

**REFLECTION OF KASHMIR CONFLICT IN MIRZA WAHEED'S NOVEL  
THE BOOK OF GOLD LEAVES****Javeed Ahmad Raina**

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**Abstract:**

The war always turns conventional morality and nearly everyone and all social institutions upside down. In this case, the Kashmir conflict is no exception; everyone living in this conflict zone has experienced the harshness of destiny from their own eyes. From West to our continent the contemporary world is witnessing sharp battles around the question of immigrants, refugees and islamophobia. This racial and religious stereotyping has created more problems in the world than solving them. It is the art that shares the responsibility to mobilize the conflicts across geographical borders. It also shoulders the burden to portray the actual plight of the people irrespective of race religion or ethnicity. Art is the sole human enterprise that captures the pulse of the society and unlike current interest oriented world organizations and their media studios justifying bloodshed of humanity; it has a purpose to collect from the ruins the traces of humanity and the paths of peace. The present paper is an attempt to locate pains of the people living in the world's largest militarized zone. The current study will analyse Mirza Waheed's novel, the Book of Gold Leaves and try to show how the war and conflict affects people differently depending on their particular social positioning in respect of ethnicity, social class, caste and gender.

**Key Words:** Kashmir Conflict, Internal Displacement, Insurgency & Military Occupation

**1. Introduction:**

The Book of Gold Leaves written in 2014 received good response from the readers and was recently Long-Listed for UK's Folio Prize. It is the second novel by the author set in early 90's of Kashmir; the book revolves round a love story between Roohi, a young Sunni (a sect of Islamic faith) woman, and Faiz a Shia (other sect of Islamic faith) Papier Mache artist, set in Srinagar. Najeeb Mubarki rightly says that The Book of Gold Leaves largely deals with Kashmiri human experiences during the darkest periods of the '90s, when violence so peaked, was so nakedly savage. (qtd. in chronicling pain of conflict-hit Kashmiris) Kashmir conflict is as old as the two nations India and Pakistan themselves, dating back to the partition of the sub-continent in 1947. This long conflict has resulted the death of thousands of people. From 1989-2002, between 40000 (official Indian estimate) and 80000 (claimed by Hurriyat conference) civilians, guerrilla fighters and Indian security personnel died in the violence. According to Indian counterinsurgency sources, in this period, more than 4,600 security personnel were killed, along with about 13,500 civilians (the vast majority Muslims) and 15,937 "militants" (the term for guerrilla fighters) including approximately 3,000 from outside IJK, "mostly Pakistanis and some Afghans." Also in this period, 55,538 incidents of violence were recorded and Indian forces engaged in counterinsurgency operations captured around 40,000 firearms, 150,000 explosive devices, and over 6 million rounds of assorted ammunition. (Sumantra Bose p. 4) Statistics, even as remarkable as these, cannot adequately portray the trauma and tragedy that have overwhelmed Kashmir, once a prime tourist destination because of its temperate Himalayan climate and scenic beauty. Life in a society under daily siege is powerfully expressed in the tortured works of a new generation. The contemporary Kashmiri writers traumatized by the horrors of war and bloodshed have slowly emerged to capture the suffering, internal displacement and agony of the people in the works of art. They no longer sing songs of love, romance, nature and beauty but are compelled by circumstances only offer memorial dirges to commemorate the dead. It is in these turbulent times, art shoulders the burden to mirror the actual agony of the people. The artistic response to any calamity is always informed by humanistic dimensions with the sole aim to discover the untold truths in order to propagate common brotherhood among different sections of the society. Mirza Waheed, a Kashmiri born British novelist takes the Kashmir conflict as background to portray the trauma and sufferings of the common people.

**2. Discussion:**

Mirza Waheed's novel, the Book of Gold Leaves is an intimate tale of love and romance in the turbulent times of Kashmir insurgency. The novelist takes the fundamental human emotion of love to deal with the larger aspects of human enterprise in the fast changing postcolonial world. The core of the novel rests on the issue of conflict- ideological, religious and political and the subsequent human sufferings. The setting of the novel is downtown area of Srinagar, a densely populated place with multi-faith residents. The novel begins with the description of papier Mache artist Faiz and his secret romance with a Sunni girl Roohi. As the story unfolds, we find the rise of Kashmir insurgency and the large deployment of Indian Para military to control the crisis. The narrative can be viewed from three perspectives- militant uprising, Hindu-Muslim secret executions and the Army's counter acts. These three strands are interwoven underneath the main plot, throughout the story. The horrors of conflict are equally experienced by all these groups of the people representing different political ideologies, each fighting with one another to maintain their respective status go. All these groups are by one or other way forced to undertake such a disastrous human enterprise that added only misery to the common people within the state and across the borders. The sufferings and hardships that common people faced are beyond recognition. Their lives, education and civil rights have been crushed to the ground. This continued war, neither won nor lost, by either of the group profited none during the last three decades, but yielded the fruits of deceit, hatred and mutual disrespect between different ethnic groups within the state and across the country. Waheed realistically portrays the gloomy picture of the nineties when Indian Army occupies the school building, leaving Mir Farhat, Faiz's younger sister and other girls first crumble in a single class room surrounded by men in arms and later completely abandon the very idea of education when army transformed the building into a military Camp. Mouj, Farhat's mother in her heartfelt pleas urges God for

the earliest return of the Army wallas to their homeland and the restoration of normal life in Kashmir. She is fed up with the daily siege of the people. In one of her pleas to God,

“She calls for a plague on almost everyone in the ruling classes, from that devious and dead Maharaja to the lion who betrayed all to the current downtown MLA and the very president of India. Even the weather, which sometimes causes too much mud in the front yard, is their fault” (p. 45)

The repercussions of this military occupation were not anticipated by the majority of the majesty. As the saying goes ‘oppression breeds oppression’. The young members and relatives of aggrieved families in anger and frustration shunned their long history of non-violence and glorified the armed rebellion. The very first of this kind of armed militant attack on a military bunker and the resultant retaliation by security forces was itself the re-writing of Kashmir’s non-violent past with all kinds of violent labels the historians deemed hyperbolic to frame nations ‘grand narrative’ on communal lines. The fictional response to Army’s counter-insurgency act is recorded in the novel as:

“He used machine guns first into the lane from where the rocket seemed to come, then right and left, then everywhere. He doesn’t stop on seeing the school minibus. He even doesn’t spare the sky.” (p.85)

Major Sumit Kumar, representing Indian forces in the novel, is initially much worried about the occupation of school building and establishment of more bunkers in the city. In his thoughts he feels guilty to be part of such enterprise. He feels both shame and anger when Shanta Madam reminds him of the pledge of leaving school building within few months. A part of him wants to leave this room immediately and never come back but a darker voice says he could easily have this woman thrown out, even barred from the building. He is divided into two entities, but he has to follow instructions of the superiors arriving from Delhi and local HQ. (p. 153). The conversation between Shahida and Faiz sums up the plight of soldiers, tasked to wage a war against their own people. The conversation follows thus:

“What have the poor soldiers done to you? It’s not their fault. They’re just doing their duty” Shahida, the eldest sister says.

“What do you mean it’s not their fault? They just shouldn’t come here Faiz protests.

“It’s not upto them, Faiza. What are you saying? Their officers decide these things, the government does. They are just poor sepoys, someone’s son, someone’s brother, like you... they just follow orders...”

“My dear sister the soldiers came first! The boys took to arms later.” (p.46)

Slowly, Major Sumit Kumar extended his military empire in the city and his grid will cover twenty six bunkers and the thought of six similar grids covering the entire city makes him somewhat uneasy. But he is forced to take such disastrous adventure. The outcome of which is destruction and the loss of vital human lives. The extremely large deployment of military and paramilitary forces has made this place a beautiful prison. Waheed through the mouth of Roohi fictionalizes the historical mass killings and reconstructs the history as:

“The soldiers ensure there is a blood soaked headline in the papers every day. Two weeks ago, they killed seventeen boys across Zaine` Kadal Bridge, shot them all dead after trapping them in a lane...the soldiers were so blind with rage that they wouldn’t stop firing even after the boys were all dead, mown down next to filthy drains. They continued shooting until no one was left standing...Zaitun’s little brother Uzair was shot in the face...Zaitun slept for three nights by his grave in the Martyr’s Graveyard...it is so mad here.”(P.211-212)

Another underneath strand of the story shows the internal displaced of minority pundit community from the valley to the other parts of the country. It is a fact that national identity is always constructed by the majority, dominant class, while the minorities remain on the fringes of the nation as outsiders even when they are inside. ‘India’ has invariably been an upper caste Hindu India that did not include the experience of the Dalits, Muslims and other minorities in its grand narratives. (Gyanendra Pandey qtd. in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory). The same is the case of pundits that constituted a minority community in Kashmir. They became easy targets of the both groups fighting with each other as well as government apathy forced them to leave their homeland. The following conversation between Mir Zafar and Master Dinanath shows the common brother hood of the people which existed before the conflict as well as the unjust treatment faced by this community. Dinanath before handing over the keys of his home to Zafar has this to say:

‘But why there is no need. No one will harm you, Dinanath, I swear upon my life. I can’t see why anyone would want to trouble you or your family.’

‘People have not been harmed. Zafar Saeb, they have been killed. Surely you don’t want me to wait until it happens.’

‘Must you punish us all for the sins of a few? Must you?’

‘I must protect what I can while I can. No one wants to leave their home, you know that, but I have to.’(p. 262)

Mohd Nageen Rather rightly observes that Kashmiris have been deprived of the right to enjoy life. They could not visit the places of their own. They were treated with suspicion and regarded as aliens in their own land. Waheed has depicted that the people especially the romantic lovers were denied the entry to the places of recreation which shows how Kashmiris were made to suffer at every front. Roohi is much disappointed to say that:

The Palace of the Faeries and the Royal Spring, the Shankaracharya Temple and Takht-e- Sulaiman are all barred to us. Rumi says soldiers live their too, and only government officials, army officers, VIPs from Delhi and their families can visit. (p.213)

### **3. Conclusion:**

In the long and seemingly never ending Kashmir conflict, grand narratives of ‘nationhood’ have always been used as a tool, mostly by political elite, to take political mileage by vote bank politics, fraught over communal lines for the pleasures of uninterrupted power. The commercial and TRP hungry media houses also ruin the secular fabric of the country. They add fuel to the flames by spreading communal hatred, ignoring the fact that conflict zones of the world are the most volatile places for such racial and religious divisions. This reminds us of Edward Said’s postcolonial stance that we need to read literary and other texts

'contrapuntally,' against the grain in order to detect the racialized, imperialist discourse within it to resist it. This is possible when we begin to develop a different historical narrative other than the one handed down to us by the colonial discourse. This approach can also be used to contemporary Kashmir conflict in order to bereave dead bodies equally, rather than label them to pro or anti nation elements. The empire may be won with the sword and gun, but wounds can be healed only through a comprehensive healing touch. Hence the need of the hour is to realize that far from being a social equalizer, wars accentuate and reinforce social inequalities in multiple ways. Well informed social policies that respond to the complex social realities are needed in order to reverse these trends and facilitate the process of reconciliation, rehabilitation and justice to all communities trapped in this seemingly never ending conflict.

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