

VULNERABILITY AND PRECARIOUS MEMORIES: AN ANALYSIS OF SELECT NARRATIVES ON KASHMIR

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Abstract

The land of Kashmir has witnessed a lot of struggles, bloodsheds and political instabilities. The conflict between common people and the army was one of the biggest scars on the face of Kashmir. There are multiple perspectives on all chaos of Kashmir, which are deeply influenced by political and ideological biases. The narratives may vary, but the suffering of the Kashmiri people is too real to be ignored. This paper attempts a comparative study of Vivek Agnihotri's film The Kashmir Files, T.D Ramakrishnan's Malayalam novel Andhar, Badhirar, Mookar, and Farah Bashir's memoir Rumours of Spring to explore how conflicting narratives shape and reshape collective memory, and its impact on the vulnerability of the lives of Kashmiris.

Key words: Memory - memory studies – history - historical fiction –conflicting narratives - vulnerability – precarity.

Human beings, since they possess bodies that can be harmed, are vulnerable in nature. As societal beings who deal with a lot of people, human beings are interdependent in various strata of life, and as active participants of social life, their lives are characterised by precariousness. Even though precariousness is a feature of human life in general, some lives are more precarious than the others, as Judith Butler observes. Some lost lives are important and grievable, but at the same time the sufferings, pain, and persecution faced by some other lives are not even addressed properly. Certain people or communities are dehumanised and their lives are not considered worthy in specific socio-political environments. The life of this “Other” (Butler 138) always remains miserable as their cries for freedom, human rights, peace, and justice are often left unheard. Art has been proven effective in portraying human struggles as well as human vulnerability, and it can also create insight on the precariousness of human lives.

Cinema and literature have long been recognized as powerful mediums for shaping public perceptions and understandings of historical events. Through their ability to present

multiple perspectives, these art forms have the capacity to fabricate and rewrite historical narratives, challenging traditional accounts and encouraging audiences to consider alternative interpretations of the past. The power of words and impact of visuals make them more impactful tools for instructing the masses. Since the content can be imaginative and the primary aim is entertainment, cinema and literature influence public consciousness more profoundly than conventional academic documents and historical manuscripts. Therefore, they can create as well as erase certain memories and construct a new history. Historical fiction, the genre, becomes significant in this scenario.

Historical fiction is defined as stories that portray historical events and historical people. It has become a popular genre in literature and film, which continues to amuse the audience. Since the authenticity of historical elements featured in historical fiction is often questioned, usually the narrators research a lot before the preparation of such works. The historical authenticity of such a work may depend on the authenticity of the documents consulted by the author and the sources from which they collect information. Beyond these reasons that might invite inaccuracy in historical events and figures, varying perspectives and ideological biases of the author also contribute to historical imprecision. While some argue that maintaining historical accuracy is integral to preserving the integrity of the past, others acknowledge the creative liberties taken by filmmakers and authors to engage audiences and convey emotional truths. This debate extends to historical fiction, with discussions on whether historical fiction should prioritize accuracy or creative invention. Even though historical fiction is just another sub-genre under fiction, its impact on creating certain historical perspectives among the readers is very profound. The inclination of the human mind towards entertainment over academic research plays a vital role in the transformation of historical consciousness through historical fiction. Among the fictional narratives, cinema can claim an upper hand over literature, as it is a composite art form. The blend of visual and audio elements makes cinema a more ready-to-enjoy entertainment product than literature, and thus cinema becomes a more powerful tool in influencing the historical consciousness of people. At this point, the Hindi movie *The Kashmir Files*, the Malayalam novel *Andhar Badhirar Mookar*, and the memoir *Rumours of Spring* are worth comparing in terms of their approach towards the theme, the general reception, and their impact on people's historical consciousness.

The Kashmir Files (2022) directed by Vivek Ranjan Agnihotri, and *Andhar Badhirar Mookar* (2020) written by the Malayalam novelist T.D. Ramakrishnan, display two different perspectives on the riots and internal unrest in Kashmir. *Rumours of Spring* (2021) by Kashmiri author and photojournalist Farah Bashir marks the memories of the author who had to spend her childhood amidst the political unrest, terrorism, and military suppression. Even though these works address the political unrest in Kashmir, significant differences in the perspective are noticeable. When *Andhar Badhirar Mookar* sympathises with the miserable lives of native Kashmiri Muslims who are the victims of terrorism, *The Kashmir Files* portrays every Kashmiri Muslim as an anti-national terrorist.

The Kashmir Files, which narrates the story of the genocide and exodus of Kashmiri pandits, totally villainises the Kashmiri Muslims. The movie, which focuses on the

persecution faced by Kashmiri Pandits, not only vilifies Kashmiri Muslims but also stays silent about the extreme pain and denial of basic human rights faced by the native Muslims. In an attempt to condemn the heinous crimes committed by the Kashmir Liberation Force turned terrorists, the plight of the Kashmiri Muslims who are the victims of terrorism and prejudices is left unspeakable. By the total monsterization of the Muslim community, the movie attempts a complete obliteration of the injustice and oppression faced by a community while addressing another community's sufferings. The two works give two different perspectives on the revocation of Article 370, which gives special status to Jammu and Kashmir.

The title *Andhar Badhirar Mookar* literally means 'blind, deaf, mute.' The novel effectively traces the sufferings and plight of the native Muslim community, especially the Kashmiri Muslim women, who are the real victims of terrorism. The story portrays the life of Fathima Nilofer, a widow of a former Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) activist. From the narrative perspective of Fathima Nilofer, the author clarifies that the organisation turned into a terrorist group, forgetting the value of peace and co-existence. When *Aazadi* (freedom) demanded by the JKLF results in total chaos and destruction, the women of Kashmir start propagating *Aman* (peace). Hereafter, the work focuses on the collision between the idea of freedom and peace. It is notable that the novel never uses the word "terrorist" to represent any of the militants associated with JKLF. Instead, they are addressed as the liberation army. In the prologue to the novel the author says, "I had to edit the terms 'Indian Occupied Kashmir' and 'Invading Forces' as she wrote, but she never allowed me to write 'terrorists' or 'separatists' instead of 'Liberation Army'." Here the author appears to take a humanitarian approach rather than conforming to nationalist sentiments. For most of the native Kashmiris, the curfews and restrictions imposed on them by the central government resulted in the complete violation of human rights, freedom, and a peaceful life. It has to be admitted that the ill treatment of the Kashmiris by the central government and the Indian army created among them a sense of non-belongingness to the Indian union. Any attempt to silence the rebellions of the liberation front demanding a free state of Kashmir in turn results in the disruption of the peaceful lives of all the Kashmiris. The author is never favouring the anti-national activities or supporting the militants, but he focuses on the real sufferings of innocent Kashmiri people, especially of Kashmiri women, which are left unaddressed by the national media, the government, or the public conscience.

The novel portrays Kashmiris as a deceived community which is left to suffer and unheard by the nation. When the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front grew as a militant group challenging national security, the central government banned the organisation along with its allies. The army used pellets and grenades to disperse the armed protestors, and at many instances innocent people, including children, were severely injured. Fathima Nilofer is an unfortunate mother of a little boy who lost his eyesight in a pellet attack. Her mother Nilofer Bhatt was gang raped by the army officials just because her deceased husband was a member of the liberation front and she was a distant relative of Maqbool Bhatt, one of the founders of JKLF. Nilofer used to work in a Kashmiri newspaper, *Jhelum Times*, and the editor was arrested and later killed for writing about the plight of Kashmiri people. Nilofer could not provide proper treatment for her son Yasin's injured eyes due to severe curfew and

prejudiced mentality of the army officials. When the government's decision of revoking articles 357 and 35A came out, all special rights of Kashmir were dissolved, and it even lost the status of an Indian state, becoming a union territory. This infuriated the people, the protests turned violent, and the situation worsened. The women's organisation Kashmiri Women for Peace (KWP), of which Nilofer Bhatt is a member, also gets involved in the protests. Even though they had strictly instructed the people to abstain from violence, the protesters turned violent and attacked the army. This worsens the situation, and Nilofer has to flee with the family to save their lives. With no other options left, they decide to flee to Pakistan with the help of some liberation army members. In that journey Nilofer realises that JKLF and the liberation warriors are supported by Pakistan based terrorist groups and most of the JKLF personals have already deviated from the real purpose of the organisation, which was preserving the rights of native Kashmiris. During the journey she was caught by the army and a major rapes her. At last, in an attempt to escape to Pakistan through a tunnel, she is shot dead.

Farah Bashir shares a convincing narrative of Kashmiri victimhood through her memoir subtitled "A Girlhood in Kashmir". The miseries of the Kashmiris portrayed in T.D Ramakrishnan's fiction are proved to be the reflection of reality when Bashir reveals her own experiences as a girl born and raised in Kashmir. *Rumors of Spring* is a highly appealing narrative about the torments of native Kashmiris who are trapped between terrorism and military oppression. The narrative revolves around the death and funeral of her grandmother who she affectionately addresses as Bobeh, and the challenges the family had to face to complete the rituals amidst severe curfew imposed by the army. The miserable daily life of native Kashmiris during the curfew unfolds through the experiences of various relatives of the narrator. The most dreadful consequence of terrorism by the separatists is the prejudice and suspicion of army officials towards the native people who are questioned, detained or tortured, if they forget to carry their identity cards. People are stopped even on their ways to hospitals and are prohibited to gather together even during the occasions of happiness or extreme sorrow. Kashmiri children were denied a childhood of happiness and celebration, as they were forced to stay inside giving up playing with their friends in order to escape pellets and tear gases. Kashmiri women are unable to sleep peacefully as their doors are being knocked continuously either by the military or the militants almost every night. Living as a native woman is extremely difficult in Kashmir, as they are always vulnerable to the tortures and exploitation of the army and the terrorists. Farah Bashir portrays herself as a young girl who had to give up many of her dreams and desires as a young girl. One of her cousins, Naseer, who was already sick was once brutally tortured by the army officials and this trauma made him a rude man who physically abuses his own wife Nasreen. Another young mute boy, Koal, was heavily battered by the army as he forgot to carry his identity card. Bashir also portrays her aunt, Nilofar, a university professor who lives with agonising memories of her husband being kidnapped by the militants for not providing them with financial help. He was once a supporter of Kashmir liberation movements during his college days and was also imprisoned along with Maqbool Bhatt. Later he gave up the support extended to the

liberation force as they deviated from the primary goal of liberty to terrorism.. The character of aunt Nilofar is similar to the character of Fathima Nilofar in *Andhar Badhirar Mookar*.

Fathima Nilofar is the symbol of thousands of Kashmiri Muslim women who had to silently suffer in the struggle between separatists and the state. She is also the metaphor of helpless innocent native people who just wanted to live a peaceful life. The most painful incident in their lives is the brutal invalidation of their sorrows and sufferings. The militants as well as the government failed to serve justice to the people, and both of them deceived the people in different senses. The screams of the innocent people, especially women and children, were not heard by anyone. The curfew on local media, and the ban on internet and telecommunication prevented the harsh realities in Kashmir from gaining national attention. The censored media content hid the actualities and it resulted in the expunging of the struggles and concerns of Kashmiri people. A prejudice against Kashmiri Muslims was also created through this curfew on local media.

The Kashmir Files, on the other hand, is a narrative in the perspective of persecuted Kashmiri Pandits, who are a religious minority. It portrays a heinous genocide led by the Islamists and Hindu Pandits' exodus from their birthplace. The movie is a bildungsroman of the character Krishna, a student at JNU. Krishna does not remember much about his past, and he believed that his parents died in a car accident. But later, from his grandparents and the friends of his parents, he realises that he had lost his parents as part of a pogrom led by the Islamists of JKLF. Krishna, who was an active member of the left-wing students' front in the university, starts doubting the credibility of students' protest and the objective of the teacher who is in charge of guiding students in political activities. In turn, he realises that the teacher who talks about human rights violation and the plight of Kashmiri Muslims is a mistress of the brutal JKLF leader who murdered his parents.

The movie begins with a cricket match between India and Pakistan being telecasted on the television. A few kids are playing cricket at the same time. When Pakistan loses the match, a Muslim boy attacks another Hindu friend of his, Siva. It is followed by several instances of Muslims attacking Hindus as the movie progresses. In the time of unrest, Kashmir Liberators hunt down Kashmiri Hindus and tries to create an Islamic territory. The chaos grows into a communal riot, and aggressive "Allahu Akbar" chants are placed against feeble "Om Nama Shiva" prayers. Severe hatred and intolerance against Hindus are the features of every Muslim character portrayed in the movie. The Muslim student who assaults his Hindu teacher, the Muslim neighbour who betrays the Hindu family by exposing them to the murderers, the terrorist who makes a woman eat rice soaked with the blood of her murdered husband, the lustful old Muslim priest trying to molest helpless Hindu women etc. are the various shades of Muslim characters of the film. In short, not a single Muslim character in the movie has basic human values or soft emotions; rather they are the epitome of violence and brutality.

Beyond the portrayal of the persecution faced by the Kashmiri Pandits, *The Kashmir Files* seems to state that Muslim victimhood in Kashmir is fake. A scene in the movie shows that when the media cameras are switched on the Muslim women start crying and they stop once the cameras are turned off. Every foreign media is taken to Pakistan sponsored

separatist locations, implying that all the tears and pain of Kashmiri Muslims reported by the media are fabricated and they are never victims, but barbaric predators. Many of the studies suggest that the episodes of genocide and exodus are historically inaccurate and are often exaggerated by some Hindu nationalist sources. The movie attempts to condemn these studies and media reports. DGP Hari Narain, an old friend of Krishna's parents, tells him "If the news can be faked, you can imagine what they have done with our history" (1:18:14) and his words "Do you know who goes to bed with the terrorists? It is them, the media" (1:19:14) suggests that any media sympathising with the Kashmiri Muslims are blindly supporting terrorism.

One of the major areas focused by the movie is the student movement in central universities. Even though the name of the university in which the main character Krishna Pandit studies is not revealed, from the political campaigns and student slogans, it can be inferred that it is JNU. The discussions on Kashmir issues under the leadership of Prof. Radhika Menon conclude that Kashmir is not an integral part of India and Kashmiris should be given freedom. When Krishna asks about the four thousand Pandits murdered in the Kashmir valley, the professor corrects the figures to 216. Later the credibility of the professor is shattered through her words such as "You will get the power only if you make Government your villain" (0:47:56) and "This is an election of our existence and our narratives, and we will never allow Kashmir to be an integral part of this country. Even if we have to set fire on it" (1:50:16). The same professor is later revealed to be the mistress of the Kashmiri militant leader who brutally murdered Krishna's parents. The slogan *Azaadi* frequently used by the students is depicted in a disgusting manner, implying that the students are mechanically using the slogan without being aware of the situation and reality. When Krishna is convinced about the brutal massacre of Kashmiri Hindus, he bashes the claims of the student federation talking about the untold history of Kashmir, Islamic invasion and tyranny based on the "original manuscript available in Research and Publication Department of Jammu and Kashmir, under accession number 551" (2:23:10) and he concludes with the words "Kashmir's truth is so true that we always think that it's a lie" (2:23:24).

The treatment of the Kashmir issue in the movie appears to be biased towards Hindu Nationalist narratives, nullifying the sufferings of Kashmiri Muslims as it is portrayed in *Andhar Badhirar Mookarand Rumors of Spring*. Most of the characters that are portrayed as the acquaintances of the deceased pandits are named after Hindu gods. Krishna, Brahma, Hari Narayan and Vishnu Ram fighting against the Islamic persecution does not appear to be very innocent and coincidental. The graphic violence of the movie, such as cutting Krishna's mother alive into two pieces in a sawmill, is powerful enough to ignite hatred towards anyone who supports Kashmiri Muslims at any context. Therefore, the propagandist nature of the movie cannot be left unseen. "This is an info war, an advanced war, a very dangerous war. It's a war of narratives" (*The Kashmir Files* 1:22:02). As the dialogue in the movie itself suggests, manipulation, distortion and fabrication of narratives are new methods of political propaganda.

Through the comparison of the select narratives, it can be observed that the life of native Kashmiri Muslims is more precarious in nature. Their life is vulnerable not only to the

separatists and terrorists, but also to a prejudiced majority of the state. The image of “anti-national” attributed to each Kashmiri Muslim makes their lives miserable as the rest of the Indian population supports the censorship of native media and the ban of internet as measures to preserve national security. Armed suppression of people’s protest which resulted in severe injuries and deaths of Kashmiris are not much condemned by the Indian society, as those lives are never considered worthy to be mourned of.

Andhar Badhirar Mookar and *The Kashmir Files* illustrate how different perspectives can influence social memory on a controversial topic. The director of the movie holds the position of a ‘dominant narrator’, who has greater impact in shaping and reshaping collective memory, as Cuc, Ozuru, Mannier and Hirst propose. As a Bollywood movie that won the National award for “Best Feature Film on National Integration”, the visibility *The Kashmir Files* gets over the Malayalam novel *Andhar Badhirar Mookar*, which does not even have an English translation, is much higher. Moreover, since cinema’s visual language is more influential than that of literature, *The Kashmir Files* has higher potential to shape the future memory. The movie questions the credibility of historical documents and also talks about the possibility of manipulating memory and reconstructing history through the media, which is highly self-reflexive. The movie attributes vulnerability only to the lives of Kashmiri Pandits and stamps native Kashmiri Muslims as privileged predators. The sympathy towards the Hindu community and hatred against the Muslim community ignited by the narrative strategies of the movie nullifies the precarity of the lives of native Kashmiri Muslims as it is portrayed in *Andhar Badhirar Mookar* and *Rumours of Spring*. The native Muslims continue to suffer in their precarious lives, as the popular memory about their vulnerability is distorted. Among them, the sufferings of Kashmiri women are unparalleled, as they often fall prey to double marginalisation. These works also prove that the public understanding of vulnerability and precarity of a community can be easily manipulated by the media.

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