

Childhood with a Difference: Growing up in the Socio- Political Conflict of Kashmir

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Abstract: This paper examines childhood in conflict-ridden Kashmir through an interdisciplinary lens. Drawing on three autobiographical texts—*Curfewed Night*, *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*, and *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*—it highlights how violence, insecurity, displacement, and disrupted schooling reshape everyday life, producing denormalised childhoods that challenge the conventional notions of growing up.

Keywords: denormalised childhoods, Kashmir, autobiographical texts, violence, schooling.

Theoretical Backdrop and Context

‘Childhood’ as a theoretically emergent concept has long been studied across academic disciplines, such as child development, psychology, the social sciences, and education. Historically, the idea of childhood was not recognised as a distinct phase of human life in medieval times, yet children were neither neglected nor ignored (Ariès, 1962). Children were perceived as ‘miniature versions of adults’ in the sixteenth century. They were treated with attention and affection by adults as they later transitioned into functional, participating members of society. By the seventeenth century, such a conception of childhood was criticised by moralists and pedagogues for the absence of rational action, reasoning faculties, and disciplining habits in children's lives. A dire need was felt to protect children from their fragile dispositions and to view them in accordance with accepted social norms. However, the idea of a ‘disciplined body’ subsequently emerged, which focused on correcting and civilising children from an early stage. By the eighteenth century, an age-graded, systemic education system was put in place to serve this purpose. Ariès’s discourse centres on how childhood emerged across various centuries and documents how children's lives were affected accordingly.

Another prominent stance in conceptualising childhood situates it with reference to what the child can do or is yet to do, as represented in the classical stage theories of development. These may include the child’s cognitive capacities, gross motor abilities, socio-emotional development, intelligence, moral development, and so on. Basically, this perspective focuses on

understanding how children attain developmental and learning milestones as they grow into adolescents and young adults. It has significant pedagogical implications as familiarity with such theories enables curriculum developers, educators, and parents to plan and create relevant learning opportunities and spaces for children of a particular biological age (Levine, 2007). This is one of the key reasons why children in a specific age cohort are clustered in similar grades in a conventional schooling system. There is a certain sense of ‘universality’ embedded in such a perspective of childhood, in which the attainment and fulfilment of age-appropriate milestones shape the experiences of millions of children worldwide.

The universal stance on childhood, however, is often critiqued for its Eurocentric thrust and for focusing predominantly on ‘middle-class, white, male, and urban childhood’ rather than encompassing children's diverse socio-cultural realities, which are considered equally significant in shaping childhood experiences. Such a notion of childhood considers a child as vulnerable and dependent, in need of protection, irresponsible, and ignorant. It is starkly different from the experiences of children in non-Western societies, where the transition from childhood to adulthood is more fluid, and the child’s and adult’s worlds are less separate (Vasanta, 2004). The continuity in the lives of children and adults in India is also highlighted in Saraswathi’s (1999) work, which questions the universal existence of adolescence as a distinct and unique stage of transition between childhood and adulthood. It varies according to children's gender and class identities as well as other socio-demographic factors.

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It is evident from the above discussion that we need to move beyond universal biological determinism in conceptualising childhood, based on a child's biological age. There is no denying that children across the world experience divergent childhoods shaped by specific "historical, social and cultural factors" (Raman, 2000, p. 4056). Socio-cultural forces significantly influence children's lives and experiences within their cultural communities and social milieu. Thus, childhood is not only to be perceived as a universal or ideal construct to be imposed or relentlessly sought, but also conceptualised as a structural category of society, governed by societal forces, with children acting as co-constructors of childhood (Qvortrup, as cited in Corsaro, 2011). The new sociology of childhood views children as active subjects operating within a social field rather than mere products of heredity and environment (Ryan, 2008). It means that childhood is to be perceived as an open-ended, interdisciplinary form of inquiry, moving beyond any dualisms between the universal and the regional.

Central Focus of the Paper

In the theoretical backdrop presented above, what has emerged very clearly is that there are multiple approaches to studying childhood. Normative childhoods are no longer the dominant ways in which children are understood. There is thus a pressing need to 'denormativize' children and locate them in the culture, context and experiences that characterise the milieu in which they live and grow. This realisation in Psychology came from allied disciplines such as Sociology, Cultural Anthropology, Child Development, and Childhood Studies. Drawing on this and adopting an interdisciplinary lens, this paper focuses on uncovering the lived realities of childhood in the turbulent conflict zone of Kashmir as documented in critical literary works set against the backdrop of the Kashmir insurgency. This is done through a detailed study of three non-fiction texts centred around the Kashmir insurgency in the 1990s and its aftermath. They offer insights into how children lived and navigated their life situations amid the uncertainties created by socio-political conflict, and how they dealt with threats, security concerns, violence, and disruptions to everyday life. The point we would like to emphasise here is that non-fictional writing is a bona fide and powerful source of knowledge and information about a phenomenon, especially when field visits to critical sites are not

possible. Literature typically draws inspiration from social realities, which it usually embodies and colours.

Childhood Accounts in Literary Texts

Three novels were selected for the present study. They include: *Curfewed Night*, *Our Moon has Blood Clots- A Memoir of a Lost Home in Kashmir* and *Munnu- A Boy from Kashmir*. They were selected because they cover the same time period and provide an invaluable insider's perspective. These accounts are based on recollections of past incidents and feelings and are thus rich sources that offer a perspective on growing up and childhood. The plot summaries of each novel are explained briefly in the sections that follow.

Curfewed Night by Basharat Peer (2011)

Basharat Peer was born in Seer, Anantnag, Kashmir, in 1977. His father was a magistrate in the Kashmir civil services, and his mother was a schoolteacher. His maternal grandparents and younger brother resided with him, along with his large extended family in nearby villages. He completed his tenth grade in Kashmir and continued his studies at a residential school in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh. Both he and his brother were sent away from their village to pursue further studies outside Kashmir as their family members feared for their safety during the 1990s.

The novel traces the author's growing-up experience in Kashmir, from his late childhood years spent in the turbulent 1980s to his return there as a young reporter eleven years later. He reflects on issues of freedom and occupation of Kashmir, the use of violence and force to suppress people's movements and militants' ways of expressing resistance. His everyday life in Kashmir was affected by the constant presence of the army and militants. It also made daily commutation in Kashmir unsafe. Travelling on regular days or during special occasions such as weddings or medical emergencies was considered extremely dangerous. The roads were hazardous not only because of surveillance and frisking by soldiers, but also because of regular militant attacks, which involved the use of explosives and gunfire.

His accounts provide insights into beliefs about a region's freedom and occupation, violence and gun battles in everyday life, fascination with militants and

martyrdom, routines of security checks and interrogation, restricted mobility and interrupted schooling during volatile times, crackdowns, curfews, and so on.

Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir by Malik Sajad (2015)

This graphic novel is based on the childhood experiences and aspirations of the Author- Malik Sajad. It also represents the story of many Munnus of the Kashmir valley who underwent similar growing-up experiences to those of the author. The author wrote the graphic novel after being deeply touched by the killings of many children in his neighbourhood from 2008 to 2010. He conceptualises the story and plotline through vivid reconstructions of his childhood in Kashmir while pursuing a degree in Visual Arts at Goldsmiths College in London. He wrote the final version after coming back to Kashmir, with the support of his family.

The novel is about a young boy who lives in the Batamaloo region of Kashmir with his family. He has aspirations and familial expectations just like any other child. He wants to become a world-famous artist, and his family insists on a quality education. He experiences disciplinary practices at school, peer interactions and teenage infatuations. He also witnesses regular curfews, crackdowns and checks by the Indian army. He gives detailed accounts of how their lives are impacted - interrupted schooling periods, being caught in the middle of cross-firing and young boys' fascinations to become militants up against the Indian army. Amidst these routine accounts, he elaborates on his anxieties and insecurities about the safety and well-being of his loved ones. He gets nightmares imagining the loss of his family members, mourns the death of any known militant or victim of the army's brutality and gets terrorised looking at the disfigured bodies in newspapers and in reality. He uses his observations, experiences, and people's stories to sketch political cartoons depicting the lives of Kashmiris in India.

Our Moon has Blood Clots: A Memoir of a Lost Home in Kashmir by Rahul Pandita (2013)

Rahul was a fourteen-year-old Kashmiri Pandit boy who was forced into exile in 1991. Due to the incessant threats and incidents of violence perpetrated against his community, his family moved from Srinagar to Jammu. He stayed in various small, rented accommodations for most of his years in Jammu and arrived in Delhi in 1996.

He worked as an author and a journalist and lived in a Delhi suburb with his parents. This memoir recounts his experience of growing up in a minority Pandit community in Kashmir. It uncovers the emotional upheavals that he and his family experienced during the mass exodus of the Pandits from Kashmir around the 1990s. Amidst the continuous threats to their lives and increased violence against their community, the author's family shifted to a one-room dwelling in Jammu. He often contemplates the possibility of being in permanent exile in his accounts. With the realisation that his home in Srinagar might be lost to him forever, he feels he has left a part of his identity behind. He remembers it in the memories rooted in Kashmir- those of celebrating festivities, visiting temples and shrines, carefree bike rides with his cousin, scrumptious meals cooked by his mother and grandmother, and so on. The memoir's plot is experiential and empathetic, tracing in detail the conditions that led to the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits in general and Rahul's family's struggle for subsistence in particular. It also presents the processes of displacement and uprooting from the perspective of an individual who wants to preserve and reclaim memories of Kashmir.

The next section discusses the altered nature of childhood as it unfolds in the context of insurgency and mass exodus in Kashmir. It is drawn from the authors' growing-up experiences in their autobiographical accounts and descriptions of how their lives were transformed as they grappled with fear and insecurity.

Childhood in a Conflict Zone

The accounts of all three authors highlight that they felt insecure owing to the unpredictable and uncertain living conditions in Kashmir. Amongst all the concerns about their security, the fear of being physically harmed, attacked or violated was the most crucial one. This fear permeated their daily activities and routines in everyday spaces, such as home, school, roads, and offices. The feeling of security for an individual is crucial, as it entails "freedom from threats and wants" and ensures an environment that enhances human freedoms and fulfilment (Waisová, 2003). It also ensures "Freedom from fear," which entails alleviating violence from people's everyday lives, allowing them to live to the fullest and inspiring them to work for better life opportunities (Jütersonke & Schwarz, 2006, pp. 34-35).

Further, post-insurgent Kashmir had made every place a source of an impending ambush or threat for the authors and their families. It had taken away an assurance that they were safe and secure in their daily lives: in their homes and streets, within their communities, and in their regions. The insecurities were typically as follows:

Insecurity at Home

The accounts of all the authors highlighted the increased permeability of danger and threat existing in the public spaces of their conflict-ridden neighbourhood, seeping insidiously inside the private domain of their homes. Malik explained that sudden gunfire and explosions were common in their neighbourhood in Batamaloo, and they were accustomed to them. However, in one such incident, his almost blind and deaf Abba ended up getting physically hurt and terrified as they made a dash for their safety upon hearing gunfire. They also got into the habit of vacating their home at very short notice with any hint of an ensuing ambush between the army and militants.

Basharat also had a similar experience as Malik, as his family vacated their home with minimal belongings on learning about an expected encounter of army personnel and militants in their neighbourhood. Compared to the experiences of Basharat and Malik, Rahul recalled the days of their exodus in 1990, when they frequently felt that a huge mob would descend upon them while they were in their home, rape the women of the family or burn the whole house down. His family experienced rootlessness and cultural bereavement as they had to abandon their homes in Kashmir and flee for their physical safety. Being part of the displaced Kashmiri Pandit community, his insecurity stemmed not only from the volatile landscape but also from the religious-cultural identity that made him and his family an easy target for the perpetuation of violence and brutality.

The accounts of all authors reiterate that, even when one feels secure in their home and immune from external cross-firing, crackdowns, and insurgent attacks, the looming threat to their lives persists. Security concerns can alter the very meanings of 'home' for individuals, making it an extension of the turmoil and volatility of the wider socio-political world. Childhood in such circumstances is rife with the challenges, uncertainties,

and vagaries of conflict, and children are also affected in similar, if not equal, ways to adults.

Insecurity at School

Schools in Kashmir were increasingly used as camp sites by both militants and the Indian army, often putting the lives of the children in jeopardy as they could get caught in the crossfire, attacks and counterattacks. Basharat's accounts revealed how a sudden gun firing at school initially generated suspense and thrill for the students. At the same time, it became a concern for their physical safety and a fear for their lives. Basharat's brother also felt a sense of fright and panic as he found himself alone on a deserted road, being aimed at by a tanker during a crackdown. Malik, on the other hand, was taken to a procession by his schoolteachers to demand the release of their principal. As a first grader, he was excited to go, but soon it turned into a nightmare as he got separated from his group and suffered in pain due to exposure to tear gas.

Rahul felt like a numerical minority at his school, as his fellow community members stopped attending school due to relocation and safety concerns. He always felt different, as a Kashmiri Pandit, than most of his classmates in terms of celebration of festivals, idols they worshipped, rituals and religious processions they followed, and food they consumed. However, the mass exodus of Pandits from the Kashmir valley made him feel targeted and at the receiving end of seething comments, disrespectful remarks, and fearful for his security.

Childhood in Kashmir does not entail an uninterrupted schooling experience for all. Schools for children are not only spaces for learning and socialising with peers, but they are also spaces where children feel threatened for their lives, targeted due to their religious and regional identities, and experience high-risk circumstances of collateral damage in any clashes between the army and militants. Schools also become politically charged spaces where heightened emotions are expressed about complex socio-political issues such as occupation and resistance in Kashmir.

Insecurity on the Roads

Travel by road was seemingly the most dangerous aspect of the authors' daily routines owing to the stopping of

vehicles at numerous checkpoints, getting caught in the crossfire between militants and the army, and unpredictable bomb explosions at any juncture of time. Basharat's accounts of road travel highlighted his narrow brush with a possible encounter between the army and militants. Malik discussed how, due to the increased checkpoints, curfews, and interrogations by the army, getting timely medical assistance for people in need had become very difficult and dangerous.

Rahul's experience of commotion on the roads was altogether different from that of the other two authors. The roads were unsafe owing to his fear of being recognised as a Kashmiri Pandit in the 1990s and being violated or killed as the systematic elimination of his community members was rampant during this time. All possible attempts were made to cover up their religious identities while on the road- his mother removed the bindi and his father removed his *Janau* and *Tilak* (all symbols of their religious identity) to safely reach Jammu without raising any suspicions.

All three authors, throughout their childhood, witnessed their family members being cautious regarding their road travels. As they resided in a conflict zone, the rituals and practices of being frisked at checkpoints, being escorted to undisclosed locations for interrogations regarding any links to militants and hiding their religious identities for the fear of being targeted were part of their growing-up experiences in Kashmir. They also grew up with grief and bereavement about the loss of lives of their neighbours, relatives and community members.

Insecurity about Struggle for Survival

In the accounts of all three authors, insecurity is understood as a lack of physical safety or exposure to life-threatening situations. However, it also emerged in conditions as described by Rahul, when he and his family had to worry about their next meal, access to water for daily use, and the availability of basic amenities like bedding and quilts. All these situations are very different from the above-mentioned ones, in which being secure implied freedom from fear. In the listed conditions, being secure meant having freedom from wants. The struggle or incompetence to secure basic sustenance items for the family at times led to a loss of dignity for an uprooted individual, who was compelled to beg, seek alms, and engage in trivial sources of income in adverse

circumstances. There was also a nagging sense of reminiscing about life in the past and how one's future would have been, had violent displacement not happened. The authors' lived experiences affirm adult-child continuity and question the validity of viewing childhood as a distinct, sanitised phase, often guided by adults' whims, fancies, and expectations. They portray the early onset of "adultification" of their childhoods. Like the other grown-ups, they were engulfed by worrying about finances and livelihoods for their continued sustenance. As children, they also participated in household work, pitching in with any help that was required, thus challenging the notion of childhood as a pampered, spoilt phase of affection and nurturance.

Schooling was the most severely affected facet of growing up in Kashmir in the 1990s. Children were compelled to remain out of school for long periods of time owing to hazardous commotion involving sudden landmine explosions or getting caught up in the crossfire. Schools were often closed due to regular curfews and crackdowns. They became sites to set up camps by both the military and militants, exposing the children to high risks. The uncertainty and instability of the outside world permeated their peer discussions, observations about the exodus of the Pandit community and the presence of empty seats in the school, awareness about the claims to Kashmir, and expressing their angst and upheaval through various means.

The texts thus present a very different picture of childhood. Yet, this is a real, lived, and experienced childhood! It is a denormalised childhood and one more potent childhood in the compendium of childhoods that make up the spectrum of childhoods in India.

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