

The Fetishization of Forbidden Land in Mirza Waheed's *The Book of Gold Leaves*

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Abstract: A desire to occupy Kashmir valley to render it forbidden for Kashmiris is closely knitted with pristine paradise-like landscape of the valley. A forensic analysis of *The Book of Gold Leaves* reveals that the occupiers apart from their maniac wishes for the land hold apathetic disposition towards people of the valley. Entire Kashmir community feels tremors of demonic materialization of a form of maniac fetishization. Teenage girls and older women of Kashmir are equally on the rack. Hindus and Muslims of the valley suffer alike as do their religious places; the temple and the shrine. Art and culture are subjected to a conflict of gory violence that is meted upon the people and the landscape indiscriminately. Plurality of Kashmiri society is smashed to smithereens. Artistic developments in the valley stand retarded. The novel may be viewed as positing that human sufferings, impediments to freedom of civic activities of valley's inhabitants and violence therein essentially germinate from fetishization of the land by the occupiers.

Keywords: 1990s Kashmir, Militarized Inner-City, The Disappeared, Carnage, Srinagar

1. Introduction

This work [1] aims to unearth the maniac fetishization of the Kashmir Valley and the violent occupation that ensued to materialize it. When literature and sociopolitical aspects entwine, the element of protest sticks out in literary works. Ralph Ellison, a great African American novelist, argued that there is "no dichotomy between art and protest" [2]. Wherever wrongs are committed, people resort to protest and their protest may take the shape of picketing or a march-on-street. Protest of an artist swells out from his artistic work. While protest of artist appears neither appeasing nor violent it has proved to be the most effective, influencing and far-reaching mode of protest. Whereas African-American writers protested injustice of segregation, African writers protested colonial masters, Mirza Waheed takes the responsibility to protest the flagrant oppression in his homeland Kashmir. His protest is strong, vehement and effective. His novels put on display the excruciatingly stark realities of everyday life. He keeps up the strands of tenderness, stemming from the land of Kashmir; and fury, boiling out from the intruders, in his unputdownable novels *The Book of Gold Leaves* [3] and *The Collaborator* [4]. Having holistic renderings, his novels picture how the beautiful valley of Kashmir is turned into a

place wherein air reeks of 'fresh blood' [3].

Kashmiri writer Mirza Waheed, with first-hand experience of cruelties at the hands of Indian state, portrays a dilapidated and damaged city of Srinagar. He spent initial eighteen years of his life in downtown Srinagar near *Dal* lake [5]. His first novel *The Collaborator* won him international acclaim for his vivid projection of Kashmiri conflict beyond the veils of state-narratives. His second novel *The Book of Gold Leaves* has attracted profuse praise and applause. His novels are impassioned documentaries which unveil the torturous experiences of oppressed people who suffer with no let-up. Mirza Waheed captures the liveliness and desperation of real-life characters, vented in the most desperate times. *The Book of Gold Leaves* splices together individual and collective affairs [6] while laying bare damaging sights of violence with their naked brutalities. In Waheed's novels, the boundary between history and fiction becomes blurred making room for an alternative history that fetches the reader immediately into the real-life experiences.

The dispute of Kashmir is certainly an overstretched violent conflict, deeply rooted in the political history of the region [7-11]. Pakistan and India explicitly claim territorial rights to Kashmir. The two countries have gone to war on several occasions. The neighboring countries refuse to budge

from their positions despite a heavy loss of human lives. Pakistan and India have constructed state-narratives along their ideological lines. While both nations lock horns unceasingly, it is Kashmir that bears the brunt of it. The territory of Kashmir certainly is not a matter of dispute for the people of Kashmir. It is their homeland, fettered and set ablaze by others. Voice of Kashmiris stands muzzled within mainstream media of India and Pakistan. India's dictatorial rule in Kashmir hardly feels insecure from squeamish demands for freedom [9].

Narratives of the two claimants posture as benevolent and charitable toward Kashmir but in the premises of their narratives are implicit a mania for the land. Significance of Kashmir is purported to be that of a "jugular vein" for Pakistan; a "lost paradise", snatched away by Indian forces that are ripping it apart. India holds Kashmir as a paradise that is flooded with terrorists trained by Pakistan to sabotage Indian unity. However, for Kashmiris including Waheed: "Srinagar is a place of great melancholy" [12]. Meanwhile Indian aggression continues to rage on and derives its motivation from fetishization of the land [13, 14]. India's excessive and megalomaniac desire for the land is conspicuous; it ignores peoples' right of self-determination. Mirza Waheed has pointed out that state narratives of Pakistan and India dominate in media coverage of the Kashmir issue. He argues: "I want a solution which recognizes the centrality of the Kashmiri narrative, and if that isn't the case, there can't be a solution" [15]. He claims that the flawed media coverage was a driving force for him to write about Kashmir and to spell out the truth [16]. Fetishization [17-19] of Kashmiri land is prevalent in the state-narratives of India and Pakistan. Kashmir appears to be a territory of desire [13, 14]; both nations idolize the land. This fetishization was versified as an earthly paradise [20] as early as fourteenth century.

In *The Book of Gold Leaves*, Waheed constructs the impelling Indian fetishization focused on the land. A land that ought to be forbidden for the Indian armed force goes forbidden for Kashmiris. The characters in the novel are in love with their land. They attach fetishistic and spiritual values to their homeland. Their idolatry of land occurs recurrently and originates from Kashmir's culture of artistry and scenic natural landscape. In the novel, Kashmiris' fetishization of their land has been juxtaposed with Indian efforts to make the land forbidden for them. As army bunkers creep up, there occurs a hideous subversion of pristine landscape and culture, leaving indelible scars on the people. The land of scenery and love is turned into a land of suffering and prohibition for the natives of the land.

Waheed's novels defy dominant narrative with temerity to question the legitimacy of its neighbors' narratives. The novels struggle to present a true picture keeping in view the centrality of the Kashmir narrative [21]. He has appropriated the insurgency of 1990s to project sufferings of Kashmiri people and to amplify their brutally muzzled voices for freedom in the contemporary age. He fictionalizes the reality which makes it more real and alive than the mundane

historical accounts of the quelled rebellion of 1990s. As the boundary between historiography and literature overlaps, a true picture emerges at the forefront of literature and politics. Without an iota of dramatization, his poetic imagination brings the readers to a level of unprecedented understanding of the grounded people who strut and fret to achieve salvation from bondage. For Mirza Waheed, Kashmir is a bruised paradise strewn with corpses alongside the blooming daisy flowers. His childhood memories not only spur his writings but also serve as a fountainhead of Kashmiri realities. Without leaning towards Hindus or Muslims, his focus is on the people of Kashmir. He reveals, in a meticulous manner, how their lives are shaped, at times snuffed out, in the conflagration of conflict. In an interview, he stated his major concern is Kashmiri youth who are facing an agonizing oppression [22].

2. Method

This literary research is conducted within the qualitative paradigm. A forensic analysis approach toward text is opted to reveal the interwoven fetishization of the land and its subversion. The events in the novel are contextualized within social and political history of Kashmir. The disinterested contextualization duly regards the perspective of the Kashmiris at center. Selective readings of dominant state-narratives are deemed necessary to view prevalent approaches toward the issue. The novel selected for this research is *The Book of Gold Leaves*. While the novel is replete with diverse themes, this work is concentrated upon the fetishization of the Kashmir valley. The constructed discourse about the land varies widely but the core elements stand fossilized in literary works. Waheed's portraiture of land and of its apparent subversion, matters that run throughout the novel, are analyzed. The perspectives of the Indian army and the Kashmiri freedom-fighters have been constructed gradually and their opinion-formulations about one another have also been laid bare in the novel. These perspectives are linchpins in this research as is the analysis of points which are attendant upon excessive desire for the land. Questions addressed are: (1) How does Indian army's mania for the land affect the people of the city of Srinagar? (2) How Indian fetishization of land turns the natural scenic landscape of the valley into a forbidden landscape of loss [23, 24]?

Above introduction sketches out the topic and domain of conflict in political, social and literary spheres. It also attempts to locate the contribution of Mirza Waheed within literary canon of Kashmiri literature [25-31]. Moreover, it presents a glimpse at established state-narratives and related perceptions. Literature review in background below furnishes a quick view of the existing literary canon that deals with the Kashmir issue, especially the intifada of 1990s. It offers a short look at several indispensable writings. Next two sections provide insight into Indian fetishization of land and its effects on the Kashmiri people and the landscape.

3. Background

Thomas Hardy stated: "My argument is that war makes rattling good history; but peace is poor reading" [32]. War and freedom-fights always mesmerize the readers and writers have tried to portray violent conflicts in various lights. Kashmir is one of the most protracted conflicts of the world. and it has attracted the attention of many writers across the globe. While some writers align themselves along the ideological lines of state-narratives, others fetishize the violence and fight-for-freedom. Recent, modern trends have curtailed the glorification and obsequious portrayals for states. Kashmir issue is increasingly becoming Kashmir-centric, directing focus on plight of Kashmiri people. Kashmir of 1990s experienced the worst cruelties as documented by persons of sensibility in their literary works. Agha Shahid Ali [25] published his anthology *The Country Without A Post Office*, addressing the long-standing curfews and unbearable losses in Kashmir. It was Shahid's poetry that first voiced the pale cries of Kashmiris in times of distress and hardship [33].

Paro Anand [27, 34] penned *No Guns at my Son's Funeral*, highlighting flawed militant uprisings against Indian army. Anand espouses Indian standpoint that terror in Kashmir is sponsored by Pakistan. The protagonist, a young man named Aftab, is indoctrinated and radicalized by outsiders, Akram and Feroze portrayed as Afghan nationals. Paro Anand postulates that Kashmiri armed militants are brainwashed by foreign agents, with no motivation arising from internal clashes in Kashmir. For Paro Anand, Indian army grapples with terror and foreigners, not with freedom-fighters. In the novel, the whole process of training and freedom rhetoric culminates in a suicide bombing by Aftab in a public market. Though her main argument aligns with the Indian perspective, yet she takes great toil to put on display the miseries and growing desensitization of the Kashmiri people. The author makes parents of Aftab mouthpieces of Delhi government as they try to denigrate the freedom narrative as infantile and naively depoliticized. Mother of Aftab chides him and lectures him: "Do you know why our Kashmir has come to such a state? It is because of people who have come from across the borders... They come here and sever the roots".

Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night: A Frontline Memoir of Life, Love and War in Kashmir* [35-36] unveils totalitarian militarism of India. His modern perspective is elusive of masochistic nationalist discourse of either India or Pakistan. It puts the people of Kashmir and their wishes at the center of colliding discourses. "Curfewed Night", takes the reader beyond veils of political and polemical rhetoric of dominant neighboring nations. Kamila Shamsie points out that the memoir describes a young man's upbringing beside the raging and ghastly violence. Peer not only garnered his personal experience, he compiled reportage, making *Curfewed Night* into a memoir of Kashmir, not of an individual. Peer sought out and portrayed enduring and intolerable parts of others' stories. His memoir incorporates

Kashmiri stories of notorious torture cells named *Papa II*, the gang-rape of twenty women by Indian soldiers in *Kunan Poshpura*, the emigration of Kashmiri pandits and the blasts of land mines. As Kamila Shamsie highlights, Peer's individual life is inseparably connected with collective life of Kashmiris. He also enumerates sinister developments of suicide bombing and sectarian violence after infiltration of Pakistan-funded radical organizations in the valley. The memoir does not fall back to tenuous assumptions that everyone was wronged but it pierces down to bring out strange stories of virulent and torturous lives of people. Further, his voice of vociferous protest of the military's cruelties echoes in hearts of millions. The book describes his experiences of crossing highly militarized Line of Control that not only separates the nations but also severs humane hearts of both sides. Peer's memoir is a heart-rending story of interminably suffering Kashmiris.

Waheed's *The Collaborator* [4, 37, 38] incorporates aggressive activities of neighbor states and disturbed Kashmiri lives. *The Collaborator* dubbed as a milestone in Kashmiri literary history, deals with the dissension of 1990s in Kashmir. In a hauntingly fearful atmosphere, unnamed hero of Waheed's first novel broods over the conflict incessantly. His village is the forgotten land in the vicinity of a forever endangered Line of Control the Kashmiri youngsters cross over to return as ferocious militants. Waheed's effort to delineate reality postures him in a world of pathos and loss. The valley of Kashmir has been turned into a valley of corpses as massacres take place just beside the tiny little flowers. Kamila Shamsie comments on the dilemma of protagonist and narrator in *The Collaborator* writing: "Picking through corpses among the daisies would be enough to drive anyone to insanity or tears...". Three sections of the novel deal separately with aspects of the Kashmiri intifada. One sketches out how youngsters slip into the Pakistani training camp and return as militants. The second section shows the dire consequences of radicalization and increasingly careless crackdowns of Indian forces in Kashmir. The third section puts forth the marred life of an individual and his relationship with an Indian army captain. The trauma takes hold of the hero as he recollects memories of friends, now hardcore militants, and feels intimidated by the thought that they may get slaughtered during vicious Indian crackdowns. Rather [39] has pointed out that Mirza Waheed neither spares Pakistan nor India. He protests India for intense militarization of Kashmir valley and takes Pakistan to task for indoctrinated radicalization of youngsters. His narrative is completely focused on Kashmiri people, and he wards off any nationalistic sway of any of the neighboring nations. The narrator of the novel cries silently at the end of novel and utters: "to hell with the Indians, to hell with the Pakistanis, to hell with The Line of Control... to hell with Jihad, and to hell with ...".

Mirza Waheed's second novel *The Book of Gold Leaves* is a love story [3, 40-42]. Romance breeds in a paradise-like ambience of the valley. It shatters with barging in of Indian military. Two lovers dream of their utopian union in the

blessed and well-endowed landscape of Kashmir. Their dreams to live a blissful and peaceful life are minimized to an existence of survival that witnesses withering away. Despite differences of sect their love prevails and flourishes until a devastating military campaign begins. Mirza Waheed, unlike Paro Anand, rejects idolization of state narratives.

4. Mania for Forbidden Land and Its Reverberations

Mirza Waheed's fictionalizing is uniquely pristine; it encapsulates a wide spectrum of Kashmiri dilemmas into a complex and interwoven web that at times seems unbreakable and inherently connected. In *The Book of Gold Leaves* incorporation of Indian mania for land is structured and interwoven with the subjugation of the land. Their fetishistic attachment to Kashmir engenders damaging and truculent policies to maintain a hegemonic authority over the land of Kashmir. *The Book of Gold Leaves* succinctly underscores the Indian aggressive design in the novel to control the valley. Curfew is imposed to instill fear and activities are confined to a level of minimum. People fear for their lives at night as the Indian forces apprehend any mobilizing object. Daily business must be conducted in day light. Kashmiris activities are shortened; the marriage ceremony of Faiz and Roohi is curtailed to a few familial guests. Raids are routinely conducted, and people disappear, never to return to their homes again. Mirza Waheed weaves the mobilization of Indian forces in a very subtle way and he brings out all these tragic regularities to create a suffocating environment for the people of Kashmir.

In order to project the agonizing and confining lives of people, Waheed exerts his merited literary talents to sketch out the conditions of the downtown. He lays emphasis at the most affected and sensitive parts of the conflict. Ramifications of war on the children is one of the major concerns of his novel. The first piece of land that is occupied by the soldiers is the school of young girls. The writer puts on display the repercussions of occupation on the educational activities of children. The cessation of educational activities ensues the occupation in a hasty manner. Soon, parents refrain their daughters from attending the school as the girls are more likely to be insulted by the soldiers. Only a few girls continue to attend school until the conflict becomes more violent, and they are intimidated by the soldiers and cannot roam freely in the school anymore. Moreover, Waheed outlines another reason for the dwindling attendance of girls as the school becomes a legitimate target for the militants because it now harbors the organized militia of the oppressing state. Even the school teachers are greatly perturbed at their presence. School becomes nothing short of an army barrack. The soldiers nail down large window and make sandbag embankments. This growing mania for security has a horrifying effect on the area; ultimately it hampers the education of school girls and antagonizes the people of downtown. In practice, the fetishization of land by

the Indian forces makes the land forbidden for the indigenous inhabitants.

Girls protest the truncated space within the school owing to the presence of soldiers. Their protest, certainly devoid of violence and marked by innocence, leaves indelible impression on the reader. As Sumit Kumar and his soldiers occupy school, they come face to face with children. While on the very first day, girls drape freedom flags outside their classroom windows. Soldiers soon nail down windows of the school and make it a military fort, but the innocent protests do not cease. One of the schoolgirls, Shireen Shah slipped a few pages under the door of Kumar's office. It was titled as "Not All Uniforms are Welcome in School"[3] p 151. Further, we also get the glimpse of schoolgirls' houses, where their parents refuse to send them to the school-turned-barrack. In fact, all the children live in a state of fear as Farhat, younger sister of Faiz, feels terrified to see her Abba (elder brother) Mir Zafar injured and impaired by the Zaal. Moreover, all the girls are stopped at the gate of their own school and soldiers frisk their bags for security concerns. For Waheed, a soldier, standing at the gate with a lit cigarette in his mouth and rifle hanging loose on his shoulders, affects the psychology of children. Waheed voices the concerns and mild protests of Kashmiri children, as they cannot do so themselves.

The city of Srinagar is the center of Indian Held Kashmir, but Khanqah-i-Mualla, a beautiful ancient shrine, appears to be the heart of the city. The shrine is not only an antiquated piece of the land, but it is as old as the city itself is. While every nook and cranny become forbidden for the Kashmiris, it remains a site of peaceful congregational prayers. It is a place of immense activity and integration. It is that one string that binds the city into one. Even at the times of curfew, people gather at the shrine and pray for deliverance. One cannot strictly categorize it into a place of religious practices as it is a place of rendezvous between the lover, a place of protest, and a place of unity too. It can be recognized as an epitome of the Kashmiri artistry and culture. Moreover, it necessitates a degree of tolerance towards both genders equally as women and men pray in the halls of the shrine. Waheed shatters the stereotyped roles when it comes to public gatherings within the shrine or the freedom protests outside. Waheed's penchant for surrealism comes to the forefront when Faiz floats out a mystifying account of the shrine's basement. Congregational prayers at the shrine appear to be the unifying factor for the Kashmiris but India perceives it as a threat to the Indian occupation. In the last section of the novel, massive populist gathering takes a political color soon after the killing of Khan Kabir Khan. Waheed elevates the sufferings of people by coinciding the religious mourning of ninth, tenth Muharram and the mourning of Khan Kabir Khan's murder. In the whole novel, there are constant references to the martyrdom of Imam Hussain (RA) who fought against the tyrant of his time. The writer draws attention to the noble cause of the Kashmiris who are also fighting the tyrannical militarism in their land. Kashmiri people hold the shrine as spiritual and social hub

for people. The Indian mania for the Kashmiri land snatches away the most beloved shrine of people. The last chapter reveals that peoples' protest after the killing of Khan Kabir Khan but Kumar, by this time firm and determined in his maligned task, reaches with his murderous looking soldiers to thwart the protest and disperse people to their homes. People must be driven back to their homes as the imposed curfew demands. Under the rule of the Indian military, the shrine also becomes a forbidden land for the people of that city. Encroaching bunkers and sandbag embankment start precluding people from their own land, and at last it all culminates into the occupation of the shrine. In the novel, it is a final blow to make the land completely forbidden for the Kashmiris. It shows that the Indian Army is solely concerned about the occupation of land, and they are not affected by the miserable condition of the people. They are simply unconcerned about the masses. Sumit Kumar reaches at the site with the Zaal to nip the political upheaval in the bud but the agitated people refuse to comply with his loud-mouthed declarations. While some of the protesters fear but most of the people, men and women alike, stand unmoved in front of his giant machine, the Zaal that swallows people to capture them.

Before the encroachment of the Indian military, the Temple was also a place for tourists and devotees. When soldiers step in, the devotees are barred from visiting the Temple. Highly renowned Kashmiri pandit starves as the Temple is in an isolated place where nobody lives except him. The insurgency of 1990s was not a strictly religion-based uprising rather it was political and indiscriminate in nature, affecting Muslims and Hindus alike. In the novel, the land was made forbidden not only for the Muslims but for the Hindus as well.

The sole concern of Indian state was to secure the territory of Kashmir without the consent of people. In the novel, the military personnel hold up sheer indifference towards civilian population, especially when it comes to their duty. Kumar seems divided between duty and good conscience. He is directed to have an "Area Domination" approach which involves neutralizing militants and a vicious anarchical purge but contrary to that his conscience chides him for being ruthless towards the Kashmiris. He recalls his grand-father's non-violent marches with Mahatma Gandhi against the tyrant of their time the British Empire. Waheed shows that the contemporary India is immensely different from the one that Gandhi, father of the nation, approved of. He remembers his grand-father saying: "Salt was hardly a sacrifice, my dear. In those days, we were ready to shed blood on every word that Mahatma uttered, but the great soul didn't want blood" [3] p 90.

On the other hand, the people of Kashmir are subjected to blood-soaked violence. The excessive fetishization of the land by the military bosses neutralizes his dictates of conscience as he receives stern directives from them. Despite the obsessive fetishization, the land remains at odds with the comfort of soldiers. Mirza Waheed introduces surreal responses that emanate from the very land they have

occupied. Sumit Kumar is haunted by the content of laboratory which appears to him spooky and distressing. After all of this, Kumar remains unshaken in his ruthless approach towards people. It becomes more noticeable in the last chapter, when he rides the Zaal and threatens people at the shrine.

Mirza Waheed does not approve of prejudice against India. He posits that the Indian militaristic spirit damages the Kashmiris and the Indians alike. Sumit Kumar, a man of conscience, is forced by his bosses to perform task which he considers unbecoming and not public-spirited. Shanta Koul tries to convince Kumar to evacuate the school, but he cannot because the Head Quarters ordered him to stay within the school. Shanta Koul comprehends his dilemma and quips: "What a fine young man they have ruined" [3] p 152. On the other hand, despite the fact she is a Hindu, she reprimands the Major for the aggressive occupation of the land by saying: "Go back, Sumit. No one wants you here" [3] p 153. Shanta Koul understands the gravity of criminality that the Indian soldiers are committing, and the Indian mania is only for the land, not for its people. Shanta Koul conveys to Major Sumit Kumar summing up the one-sided Indian approach: "You can't have much interest in the people here and I can understand that. It's not part of your upbringing, your imagination, your story" [3] p 153.

It not only tells us about the Indian oppression, but it also puts forth that the Indian army will remain an outsider for the Kashmiris as the former has never taken into consideration the latter's gravest concerns. Further, by referring to his upbringing, Waheed conveys flawed ossification of the Indian narrative which is constantly fed to the people of India. Like other soldiers, Kumar as a textbook Indian cannot put himself in the shoe of the Kashmiri people. The machine gunner, who kills Fatima and school children, is also unable to empathize with the Kashmiris. The state deprives its subjects of basic and humane understanding of core issues. Ultimately, mania for land is imbued in the minds of soldiers, who then in their masochistic and jingoistic spirit commit transgressions.

Holding forth the fetishistic attachment of soldiers to the land, on the other hand, Waheed also projects the Indian Army as an alien to the land, upon which they have descended. Especially the people of Kashmir reckon them as oppressors and outsiders. There is not even a single case where army personnel are helped by the people except by the informers and the henchmen who were patronized for such succor. On the other hand, the more protracted their stay gets higher the aggravating antagonism appears in the public. This view is bolstered by the fact that the soldiers have been portrayed as insensitive to the sufferings of people at large.

The machine gunner scene reveals the apathy of the Indian military towards the Kashmiri people. When the bunker is attacked by a rocket launcher, the machine gunner opens fire randomly and blindly. Waheed writes:

The machine-gunner knows what he has to do. He is always ready. He lets the tripod go into a free swing and pulls the trigger. First into the lane from where the rocket came, or

seemed to have come, then right and left, then everywhere. He doesn't stop on seeing the minibus. He does not even spare the sky [3] p 85.

He kills children and Fatima, godmother of Faiz. Further, this horrible incident leaves deep and aching scars on the memory of Faiz, who later haunted by this memory joins militant's group. Whereas the soldiers flaunt their mania for land, their attitude towards the people is that of utter indifference and disregard. Similarly, the Zaal is the very symbol of the Indian apathy towards the people of Kashmir. The first raid of area leaves the indigenous people thunderstruck, as a gigantic truck the Zaal, having jaw-like snout, sucks people in and takes them away never to return. Moreover, Waheed describes the agonizing experiences of people as they are: "Hunted like cattle. Snared like chickens. Caged as if they were mad dogs" [3] p 186. People wonder about the cruelty and the mothers of the captured boys offer heart-rending prayers to wish their boys returned. The writer sensitizes the loss of youth by depicting their sobbing mothers. Thereafter, Roohi idealizes the struggle of her beloved Faiz to fight the terror of an organized army.

India's crazy desire to control the land of Kashmir entails not only acts of aggression but also spying and mass surveillance. In the novel, the Indian Major Kumar bankrolls his informers to get information about the activities of the Kashmiri people. In their obsession for land, soldiers patrol the city day and night. Waheed writes: "... Both kinds of armed men, the uniformed and the non-uniformed, patrol the city's gardens of Eden" [3] p 139. Resultantly, activities of people and the native touristic excursions are abridged to a great extent. Moreover, the Kashmiri people cannot communicate freely as censorship of letters is impeccable. In his chapter Country with Post Office, the title alludes to the anthology of Agha Shahid Ali titled as The Country without a Post Office which gave prominence to the issue of suspended post office rendered dysfunctional by the Indian forces. Waheed reveals that how letters are first dispatched to a facilitator in Nepal and then resent from there to the Pakistani training camps. It is not only that the battalion in Srinagar conducts surveillance but that the Delhi Head Quarters has its own autonomous clique of spies. Sumit Kumar receives details of a man's profile named Panther from the Head Quarters and is warned about Panther "Extreme vigilance and caution regarding this unpredictable and eccentric man" [3] p 167. While on the other hand, top military bosses have fostered the same man as their henchman. The whole labyrinth of military surveillance eludes even Major Sumit Kumar. The military's desire to control the land goes as far as the hook and crook methods can go.

For Mirza Waheed, it is not only India that harbors the mania for the Kashmiri land. Pakistan too has captured the other half of Kashmir, apparently full of military barricades. He accentuates bitter criticism of Pakistan for making Azad Kashmir a forbidden land for the Kashmiris. He names a chapter as Ilaqa-e-Ghair (forbidden land). Nonetheless, the historical princely state of Jammu and Kashmir encompasses

the land Azad Kashmir, Gilgit-Baltistan and Jammu Kashmir, but the people of the Indian Held Kashmir cannot freely move to the other side as both nations have tagged their occupied areas as "forbidden" for others. Here, the irony of fate glares out as both parts belong to the people of Kashmir. When Faiz, now a trained militant, sets on the journey to cross back the Line of Control, he catches a glimpse of the river Neelum in Pakistan and wonders about his fate: "Only a few years ago, he had thought it inconceivable that he would see the river on the other side, in the forbidden other half of his country" [3] p 230.

The valley of Kashmir, indeed a homeland of native people, has been truncated and rendered forbidden first by Pakistan and then remaining portion is being savaged and rendered unlivable by the Indian army. Waheed rakes both neighboring countries over coals for ruining the pure land of Kashmir by emasculating the political potency of its indigenous people.

As the intruding forces kick off massacring people, tragic events catalyze trauma. Traumatic events happen with a tragic regularity on daily basis, and these tragedies are the direct and far-reaching spin offs emanating from the maniac desire to have ascendancy on the valley of Kashmir. The brutal killing of Fatima, Faiz's godmother, leaves him traumatized and lost in his deprivation, but misfortune rides a fast horse in Kashmir. Soon, his brother becomes a victim of the Zaal and his hand is impaired permanently. The motivation of Faiz is not derived from any external exhortations but stems from his hopelessness and traumatic conditions vis-à-vis the mighty army. As the author of *Empires of the Indus*, Alice Albinia wrote: "The catalyst for Faiz is personal tragedy" [43]. Even though he joins the militant group to avenge the death of his godmother, unlike many other militants he does not go astray by becoming a ruthless or desensitized creature rather his memories of love and compassion remain afresh. However, Faiz is not the only traumatized character in the novel, mothers of the disappeared youngsters pray on daily basis for the recovery of their sons. Prof. Madan Koul's daughter, Shanta Koul also suffers from trauma as her father and her Muslim lover Syed Afaq Bukhari were shot dead during the conflict. Upsetting flashbacks of memory come haunting her, and she remains distressingly melancholic in remembrance of her beloveds. Further, as a principal of girls' school she is in constant angst, avoiding the gaze of soldiers. Her efforts to evacuate the school do not bear fruit because of the growing obsession of the Indian army for the land.

The Indian occupation and their unprovoked violence have unexpected repercussions including assassinations and disappearances. Several small groups assemble themselves in the name of freedom and reckon themselves as freedom-fighters, but they are manipulated by the state. Such freedom efforts misfire as Roohi points out in her letter to Faiz: "There is suspicion and, of course, death, all around. While the soldiers kill every day, the boys have started killing some of our own" [3] p 211.

Prof Kaul, a highly venerated Hindu figure for the

Muslims as well, was murdered without an apparent reason. Later in the novel, it has been strongly implied that he is killed by some militant as a practicing target. It shows that how war fostered a dangerous society. Rumi, trained by local imposter named Panther, remains absent from his house all the time. His blind adherence to the group led to the entrapment and murder of his father. While people fetishize freedom fighters and encourage violent overthrow of governments, youths continue to be recruited by the radical militias. His father Khan Kabir Khan is gruesomely shot at the brink of the river by the same Panther, a mercenary of the Indian army because Delhi government had apprehensions that damning information might get leaked by him. On the other side, the furtiveness of matters is so immaculate that even Sumit Kumar, commander of the area, has not been informed of their bloody plans. The mystery surrounding the matter unravels when Kumar enquires about the killing and his informer divulges the matter to him. According to informer's account, Panther was bankrolled by him to serve the purpose of the government. The intricate and complex web of violence spurred by the occupation runs unfettered and is beyond control.

The whole story of *The Book of Gold Leaves* revolves around the love story of Roohi and Faiz. Their familial and sectarian differences are alleviated because of the freedom war, but the turmoil does not let them live in peace. The sweet desire of the couple to live together in harmony remains a pipe dream. As she prays: "Aye Parwardigar, cast away these aliens from here, so Faiz can breathe, so I can be at peace, so we can be us again" [3] p 109.

The fourth part of the novel unveils the repercussions of forcibly forbidden land and the section is titled as "A Terrible Beauty Is Born", taken from William Butler Yeats' poem: Easter, 1916. Yeats perpetuated the freedom struggle of Irish leaders in his poem. Unlike Yeats, there is no sparkling Red Rose, yet the freedom-fight has taken a massive toll. When violence is fetishized and glorified in the society, extreme motivations for freedom crop up. Those, who are not wronged and have not suffered in the same measure as others did, develop a mental condition called "Survivor's Guilt", as Roohi mentions the condition of society: "Those who haven't suffered themselves are racked by guilt" [3] p 212. Whereas Indian craze for land rages on, people resist the illegitimate occupation. For Waheed, the Indian aggression and the militant resistance, not only defer the promising dreams of people but have ravaged the peaceful lives of people.

Nonetheless the mania for land grows manifold while the military remains ineffective to pacify the people of Kashmir. Their apathy towards the Kashmiri people keeps them at a disadvantage as people have already ossified their opinion about them as oppressors. Instead of befriending the locals, they continue to show their dominance over the area as directed by their military bosses at the Head Quarters. Moreover, Kumar himself is surprisingly aware of the criminality of inefficiency by the army officers as they have allowed the militants to cross the border because they were provided a hefty bribe. The perturbed Kumar remains on

tenterhooks whether to execute the maniac plans of bosses or hearken to the voices of his good conscience. The last occupation of Khanqah-i-Mualla indicates that he chooses to execute the dreadful plans of the devilish bosses.

Besides the military failures, Waheed chastises the Indian desire for the land by taking the toil to expose the dysfunctional civil government. In the novel, there are several references about the inefficiency of the Indian civil government while their mania to rule Kashmir appears at odds with realities. Such ineffective policies rubbish their claims as hollow. Waheed reveals their priorities which appear absurd in the face of reality. As far as the administration is concerned, the government keeps up their indifference towards people. The countless power outages show the ineffectiveness of the Indian state in the times of a boiling crisis.

Mirza Waheed does not blame the soldiers for the conflict, and regard them as mere pawns in the hands of the Indian state. He holds moronic politicians and statesmen liable for the protraction of conflict and the perpetuations of maniac fetishizations. For Waheed, the ravaged times of fighting faze both the Kashmiris and the soldiers alike.

5. Landscape, Culture and Art Under Siege

Two strands run throughout the novel, one is focused on the heavenly blessed landscape of Kashmir and the other is on the violent occupation of this land by the Indian army. Waheed augments the aesthetic effect by juxtaposing both the pictures together. His approach indeed closest to the realities of Kashmir, shows a bruised land in a heightened solemnity. On the other hand, his frequent glimpses of picturesque and undisturbed landscape of Kashmir reflect the gravity of the oppression imposed upon the Kashmiri land. The indigenous people fetishize their land as one of the marvelous and unmatched beauties of this earth, nothing short of paradise. On the other hand, the intruding force expresses euphoria for the land to make it more restrained than it ever was. Major Sumit Kumar, though perturbed over the dictates of his conscience, continues to expand his control over the city. The expansion of military hegemony and forceful possession of the land directly damage the eco-friendly environment of the valley. Soon the whole beautiful terrain and riverscape of the valley is degenerated and spoiled.

One of the vivid pictures is the river Jhelum that once the symbol of valley's glory, now has turned into a bloody and sordid stream. Waheed admires and reckons the river as a life-giving force that brings 'heavenly waters from the emerald Verinag [3] p 23. It provides sustenance to the people of the city and in fact, the boat people live only by the bounties of the river; it literally providing them sustenance. It is a source of survival in desperate times. The conflict has subverted its generous role as Mirza Waheed cites: "... of late, it has also started carrying the dead, many tales of cruelty drowning in its downward rush, and with them, the

dark deeds of the oppressor" [3] p 23. The writer gives an earful to his own countrymen for contaminating the river with their filth. The city has brought ruin to the river though it was the river that attracted the people to habituate the city. The writer argues: "This river made the city, and the city has tried to unmake it over the centuries" [3] p 23. At one end he condemns the oppressor for its transgression but at the other end he raises a strong voice for the protection of ecosystem.

Landscape and nature in the novel play a very important role. Waheed places great emphasis on the setting which includes the cityscape, riverscape and the landscape of the Kashmir Valley. He lives up to the expectations of Kashmir's heavenly beauties and paints the imagistic country laced with wonderful and stellar landscape. In *The Book of Gold Leaves* natural landscape emerges as a character, formulating a formidable relation with other characters. When Faiz heads back to Kashmir from the Pakistani training camp, he catches sight of The Emerald Valley and he becomes a mouthpiece of Waheed himself by penning:

He sees the corridor clearly now, a neighborhood of trees, and swarms of leaves hanging from age-old creepers and their newer, younger siblings. It almost seems if a gardener, a keeper of forests, with an eye for detail and artistic composition, has put it all together [3] p 228.

The indigenous characters, mouthpieces of Mirza Waheed, are filled with pleasing idolization for their own land. The picturesque scenery of the Kashmiri countryside attracts irresistible adulation by the readers as well.

In the novel, the heavenly natural landscape of Kashmir not only appears to be wronged by the intruders but Waheed's projected landscape has the anthropomorphic characterization. The pristine nature has been ravished in the conflict and the environmental degradation speaks for itself as Roohi says: "I can smell fresh blood in the air, sometimes even in my food, especially at sunset. The sky across the river turns scarlet and I can smell it" [3] p 250. The beautiful ambience of paradise has been slid into a blood-soaked backdrop. *The Book of Gold Leaves* provides glowing insights to the landscape. In the beginning of novel, beautiful land emanates happiness and love but later the same land has been shaped into a landscape of loss and hostility. The love of Faiz and Roohi germinates from the land as Mirza Waheed penned down: "While the occupiers lay siege to it, the river has tender things to attend to – it has a love story to write" [3] p 23. Famous for its beauty, earthly paradise of Kashmir is plagued with blasts and gruesome violence which tarnish its scenic beauty.

On the other hand, the Indian mania for controlling the land takes the shape of excessive militarization of the valley and all the beautiful places are transformed into militarized forts where raids and killings become norm of the day. Curfews, crackdowns, raids and bloody violence show obsessively militarized environment. There are not only military bases established; numerous torture cells are installed too. One such thing appears to be conspicuous when the Indian military transforms Paradise Hotel into a torture cell. Waheed writes: "governor's mock-Tudor residence as

well as a former prince's palace, which was the Paradise Hotel until two summers ago, but is now used as a detention, torture and processing centre called Paradise One" [3] p 91.

Kashmir, with its beautifully scenic lakes and excursion resorts, has always been an attractive place for tourists as well, and writer solidifies this trend by really capturing the true beauty of its places. The Indian occupation controls not only the parts of Srinagar, but they also control the touristic places. Further he brings forth the devastating effects of the Indian mania for land. Roohi and Faiz dream of tripping up their own homeland but are impeded in their excursion as the Indian forces have either turned the places into barracks or barred the local tourists. Those places are open only to the "VVIP or the people of Uniform", armed personnel. Both lovers yearn to go on "shikara", a Kashmiri term for a houseboat used for excursion, but they cannot because of Indian army's round-the-clock curfew and vicious hunt-down by the forces. Roohi laments army's occupation of those lands. As the encroachment of soldiers continues to expand, she mentions in her letter to Faiz that they have took control of The Royal Spring, the Palace of the Fairies and Takht-e-Sulaiman, barring the entry of the Kashmiris. Since the entry of the Kashmiris is prohibited in their own homeland, their efforts to regain their full status are legitimate. Further, Roohi also idolizes the weather and landscape of Kashmir. Weather too for besotted Roohi brings good memories to the fore of her mind. She fantasizes valley's weather and romanticizes the places of valley. She expresses her mind by saying: "The weather is so, so beautiful now. The kind of weather that must bring down angels to the garden. Pari Mahal must be full of laughter and music, I think" [3] p 213. So, their yearning to visit all the places of homeland is thwarted as the Indian mania for land expands to those serene and tranquil places too. What was highly conducive to the halcyon tourism has been subverted into a place of banned activity.

The fate of characters is also interwoven with the fate of landscape. Suppression of individual is conflated with that of the community and land. For Waheed, the personal becomes political. It is a place wherefrom father wants the children to be far away but alive. Mir Zafar having suffered a terrible fate at the hands of the Indian military, urges his younger brother to run for his own life. The world of nature also endorses the entreaties of Mir Zafar as the writer says:

A feral pack of dogs that gathered every night in the neighbor's dark pomegranate garden had broken into a shrill dirge. The house sparrows protested meekly, aware they could make no effective intervention at this hour. (Mir Zafar Ali speaks to Faiz) You should leave home, Faiza. You need to run [3] p 156.

To cut short, the mania for land pervades the environment of the area as elder brother wants his brother to run away for safety.

Mirza Waheed admires greatly the culture of artistry, evolved and flourished in the land of Kashmir. One of the main protagonists, Faiz has been portrayed as a truly gifted papier-mâché artist who wants to excel in his art. He fetishizes the artistry of the land as the generations of the

Kashmiri people stand at an elevated pedestal in the world of art. Occasionally, Faiz expresses a sense of pride in the artisanship though the art may not purely have originated in Kashmir but certainly evolved in the cultural richness of the land. Waheed portrays the proficiency of artisanship of Kashmir as the pigments of paintings on the wall never fade because they harness natural dyes of their rich land. The quality of Faiz's artworks speaks for itself as his works are exported to foreign countries including Canada. Waheed draws attention towards the fact that the artistic developments are hampered during the years of conflict. The production of art not only recedes but the artist, a man of great sensibilities, ends up joining the ranks of militant groups deliberately without any external motivations whatsoever. Faiz's magnum opus *Falaknuma* remains unfinished which symbolizes his unfolded potential talents for artisanship. Full realization of his potential would have resulted in the completion of *Falaknuma* but his progress is thwarted by the Indian aggression.

Calligraphy too has been described at length in the novel as it too exists in the Kashmiri artistic culture. The interior of shrine is carved with the marvels of the Islamic calligraphy. Similarly, the old house Mir Manzil also has beautifully calligraphed Arabic words from the Holy Quran on their doorframe. The carving can be transcribed as 'Help from Allah and Victory is near' symbolizing the unflinching determination of the Kashmiris for freedom and their optimistic belief in the inevitability of freedom. Moreover, hand-written calligraphy is also practiced by Mir Zafar Ali as his part time profession until his hand is impaired by the Zaal. It is an unswerving way to underscore the cessation of artistic activity due to the violent aggression by the occupiers. Waheed highlights the rich artistic trends in the Kashmiri culture that are under siege [44-46]. So, not only the lives of Kashmiris are threatened but their artistic richness is marred by the Indian obsession for the land.

In the novel, the society of Kashmir is heterogeneous in composition and all the people have lived peacefully without letting go their identities. The Hindus and the Muslims live next door to one another and have never groused about their cultural differences though we are being told that they have never shared a meal together. Apart from it, they have not only spent lives together but have fallen in love with each other. Principal Shanta was besotted with a Muslim teacher Syed Afaq Bukhari, on the other hand, Mir Zafar's daughter Mehbooba had developed feelings for a Hindu boyfriend but both affairs met a tragic end due to the opposition of their fathers. It appears that the younger generation is more tolerant of other religious communities than the older generations. The older generations may be less tolerant, the whole concept of hatred towards others' religion is alien to them. As the devotees deter from visiting the old Temple, Pandit is provided with food by the Muslim families. Further, Shia and Sunni families intermingle to make the dream of lovers, Faiz and Roohi, come true. At first, their love story seems fragile because of their religious differences. However, their religious divide ameliorates as the whole Kashmir

chants for the freedom of all. In the novel, religious mourning of Muharram is observed by the Shia and the Sunni groups alike. The people of Kashmir celebrate and mourn together the days of religious customs as Waheed puts it: "... on the tenth day of Muharram each year, when everyone from the neighborhood and beyond, Sunni, Shia, Pandit, friend, stranger, poor and rich eats from the Mir hearth..." [3] p 261.

It is not only the people who are knit together but their culture too speaks of plurality. Temples and mosques are situated in one downtown so do the Persian papier-mâché art and the Arabic calligraphy on the walls.

The Book of Gold Leaves enumerates the severe blows to the culture of Kashmir at the time of insurgency of 1990s. In the novel, the hurricane of occupation predominantly uproots the culture of peaceful coexistence. The emigration of the Hindus kicks off as they feel threatened by the Muslim militants as well as by the military. The Muslim Mir family and the Hindu Dinanath family have lived in peace and harmony for years and nothing unbecoming took place between them until the occupation tore them apart. They kept their religious differences intact, yet never clashed with one another. The novelist writes about their friendship: "the daughters from the two families, having spent many days together as children, are friends" [3] p 281. As the Indian army marches in, the hedge is driven between the Hindus and the Muslims. While the good families do not fear their neighbors, they are fearful of the area and radicalization. Dinanath does not want to migrate but the climate of violence and fear especially after the murder of Prof. Kaul, forces him to leave. He mentions that the other Hindu families have already left the city. He mouths his heart about migration: "It feels like I'm taking an axe to my chest and ripping my heart out. But I have a family, Zafar Saeb, I have daughters... You see, many have already left" [3] p 263.

Despite the entreaties of Mir Zafar, the Dinanath family leaves the city in a sorrowful way. On the other hand, Mir Zafar while requesting him enumerates both the Muslim radicals and the Indian forces liable for that and says: "Dinanath! Come on, please don't leave. This is your home... Please don't punish us all for the sins of few" [3] p 262. The Hindu community starts moving out of the valley in fear of the Muslim militants, and the Muslims are running for their lives in fear of the military. Both pray for the freedom and demilitarization of land.

The issue of disappeared people also comes to the fore in the novel. It highlights the large number of disappeared persons in the insurgency of 1990s because the incidence has become a tragic regularity in the valley of Kashmir. In an interview, Waheed mentioned the dilemma of 'half widow' as he argued: "There are thousands of 'half widows' who don't know if their husbands are dead...there is no justice; the government fudges the figures" [15].

In the novel, the four disappeared persons never return, and they continue to be detained with no charges. The status of disappeared people is painful for the families, and their traumatized mothers remain disoriented and continue to

implore God for the return of their sons. *The Book of Gold Leaves* features no authority which addresses the issues confronting civilians. Only the military might is flaunted flagrantly to occupy the excessively desired land. The novel lays bare the gross transgressions against the people by the occupiers' sheer hunger for the territory. The conflict becomes detrimental to religious syncretism, peaceful coexistence and art.

6. Conclusion

In summary, Mirza Waheed presents a photographic verisimilitude of a war-torn Kashmir valley. He impersonates the Indian maniac fetishization into a physically apprehended phenomenon. The materialization of their mania necessarily ends up as deprivation of the people. In the novel, each move to occupy land of Kashmir takes away the freedom of its people. The occupation of land and ultimately the deprivation of freedom kick off with the taking over of the girl's school. First move to materialize their maniac yearning robs girls of their right to education. The army bunkers sprout to curtail activity of people during day, and nocturnal vigils are kept up to rule the roost at night. Downtown of Srinagar is raided and prowled by a monstrous, snouted truck, the Zaal which either impairs or captures its human prey. As control of the land expands with overwhelming security at all six grids deployed by Major Sumit Kumar, activities of people are truncated drastically to a short sphere. In *The Book of Gold Leaves* a culpable apathy toward people turns glaringly callous, when the occupiers massacre children and an old woman Fatima indiscriminately with no qualms. Indian fetishization does not stop at possession of the land; the army renders the land essentially forbidden to and unlivable for the people of Kashmir.

In the novel, Mirza Waheed canvasses reverberations of Indian desire for Kashmiri land. The serene and scenic natural landscape appears to be extirpated while marred by incessant violence. *The Book of Gold Leaves* sketches out river Jhelum awash of corpses. Beautiful forbidden resorts of *Pir Mahal* and *Mughal Garden* are totally militarized and are barred to native Kashmiri visitors. Pristine scenery of the valley gradually transforms into a valley of decay. Culture of peaceful coexistence is quashed as Hindu community exits the valley in fear of radicalized militants. Last but not the least, artistic developments fizzle out as artists are driven to join militant groups. In the novel, Faiz a professional artist of papier-mâché becomes a trained militant, a Kalashnikov always on his shoulder, to free his forbidden country from the occupiers. To recapitulate, the novel holds out the centrality of Kashmir narrative and scuppers Indian maniac fetishization of the forbidden Kashmiri land.

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