identity and its cultural milieu inhabit, reflect, and define each other. Their relationship is mutually constitutive (they create each other) and dynamically unstable. Thus, the old argument between determinism

and free will can't be settled because it rests on the wrong question: "Is human identity socially determined or are human beings free agents?" For new historicism, this question cannot be answered because it involves a choice between two entities that are not wholly separate. Rather, the proper question is, "What are the processes by which individual identity and social formations—such as political, educational, legal, and religious institutions and ideologies—create, promote, or change each other?" For every society constrains individual thought and action within a network of cultural limitations while it simultaneously enables individuals to think and act; our subjectivity, then, is a lifelong *process* of negotiating our way, consciously and unconsciously, among the constraints and freedoms offered at any given moment in time by the society in which we live.

So far, we've seen new historicism's claims about what historical analysis *cannot* do. Historical analysis (1) cannot be objective, (2) cannot adequately demonstrate that a particular spirit of the times or world view accounts for the complexities of any given culture, and (3) cannot adequately demonstrate that history is linear, causal, or progressive. We can't understand a historical event, object, or person in isolation from the web of discourses in which it was represented because we can't understand it in isolation from the meanings it carried at that time. The more we isolate it, the more we will tend to view it through the meanings of our own time and place and, perhaps, our own desire to believe that the human race is improving with the passage of time.

The circumstances in Kashmir have remained problematic before independence and took gruesome and distorted shapes during 1990s. Walter Lawrence wrote in his book *The Valley of Kashmir*:

I first came to Kashmir in 1889, found the people sudden, desperate and suspicious. They had been taught for many years that they were serfs without any rights but with many disabilities. . . They were forced by soldiers to plough and sow and the same soldiers attended at harvest time. They were dragged away from their houses to carry loads to Gilgit and every official had the right to their labour and their property. (2)

It refers to the plight of the 19th century Kashmiris but the plight of Kashmiri people is still the same. The glimpses of violence are seen in almost every literature written by every contemporary writer. The predicament caused by unprecedented bloodshed of the last twenty-six years appears in all aspects of Kashmiri literature. The writers respond to the ethos of discord, hate, destruction in the portrayal of characters and their frustration. Violence has become a subject for every Kashmiri writer who aims at conveying the historical, psychological and artistic landscape of modern Kashmiri society. It deals with turmoil resulting in loss of lives, values, orders, anarchy, exploitation and unrelenting suffering of the people of the state.

Curfewed Night is an outcome of Basharat Peer's account of early life spent in Kashmir and his journalistic experiences. The writer introduces his readers to the beautiful valley of Kashmir where he was born and spent his childhood as a carefree child playing in the lap of Mother Nature. But as soon as he stepped into adolescence, things changed for him altogether. The games of his childhood were replaced by the passion for Kalashnikovs and guns. The youth of his generation romanticized war and enjoyed the sight of militants with guns in their hands. The separatists became their heroes thus, affecting the psyche of the young generation of Kashmir.

By the summer of 1990, thousands of young Kashmiri men crossed the Line of Control for arms and training in the Pakistan –Controlled part of Kashmir. When they returned as militants, they were heroes-people wanted to talk to them, touch them, hear their stories, and invite them for a feast. Many more were trained locally, in apple orchards and meadows –earning them the nickname *dragud*, or meadow. Fighting and dying for freedom was much desired, like the first kiss on adolescent lips. (24)

The whole meaning and essence of education changed and youth began to tilt towards politics. Basharat Peer's own taste of literature changed from Shakespeare's books to *Pahadoon ka Beta*, a book about an Afghan warrior. The Indian movies were replaced by movies like *Lion of the Desert*.

The winter began my political education. It took the form of acronyms: JKLF (Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front), JKSLF (Jammu and Kashmir Students Liberation Front), BSF (Border Security Force),

CRPF (Central Reserve Police Force). To go with these, I learned new phrases: frisking, crackdown, bunker, identity card, arrest and torture. (19)

The glamour of war fascinated the youth and many of them joined militant outfits leaving their parents in agony and pain. The recurrent hartals, curfews and crackdowns disrupted the normal life affecting the economy and life of common man. During hartals and curfews, people were not allowed to move out of their houses. Crackdowns further aggrieved their miseries, the men and youth were treated miserably by the armed forces. The women were ravished of their chastity during crackdowns. Kashmir was replete with examples of rapes and misbehavior by soldiers. The people always lived in horror and constant fear. The soldiers acted as brutally as they could during these crackdowns. The people were subjugated at every step and their life changed into a nightmare.

If he raised his hand, the soldiers pounced upon him and took him away for interrogation. My turn came. I stood facing the cat whose eyes stared at me from behind his black mask. My heart galloped but I tried not to look nervous. (53)

The suffering of Kashmiri youth did not remain restricted to crack downs only but the torture faced by the youth at the hands of Indian Army in interrogation centers was beyond human imagination. It was during Basharat Peer's interviews conducted with the people who had been kept in interrogation centres that he came to know about the tortures and afflictions faced by them in these dungeons. Some of them were beaten ruthlessly, tortured brutally and made wrecks.

Shafi was moved to Papa-2. 'It was hell,' he said. Fumbling now to find the cigarette burning to an ashen finger on the ashtray. He was thrown into a room crowded with twenty men. The room was bare. Smears of blood blemished the whitewashed floors. (144)

The forces have been dominating the people and depriving them of their rights, resulting in agonizing circumstances. Such kind of supremacy has given rise to the traumatic conditions and created awareness among people to raise their voice against outrageous treatment of troops.

The atmosphere of grief, terror threat, misery, anguish caused to Kashmir is well described through the narrative. The brutal torture caused by the security forces, paramilitary and militants have put natives on shocking brink. At present more than six lakh Indian troops are scattered for the protection and safety of the people; but inhabitants never feel secure rather experience threat from such protection. (Chatterjee 01)

The prisoners suffered ailments after their release from the prisons. There were cases of lost eye sight, sterility, cardiac problems and the hospitals were every time flooded with people who lost their health for the so-called freedom struggle of Kashmir. The privileged people did not suffer much. They were saved by their money and status. Most of them send their children outside the state to study and remained away from the sufferings and militancy. Basharat Peer too was sent to Delhi for higher studies but his like many Kashmiri friends, he felt alienated. He missed his friends especially the Pundits (who had migrated to different parts of the country during the exodus of 1990. Despite the bitterness, the Hindus and the Muslims wanted to maintain their personal relationships. The Pundits too suffered, their houses were burnt, and some of them abandoned their houses. The temple complexes were taken over by military and paramilitary. The Pundits who had enjoyed rich legacy and culture were forced to confine in concentration camps at various parts of Jammu. This memoir does not give a lop sided view of Kashmiri Muslims but it also talks of the wretched conditions of Kashmiri Pundit migrants who desired to return to their peaceful abodes.

Sweat rolled down her forehead like teardrops. August is a time of miserable heat in Jammu...What meaning would the words like drawing room, study, bedroom or balcony have for her? How would she relate to the stories of the people living in houses that she would meet in her books? (206).

Conclusion

The situation in valley has been challenging for the last two decades, it has undergone immense transformation at all levels-political, ideological, cultural, emotional. Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night* is his remembrance about the valley that used to be a real heaven on the earth, serene, simple and stunning a few decades ago, where all of a sudden everything changed resulting in gloomy history.

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