

**“My memory is my contribution”: The Politics of Memory and the Possibility of an Alternative Historiography in Farah Bashir’s Rumours of Spring**

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“The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.”

– Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

The shifting narratives over Kashmir from the ‘territory of desire’ to the ‘land of terror’, shaped by the mainstream media and other modes of representation, have ignored the voices of the people residing there. Since the armed uprising in Kashmir in the 1990s, the ordinary Kashmiris have been coerced into living in a state of perpetual fear and uncertainty because of the constant threats from the military and the militants. This traumatic existence of the Kashmiris has often been overlooked in the Indian state’s official narratives that justify the atrocities by associating certain negative stereotypes to mask the everyday violence, brutality and dehumanisation perpetrated on them by a repressive force. The present paper, in its attempt to comprehend this complex web of state militarisation, trauma, and resistance in the Valley of Kashmir, will seek to explore the politics of memory and

how its subjective delineation unfolds the traumatic existence of the common Kashmiris under extreme militarisation of the territory. In its reading of Farah Bashir's coming-of-age memoir, *Rumours of Spring: A Girlhood in Kashmir* (2022), it will seek to unravel how the narrator offers a narrative of resistance against the dominant discourse by rendering to her traumatic memory of growing up amid the prolonged armed conflicts and violence in the Valley and how this opens up a possibility for an alternative historiography of Kashmir that will restore the voice and agency of the Kashmiris.

The history of Kashmir is fraught with the fretful memories of violence and trauma, displacement, and dispossession since its accession to India in 1947. The complex history and the troubled relationship of Kashmir with India resulted in a protracted conflict and political tension, which allows it a hyper-visibility. However, the harrowing existence of the Kashmiris remains overlooked in the hegemonic nationalist narratives and historical archives. This deliberate ignorance towards their sufferings is also evident in the representation of the Valley of Kashmir in popular Indian films in post-independent India, especially in Bollywood. The representation of the valley in most Bollywood films before the 1990s, such as *Kashmir Ki Kali* (1964) and *Jab Jab Phool Khile* (1965), is problematic, as it romanticises the Valley's exotic beauty and serenity while giving little consideration to the people of Kashmir. This has been completely altered in post-1990s films, such as *Roja* (1994), *Mission Kashmir* (2000), and *Yabaan* (2005), where the Valley is presented as a violent terrain that harbours terrorism, ignoring the complex historicity of Kashmiri politics (Kabir 2009). In such circumstances, where their voice and agency are deliberately denied, the fear of effacement and erasure of identity and belonging looms large. The shared remembrance of the past in the present context becomes essential for these people to retrieve their individual and collective identities. Pierre Nora argues that for minority groups, "rehabilitating their past is part and parcel of reaffirming their identity" (qtd. in Plate 2011, 10). In this process of reclaiming identity, memory becomes a

crucial medium that enables people to revisit the past and present a counter-narrative that challenges the dominant discourses. Marianne Hirsch's observation in this context is indispensable in understanding how memory creates a space for marginalised people to reclaim their identity by allowing them a voice and agency. In her book *The Generation of Post Memory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012), she defines memory as "a form of counter-history" that offers "a means to uncover and restore experiences and life stories that might otherwise remain absent from the historical archive" (Hirsch 15). She argues that this restorative mechanism of memory allows it to counter the dominant historical narratives and offers "a means to account for the power structure animating forgetting, oblivion and erasure and thus to engage in acts of repair and redress" (Hirsch 2012, 16). Manisha Gangahar in her article reiterates this functionality of memory in the context of a conflict zone when she observes: "In the realm of culture, the memory about the years of conflict and turmoil is recovered and reconstructed in a way that it not only counters the official word but also articulate an alternative story" (Gangahar 2018, 116). She notes that through the recollection of personal memories of loss and suffering, "an attempt is made to revisit and review the past but in the present context" and thus, remembering becomes "a cultural pattern for self-description and self-representation" (116). Farah Bashir, in her memoir, utilises her personal memories as expressions of cultural and familial memory that counter dominant historical narratives shaped by this erasure. The author, through the articulation of her violent past, asserts the subjectivity of the historically silenced people of Kashmir and resists the power structures that exclude their voice and agency to engage in acts of historical repair and redress.

Bashir's memoir *Rumours of Spring: A Girlhood in Kashmir* is a recollection of her adolescent years amid the prevailing conflicts in Kashmir in the 1990s and "presents a microcosm of suffering from a young girl's perspective" (Adish and Mathew 2024, 6). Divided into six broad sections, the memoir's narrative hovers around her memories of

growing up amid the existing hostile socio-political environment when frequent curfews, crackdowns, night raids, search operations, arrests, and enforced disappearances became the norm. The author recounts her past, defined by this extreme uncertainty and chaos, on the fateful day her grandmother died. She was very fond of her grandmother, whom she called Bobeh, and who had been the centre of her world; her death took her down memory lane. She recounts all her memories associated with her grandmother and brings out the agonising existence of the common Kashmiris under extreme militarisation of the territory. Her death on the day when curfew was in place reminds her of the day when she was caught up in a cross-firing, and an immediate curfew while returning with her elder sister, Hina, after her first haircut in a salon on the eve of Eid in 1989 at the age of twelve. She escaped death that day, but the apprehension of a possible death made her shiver in fear, which turned into a permanent trauma when she came to know that her second cousin, exactly of her age, who also went out to buy shoes on the occasion of Eid, was killed while returning from the market with his father. This tragic death of her cousin has completely shaken her and trapped her in a state of perpetual trauma that she could never get rid of. Since then, she has started associating Eid with melancholy, as she ruminates:

That Eid eve, as a twelve-year-old girl, I decided unwittingly to never participate in festivities again. In fact, from then on, I began associating inexplicable melancholy with Eid, and the heaviness that settled on the heart that day sank deeper each year. (6)

She might have escaped death that day, but the experience that she has gone through as a twelve-year-old girl on the street, and the tragic death of her cousin brother of her age on the same day, left her psychologically dead, as she recounts: “Since then, a dark, silent cloud of death hovers above me every Eid” (12). A traumatised person is often haunted by the intrusive memories and flashbacks of an unsettling event, which constantly erodes their mental peace and

stability. As Cathy Caruth observes, “To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event” (Caruth 4-5). Bashir, in this case, has consistently been haunted by these violent, intrusive memories that perpetuate her trauma in a hostile socio-political setting. The frequent curfews in the Valley keep reminding her of the violent experiences that she has gone through and increase her suffering.

The growing militarisation of the territory since the 1990s, aimed at containing the armed rebellion, has turned the valley into one of the most militarised zones in the world (Kabir 2009, 9; Roy 2011). Samreen Mushtaq argues that in the modern armed conflicts, this sort of extreme militarisation erases the distinction between home and the battlefield, and “violence does not remain confined to the combat front but enters people’s safe havens” (Mushtaq 2020, 74). In this prolonged conflict in the Valley where people’s lives and spaces are governed by militarised control, fear and uncertainty become the norm for the common Kashmiris because of frequent curfews, crackdowns, night raids, and detention. The author remembers: “It began with the winter of 1990, which was not just dark but dreary. It was also the harbinger of the drearier ones to come. A horrific silence fell over our houses and our hearts” (31). Frequent imposition of curfews brings life to a halt and renders them powerless, as the author observes: “Curfew swelled up the air with fear and uncertainty. It controlled everything. It disciplined people inside their own houses, animals on the streets” (3). The author recounts how night curfews create an atmosphere of eerie silence. During curfewed nights, making the slightest noise could be dangerous, as it could draw the attention of the patrolling army, which constantly surveils the area. Their movement becomes restricted, and even within the house, they have been coerced into maintaining absolute silence out of fear of retribution from the armed forces. This fearful atmosphere increases her anxiety, and she suffers from sleeplessness, as this reminds her of the violent experience of her being caught up in a crossfire. To cope with her anxiety and to subvert her trauma, she started plucking her hair whenever she felt anxious. Bashir writes: “If I ever heard a

knock, a wail or gunshots, I would hurriedly and mercilessly jerk out one strand after another” (17). The extreme and unassimilated nature of her trauma due to the ongoing conflict and incessant violence drives her toward the habit of self-harm.

The intensive militarisation of the Valley by the Indian state was assisted by several special military laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act (PSA), and Jammu and Kashmir Disturbed Areas Act (DAA), which allow the security forces immense power to operate at their discretion. This legally entrenched immunity for the security forces deeply disturbs the ordinary Kashmiris, who always have to remain apprehensive of a possible threat of being killed, detained or facing some other forms of violence from these powers. Amid such circumstances of pervasive fear, people adopt new ways of survival. The author records how people keep their windows shut and switch off their lights as soon as evening falls to avoid any danger. She recounts how the windows in their house served varied purposes before the eruption of violent armed conflicts. She ruminates: “Every window in our house seemed to have been assigned a specific role, each one had numerous tales to tell” (23). She remembers how her grandmother used to keep the windows open because she was asthmatic, and it was also her only means of communication with the outer world beyond her house, as she hardly went out. But after 1989 everything changed, and windows remained permanently shut. Open windows become synonymous with the threat of being killed by stray bullets that might come at any moment from any direction. Bashir documents the tragic death of an older woman, the grandmother of one of her friends living in the neighbourhood, who has been hit by a bullet as soon as she opens the window of her room to relieve her asthmatic lungs. She writes:

One night, she experienced a shortness of breath and decided to let in some fresh air. As she flung one of her bedroom windows open, the wooden planks jostling against

each other made some noise. Just then, a bullet flew in from nowhere and hit the seventy-five-year-old woman, killing her instantly. Instead of catching fresh air to ease her laboured breathing, her heart was neatly pierced. (73)

In Kashmir, the Kashmiris have been systematically denied basic human rights and are thus reduced to the status of the killable, resembling what Agamben calls a “bare life”, i.e., a life without any legal right that can be killed with complete impunity. In such a “state of exception”, where the law encircles them only by means of its own suspension, her tragic death can be read as part of the systematic extermination of the Kashmiri bodies carried out by the Indian state to consolidate its national territory. In this ongoing conflict, such a violation of the rule of law has become the norm, and death and destruction have become an everyday occurrence. Bashir chronicles the brutal killing of thousands of Kashmiris who have become the victims of this ongoing armed conflict. She notes that the newspapers are now filled with news of deaths. The excessive presence of this sort of news of deaths led her father to say: “Our newspapers had turned into nothing less than mortuaries laid out on broad sheets” (47). These horrific news of deaths and destruction upset her, and she has been haunted in her dreams by the photographs of mutilated bodies in the newspapers. She wanted to get rid of these horrible visuals, but could not. She says:

I wanted to stay away from the swathes of photographs published in the newspapers of unarmed, dead civilians. I wanted some physical distance from those pages, lest I dreamt of them again. But the more I wanted to peel myself away, the stronger their hold on me became. (48)

The horrible dream that she had suggests the prevalent socio-political dimensions of the Kashmiri society during this period of extreme political crisis, and the inescapability suggests her perpetual suffering amid this horror. The title of the novel indicates this unceasing

wretchedness of the ordinary Kashmiris in these hostile circumstances when the author writes: “Winter on its way out, cast an unending sense of foreboding. To expect change in the season in a month’s time felt less like a reality but more like rumours of spring” (20). The coming of Spring seems elusive in this seemingly eternal cycle of violence and terror in Kashmir’s politics. The author says that in this vicious cycle of death and destruction, “ordinary people turned into statistics” (208). The psychological repercussions of these violent events on her mind result from a shared cultural identity that has been systematically wounded. Thus, these violent occurrences in Kashmir’s history do not remain confined within the personal sphere but transform into cultural trauma for the Kashmiris, which shapes their cultural memory. Reflecting upon the horror of these brutal killings of civilians, the news of normal deaths makes the author happy, and she wishes for ‘normal’ death for her family members and herself. She writes:

Looking at the faces of the people who had passed on from the world ordinarily made me wish the same for my family and for myself. I wish we’d appear in the section of ‘normal’ obituaries when our time came, and not hidden in a casualty count on a headline. (210)

Her wish for a ‘normal’ death, which has become rare amid this ongoing mayhem, lays bare the vulnerable condition in which they are constrained to live.

The immense and unaccountable power granted to the security forces to commit violence creates a culture of impunity where civilians become defenceless and are left at the mercy of the perpetrators. The Public Commission on Human Rights (Kashmir), in one of its reports of 2007, observes that this absolute power of the security forces in Kashmir makes the army the “highest decision-making authority” and the civil government is “tantamount to proxy military rule” (Public Commission on Human Rights, Kashmir qtd. in Zia 2021, 5). Bashir, in

this memoir, reflects upon the absolute and unmediated power of the security forces that routinely expose the Kashmiris to violence and torture, and unearths their vulnerability. She recounts how one of the windows in their house, facing the street, mysteriously remains open. Everyone was trying to solve the mystery and wondering whether the window might have been opened by someone who might have forgotten to shut it properly. The narrator finally resolves the mystery when she sees her aunt, her father's elder sister, who came to stay with them for a few days as her house was burned down by the security forces after a gun battle between the military and the militants in the neighbourhood, saluting the patrolling army on the street in the evening. On asked why she was saluting those troops, she guiltily says: "I thought next time there is a search operation or an encounter in the neighbourhood, the troops would show some mercy... Maybe they'll remember that someone from this house saluted them" (26). The author's description of her aunt's attempt to appease the very force that destroyed her home suggests the fearful circumstances in which they are made to live. This simple narration of a very personal memory suggests the lived realities of many Kashmiris who are subjected to this agonising existence during this protracted conflict. Thus, her personal memory becomes a political tool to unfold the shared cultural trauma of the Kashmiris living under constant siege.

Kashmir has been identified by the Indian state as a site of emergency and exception, which justifies the region's militarised governance as essential to maintaining law and order (Duschinsky and Hoffman 2011, 45). With this perception of a possible threat and the necessity to maintain law and order, the "Indian administration in Kashmir had made people's lives subservient to consolidating borders and state security, paving the way for their annihilation or destruction" (Zia 2021, 52). This can be traced in the instances of systematic and routinised violence that the Kashmiris have been going through in their day-to-day lives. Farah Bashir, in this memoir, records the harassment and humiliation that the Kashmiris have to undergo during the crackdowns

when all the male members of the area have to assemble in an open field, forming queues and walk slowly raising their hands and holding their ID cards in front of a gypsy where sitting inside the vehicle a masked *mukhbir* (informer) identify militants and militant suspects while the women remain indoors and the security forces go and search the house for the militants. This practice of searching for the militants runs a shiver down the spines of the Kashmiris who have remained apprehensive of a possible detention, torture or even death. The author records this harrowing experience of going through frequent crackdowns that completely shattered them physically as well as psychologically. She writes:

A crackdown was nothing short of an out-of-body experience, no matter how many times one had been through it. Someone takes over your house without warning or permission, ransacks your bedroom, goes through all your things, turns your house upside-down and you're left either appealing or pleading with them. The sound of boots on the wooden staircase would spark off a series of tremors in me. (53)

In Kashmir, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), vested the security forces with the power to “arrest any person without warrant, any person who has committed a cognizable offence or against whom a reasonable suspicion exists that he has committed or is about to commit a cognizable offence and may use such force as may be necessary to effect the arrest” and also enables them to “enter and search, without warrant, any premises to make such arrest” (qtd. in Sen 2015, 4). With this sweeping power to facilitate violence without the fear of any consequence, the security forces have unleashed havoc on the lives of the common Kashmiris.

While the ongoing violence during this prolonged conflict in Kashmir took a heavy toll on all the people across gender or religion, women are

the worst sufferers of these brutal conflicts because of their social vulnerability. They have often been subjected to sexual exploitation, harassment and even rape. Such incidents of violence on the female body have been deliberately perpetrated to create a culture of terror, impacting the whole community to which she belongs, shaping their shared cultural identity of violence and terror. Bashir documents the horrible incident of the rape of women in the village of Kunan and Poshpora by the security forces, which left an indelible psychological impact on the common Kashmiri psyche. The effects of such brutal violence on the female body go beyond the individual and spread across groups to encompass those members who themselves have not been physically harmed. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is like an infectious disease capable of passing across generations and cultures (qtd. in Bell 7). The author, being a teenage girl herself, can relate to the excruciating pain that goes beyond the physical sphere and leaves a deep psychological wound in their mind. She becomes conscious of her gender, and thus, whenever she comes out on the street, she becomes conscious of her body. She says, "With troops stationed everywhere, walking on the streets made me feel uneasy. I felt like I was inviting their lecherous gaze (58). This feeling of her uneasiness on the street explicates their vulnerability and exposes the male chauvinism and hegemonic masculinity that operate in Kashmir. The author's further revelation of her wish to become invisible to evade that male gaze unfolds the prevailing vulnerability of women in a hostile socio-political environment defined by militarism, where the only means of escaping the male gaze is to be invisible.

The cultural impact of this raging violence does not spare the children as well. They have become the 'collateral damage' of this ongoing political upheaval. The narrator recalls how her mother and grandmother would encourage her to study hard, promising gifts in exchange for her academic achievements; however, maintaining the resolve to excel in exams becomes increasingly difficult amid this prolonged conflict when schools remain closed for most of the year.

She further records how the old, simple games they used to play as children before 1989 were replaced by the games that reflect the violent enactment of the military and the militants, with guns and bullets (199). They unwittingly started imitating the military and militants in their games amid this raging violence. These apparent changes in their behaviour indicate how deeply the violence penetrated into the common Kashmiri psyche. The extensive militarisation and the resultant violence have transformed the strange into the familiar, and the children have become its inadvertent victims.

Apart from depicting the violence perpetrated by the Indian state machinery to assert its control over the Kashmiri subjects, Bashir, in her memoir, also exposes the violence inflicted by the militants in the region. She records how the militant groups use religion for mobilisation and spread terror among people, leading to the expulsion of the Kashmiri pandits from the valley. In the chapter titled “Roll Call,” she notes that all her pandit friends are absent from the class. The armed uprising in the Valley swiftly changes its course from a popular mass movement for self-determination to a religious insurgency that targets anyone whom they suspect of working against them. These targeted attacks create an atmosphere of overwhelming fear and insecurity for the Kashmiri pandits, a minority community in the Valley, and they are coerced into leaving their ancient homeland. The author records that they often seek donations, which, if unpaid, can lead to serious consequences. The author notes how her aunt’s husband was abducted by the militants for not giving the donation they were seeking instantly. He was released after three days, but the event left an indelible scar on their minds. This is quite paradoxical as the very force that claims to liberate Kashmir from a repressive state power ends up being an oppressive power itself, inflicting violence and terror. Thus, the ordinary Kashmiris are trapped in the crossfire of this protracted armed conflict and continue to suffer unceasingly from both ends.

The violent armed uprising in Kashmir and the subsequent militarisation of the territory have coerced the Kashmiri subjects to

lead an agonising life. The Indian state, in its attempt to contain the rebellion, has allowed the security forces immense power to operate at their discretion, and they, in turn, have brought havoc to the lives of the ordinary Kashmiris. This absolute power of the security forces to perpetrate violence without any accountability creates a culture of impunity where the Kashmiri subjects are rendered defenceless and left at the mercy of the perpetrators. The militants, on the other hand, also engage in acts of violence that go beyond the confrontation with the security forces and impact the ordinary Kashmiri lives. The common Kashmiris are, thus, caught in the crossfire of a violent armed conflict and sustain a life of perpetual trauma and agony amid an atmosphere of pervasive fear and uncertainty. Farah Bashir, in her memoir, *Rumours of Spring: A Girlhood in Kashmir*, uses her memory and affective experiences to record this traumatic existence of the Kashmiris amid frequent curfews, crackdowns, and night raids. She infuses her memory into the genre elements of memory narrative to reflect on the collective trauma of Kashmiri people who have been systematically deprived of their rights and denied their agency. It serves as a potent tool of resistance, challenging established narratives and creating a space for its own account of the traumatic experiences of ordinary Kashmiris. She draws on her personal memory associated with her home, which she considers “the little monument of memory”, serving as an archive that records their collective experiences, which juxtapose grand historical narratives and dominant nationalist discourses that strip the Kashmiris of their values by dehumanising them to justify the atrocities done to them. Through the narrative articulation of her memory, she queers justice by critically engaging with the affective and mnemonic landscape of the enslaved people who have been systematically silenced and dehumanised. The narrative of her memory is unique yet very common, and herein lies the politics of memory and its essence in bringing to the fore the collective experience of Kashmiris living there. Her personal memories become representative of the community she belongs to, and her recollection of them becomes a tool for bringing their voice to light.

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