

Reclaiming the Secular Glory: A Critical Study of Ayaz Rasool Nazki's *Satar: The Valley of Demons*

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Abstract

Kashmir is known for diverse facets and elements, from its picturesque beauty to its age-old values and traditions passed down to generations. "Kashmiriyat," a term often echoed to reverberate and reiterate the ethnic, nationalistic, and social consciousness of Kashmiris, has been debated and discussed in different social, cultural, and literary circles. Ayaz Rasool Nazki's maiden novel, *Satar: The Valley of Demons* (2018), is a literary foray into the rich and glorious past of Kashmir with the undertones of repressive forces of anarchy, highlighting the destabilisation of social and political equilibrium. It sheds light on the age-old cultural harmony and religious syncretism that once defined the geographical locale. The paper aims to present how literary output appeals to reclaim the secular glory lost to multiple political power structures over the years. Moreover, it will highlight the erosion of the rich cultural heritage that once delineated the essence of Kashmiriyat. The research objectives would be supported by a relevant theoretical framework to signify the importance of secularism in maintaining peace and stability in a pluralistic society like Kashmir.

Keywords: Kashmiriyat, Secularism, Religion, Nationalism, Conflict

Introduction

Kashmir, known for its picturesque beauty as heaven on earth, stands on a pedestal of rich socio-cultural heritage. The literary traditions of the mainland have witnessed the influx of great masterpieces of literature, primarily highlighting their rich legacies passed down to generations. The socio-political climate that has changed since the 1980s is often talked about and represented in literary works and socio-cultural circles. For centuries, Kashmiri literature

was characterised by Mysticism and Sufism (Lal Ded, Rupa Bhawani, Sheikhu Aalam, Zinda Kaul) and romanticism (Habba Khatoon, Arnimal), which propagated the essence of Kashmiriyat. With changing democratic and political frameworks, the literary genre evolved, focusing on revolutionary ideals by writers like Abdul Ahad Azad (“Peasant”), Ghulam Ahmad Mahjoor (“Call to the Gardener”), and Dina Nath Nadim (“My Hope of Tomorrow”), accentuating nationalistic ideals, rights, identity, justice, and oppression. Writers of the modernist movement, like Rahman Rahi (“The Butcher in the Bosom”) and Akhtar Mohiuddin (“The Terrorist and New Disease”), manifested the sufferings of modern Kashmiri with a zest for social emancipation. In contemporary times, writers like Mirza Waheed (The Collaborator, The Book of Gold Leaves), Basharat Peer (Curfewed Night), Shahnaz Bashir (The Half Mother and The Scattered Souls), Nayeema Mahjoor (Lost in Terror), Farah Bashir (Rumours of Spring), Rahul Pandita (Our Moon has Blood Clots), and Siddhartha Gigoo (The Garden of Solitude) predominantly highlight the socio-political atmosphere of Kashmir. Over the centuries, writers have characterised the essence of Kashmiriyat by highlighting the universal values of pluralism and tolerance. The rupture in Kashmiri identity depending on a host of factors like socio-economic structures and the political and religious milieu of the years gone by has been reflected by writers like Agha Shahid Ali (“I Dream I am the Only Passenger on Flight 423 to Srinagar”, “Farewell”) and Lalita Pandit (“Anantnag”). Ayaz Rasool Nazki is a Kashmiri poet, researcher, columnist, and translator who has written books in Kashmiri, Urdu, and English.

With a five-thousand-year-old history, Kashmir has been a seat of knowledge and scholarship for the natives and the foreigners. In the literary and cultural scenario, the essence of being a Kashmiri, called ‘Kashmiriyat’ (century-old religious harmony and religious syncretism), is often discussed and highlighted on different forums. Over the centuries,

Kashmiriyat as a term has been smeared with political and nationalistic connotations. Tak (2013) points out how Kashmiriyat played a crucial role in moulding the nationalistic consciousness of Kashmiris post-1947. After the integration of Kashmir with the Indian mainland, Kashmir was perceived as a symbol of communal amity between the Muslim majority and Hindu minority groups (28). In the political domain, the term was embedded in the psyche of the local population to assert that the Kashmiri identity (which took centre stage in the nationalistic fervour of the Kashmiris) remained intact and to exemplify to the Indian government that the secular nature of Kashmir is an indigenous phenomenon. The term Kashmiriyat entered the political arena as a manifesto of the election campaigning in the state's assembly elections during the 1970s. On separatist lines, the term was used to address all the citizens of Kashmir, irrespective of caste, creed, or religion, to support the cause of separatism and safeguard ethnic and cultural identity and integrity. In the early 1990s, the term was embraced by Indian intellectuals to stress the affinities between India and Kashmir (31). Tajamul Maqbool (2019), reflecting on the semantic interpretation of the term "Kashmiriyat," states that the volatile period of the 1980s and 1990s brought into question the essence of Kashmiriyat, which represented the synthesis of religious groups and their beliefs and ideals. The sufferings of the communities during and after the exodus and migration of Hindus and Muslims challenged the discourses of Kashmir, its Kashmiriyat, and the categorization of people as victims and sufferers (Maqbool). It is known for its rich religious, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, often portrayed by writers through different genres. The kaleidoscopic, pluralistic society is a distinctive feature of the Kashmir Valley. The communal bond shared by the dominant ethnic groups, mainly Hindus and Muslims, is often brought to the fore by civil society, highlighting the glorious past of the pre-1980s. Nazki's literary piece is set in the 1990s, when the peaceful and ethnically prosperous land was exposed to harsh and inhuman extremities, sending ripples through the different strata of society. He draws a plethora of

characters from various corridors of history, divided by periods, with allegiances to different sects and communities that had a significant role to play in their societies. The angelic and demonic figures are resurrected and planted in times of violence and bloodshed to portray the impact of the conflict on all. Nazki weaves a tapestry of ordinary and influential figures, highlighting the rich and glorious past blotted with the blemishes of violence and political imbalance in contemporary times.

A geographical place ravaged by political turmoil is reflected in its arts and literature. Writers highlight the various facets of war zones or conflict regions to draw a general picture or present a selective narrative given their adherence to a particular school of thought. Similarly, Nazki draws a general picture of conflict-ridden Kashmir by highlighting the various denominators of Kashmir's cultural and political scenario. Pluralistic societies generally exemplify a rich social and cultural heritage. However, heterogeneity also poses challenges in maintaining peace and harmony among the divergent groups pandering to varying ideologies and schools of thought. In the Indian context, pluralistic societies have also witnessed the polarisation of communities, with political and religious dogmas clashing with one another. One of the primary reasons is the intermingling of political discourse with religious dogma. The political parties create a sense of paranoia among their communities by portraying each other as a threat to their existence. The stronghold of religious fundamentalism has also played a key role in amplifying the polarisation issue. The insecurity and fear among the communities have resulted in division within states and numerous incidents of communal violence. Indian states like Uttar Pradesh, Assam, Gujarat, Kerala, Jammu, and Kashmir have witnessed communal clashes between different groups based on issues of autonomy, citizenship, and religious and political rights.

Secularism: A governing principle in an Indian context

In the Indian context, the law states that India is a secular state upholding democratic laws and policies. The 42nd Amendment of the Indian Constitution (1976) states that India is a secular nation and does not prioritise religion for the country and its people. Instead of religious laws that earlier governed Western society or the pre-democratic period in the Indian context, parliamentary laws would be enforced, considering plurality and diversity. The Indian Constitution, as a bible of the democratic framework through various articles, highlights the significance of secularism and the freedom granted to citizens to practise their respective religions—religious freedom, separation of state from religion, and the concept of citizenship. Religious freedom postulates that citizens can practise any religion without restriction or repressive measures from the state. Under the purview of these laws and belief systems, Indian society is diverse, with people of different faiths and religions. Religious intolerance sprung up at the time of partition (between Muslim-Hindus, Muslim-Sikhs, and Muslim-Jains), resulting in bloodshed and violence on a gigantic scale. The subsequent violence resulted in large-scale migrations of people to settle in communities sharing a common religious belief system in response to the ethnic and religious antagonism.

Religious tolerance for other sects and beliefs results in the unification of distinctive groups to work collectively towards the welfare of society. The various groups based on religious lines with socio-political and economic interests need unity and cohesion to integrate and grow socially in a peaceful environment. There are different opinions about secularism in the Indian context. According to the Gandhian school of thought, secularism is Sarva Dharma Sambhav, meaning equal tolerance for all religions. Gandhiji believed that all religions were based on the principles of brotherhood and peace. According to the Nehruvian school of thought, states should adhere to a neutrality policy towards religious beliefs and faiths.

One of the most famous Indian political psychologists, social theorists, and critics, Ashish Nandy (1988), believes that the Indian subcontinent has demonstrated the collapse of secularism. According to him, religion has entered politics, entangling policies, and frameworks.

He gives examples of anti-Sikh riots (1984), anti-Muslim riots (1985), and anti-Hindu riots (1986), not directly associated with religious bigotry but with political cost calculation and economic greed (189). According to Nandy, modernity is the organising principle of the dominant culture of politics. Regarding the role of the state, Nandy proclaims,

When the state makes a plea to a minority community to be secular or to confine itself to only secular politics, the state in effect tells the minority to ‘go slow’ on its faith, so that it can be more truly integrated in the nation-state. Simultaneously, the state offers the minority a consolation prize in the form of a promise that it will force the majority community also to ultimately dilute its faith. (185)

Nandy asserts that the concept of secularism has been misinterpreted in the Indian context as the suppression of religion. The key to religious tolerance is acknowledging the pluralistic belief systems across the country and making a fundamental shift in how religion and politics are perceived. The varying religious and political groups need to develop an inclusive approach to governance with a reliance on dialogue between different groups. Nazki has exemplified this argument through the inclusion of different characters belonging to different periods and religious and political ideologies. The multiple characters in the novella exposed to the onslaught of political and religious anarchy highlight the predicament of Kashmiris irrespective of caste, creed, or gender. Moreover, it highlights the collapse of religious and political institutions, which play a key role in polarising communities in a volatile and fragile communal environment. Nazki’s work is a clarion call to reclaim the secular glory that once defined the essence of Kashmiriyat.

Partha Chatterjee, an Indian political scientist and anthropologist, in his seminal work “Secularism and Toleration” (1994), deliberates on three characteristics of secularism: liberty, equality, and neutrality. According to him, in the Indian context, all three principles have been incongruous and have indicated key anomalies. In the case of the principle of liberty, Chatterjee asserts that the reforms done in the Hindu personal law clash with the basic principle (freedom to practise and engage in religious belief systems). Likewise, the equality principle, based on the idea that the state would not prefer one religion over another, is problematized by the reservation quotas given to selective groups of faiths. The principle of neutrality, which believed in the separation of the state from religion and religious organisations in its governance, has also been violated given the state’s intervention in religious reformation practices (1771–1772). Nazki has subtly hinted at all the principles emphasised by Chatterjee in his work. The characters who signify the migrants and their exodus highlight the fundamental issue of religious and political intolerance, given the involvement of different parameters in Kashmir’s geopolitical issue, particularly the state. The authoritarian figures and self-proclaimed leaders in the novel, given their political interests, deprive the ordinary people of their fundamental rights. The historical personages contextualised in the current scenario exemplify the anarchy and chaos that have seeped into religious and political institutions. It brings into question the basic tenets of secularism, as emphasised by Chatterjee in his work.

Theoretical framework

Various critics and theoreticians (Anne Phillips, Jurgen Habermas, Akeel Bilgrami, and Charles Taylor) have highlighted the different aspects and dimensions of secularism and how it should govern the life of an individual or a community. Rajeev Bhargava, a renowned Indian political theorist, has written extensively about the tenets of secularism in his various works. In his seminal essay “What is Secularism For?” (1999). Bhargava outlines the theory of

secularism. According to Bhargava, institutions linked with religions and politics are powerful in their capacities, hence, separating them is necessary. The overlapping aspirations and consensus regarding autonomy can thwart the normal functioning of a socio-political system. On the principle of equality, people in association with different groups need to be separated from getting privileges on different socio-economic fronts; instead, a subtle and complex egalitarian system must be ensured.

In a pluralistic society like Kashmir, where people of different faiths have fostered societies, including natives and outsiders, the secular and nationalistic splendour was replaced by religious bias and prejudice against two significant sects, Hindus, and Muslims, during the 1980s. The political climate led to segregation, with the consequential dislocation of one group from the state and the implementation of repressive policies against the other. On the one hand, the harmony and brotherhood that bonded the two communities at one time reflect religious syncretism, while on the other, the unrest on social, political, and religious lines demonstrated the susceptibilities of such societies, jeopardising the secular glory. Nazki satirically paints the villainous figures and powerheads (Jaladbhava, Jag Lochan, Nullah Khan, and Maharaja Bahadur) who were pivotal in triggering the turmoil and turbulence. Through the presentation of a multi-cultural society, Nazki highlights how a democratic polity and a secular state structure need to coalesce the diverse sections of society under a nationalistic identity. In a society where people of different faiths and religions coexist, homogenization and assimilation play a key role in sustaining peace and stability on social, cultural, and political levels. A country constituting diverse groups with varying political aspirations is often ensnared by conflicting ambitions, resulting in the marginalisation or dominance of one or another. A heterogeneous locale built on cohesion, synthesis, and unity determines a stable and peaceful social and political climate. The congruence of diversities leads to the unity and integration of

distinct classes and sects, defining the communal and social fabric of society. In a contemporary scenario, the communal fabric is often analogised with the rich past. In the novel's opening pages, the picturesque beauty of Kashmir is described through the mouthpiece of Kashyap's guru.

A world hitherto concealed from the human eye. A chaste, pure, and virgin land. It had all begun with a discourse by the guru. He had talked of the accounts he had studied in ancient texts that there lay a country to the north of the plains, surrounded on all sides by lofty snow-clad mountains and all lush green, dense forests, shimmering waters, vales, and dales. The Guru had depicted it as Swarg (heaven) on earth. Beauty personified. (Nazki 15-16)

In modern democratic societies, the concentration of power vested in one group is not preferred; authoritarian figures in religious institutions cannot be given the licence to exercise power in political matters. Relying on the principle of instrumental rationalism, where the best means are necessitated and acquired to 'achieve a professed objective,' the coercive nature of states cannot settle disputes, and this principle is rendered dysfunctional by states in such a context (Bhargava 490). An egalitarian lifestyle can be procured for the welfare of the state, and ordinary life is secured when ideals are expunged from the affairs of the state. The suffering and loss of life can be averted if religious issues are separated from the political framework. Based on religion, violence can be unleashed against a specific group, thus endangering the communal and secular fabric of a particular society or country. Peace and stability demand the prioritisation of autonomous existence over heteronomous existence, egalitarian society over hierarchical power structures, and democracy over autocracy (492).

To paint a dark and gory picture of the viciousness that Kashmir has witnessed over the centuries, Nazki is hinting at the resolution of modern-day war crimes and human rights violations. The rich cultural heritage that once defined Kashmir and Kashmiriyat is evoked as a clarion call for the restoration of a secular state where people of different faiths sought a home

bonded by harmony and prosperity. As historical fiction, the personages who were towering figures during their periods are conjured to throw light on the peaceful and glorious past. Through characters like Kashyap, who represent the wisdom and religious ideals that Hinduism rests on, an inherent part of pluralistic Kashmiri society, Nazki presents the aesthetic perspective of the world and the mystical divinity—Shanti (peace), Shakti (power), and Vibhinita (diversity), the offshoots of beauty. The serene surroundings of Kashmir are often associated with the spirituality vested in the people of diverse schools of thought and religions. Some names of the historical personages have been modified to satirically bring to light the political machinations of the power heads that tried to erode the communal harmony constituting the essence of Kashmiriyat. As a political satire, Nazki's narrative is underlined with secular overtones to emphasise the need to reclaim the glory that fused the different sections of society.

Historically, Kashmir witnessed different authoritarian figures and regimes, from kings to democratic rulers, who abided by multiple socio-political and religious ideologies manifested in their policies and governance. On religious grounds, there have been periods of domination where one section would be sidelined or marginalised compared to the other. Religion has played a vital role in all periods of peace, prosperity, unrest, and disorder. The dominion of Kashmir, which once was home to Kashmiri Hindus and Muslims, has now been wrecked by collaborators, political manoeuvrings, and communal politics that pit religious groups against one another.

Bhargava identifies two ways in which separation between religion and politics can be sought: one leads to the absolute exclusion and refusal of any means of contact, and the other entertains neither the fusion nor the complete disengagement of the two instead of setting boundaries and respecting them (principled distance). Each domain has distinct spheres with

respective jurisdictions that need to be followed (493–494). Moreover, he postulates that a multicultural or multi-ethnic group can coexist, guided by the principle of neutrality. Developing a neutral position towards the believers of different faiths doesn't threaten the identity or existence of one group or community. Political secularism stresses only that everyone gives up a little bit of what is of exclusive importance to sustain that which is commonly beneficial. If people are assured that politics will not be invaded by any one specific ultimate ideal, then it would be viable to restrict the scope of their respective ideals (496). The principle of neutrality determines that the state and the associated authorities and institutions should help or hinder all individuals to an equal degree. Bhargav emphasises contextual secularism, which safeguards a “dignified life for all, prevents discrimination on the grounds of religion, checks religious bigotry, and manages frenzied internecine conflicts that plunge societies into barbarism and into an escalating spiral of violence and cruelty. The intermingling of religion and politics is permissible as long as it helps meet these objectives, but if any form of blending defeats these aims, then their amalgamation must be restricted” (517). In other words, it advocates the “view that religious and political institutions must be separated on the basis of non-sectarian principles consistent with some features constitutive of the modern political arena” (537). Despite the mixed group of believers belonging to different faiths and ideologies, this secularism provides a platform on equal footing for everybody to “begin formulating, through a formal structure of dialogue and deliberation, a substantive common good capable of providing a solid basis for their social and political order and can generate new forms of solidarity” (537).

The lack of cultural and ethnic sensitivities in a society where different cultures (minority and majority) clash or interact can easily result in a socio-political cataclysm, as reflected in the novel. The characters portrayed by Nazki belong to different classes and

religions, highlighting the inevitable blending and unification of the groups to seek a solution to the unresolved political problems. Through the novel, Nazki highlights how religious syncretism and harmony can be conceived and sustained, “All religions must travel in their own orbits and never, I repeat, never cross each other’s path” (Nazki 167). The segregation in Kashmiri society based on faith (Muslims predominantly seeking unification with the neighbouring country and Hindus vouching for Indian control in Kashmir) divided the Kashmiris on religious lines. Among the ideological divisions, a section of Kashmiri society dreamed of communal harmony, peace, and stability within and outside its geographical environment. The religious bias was manifested by political powerheads and fringe elements who wanted to control socio-political scenarios according to their own will. The fear of losing hold of one’s cultural background often creates a precarious situation for cultures to interact or blend in. Nazki descriptively highlights this religious crisis engineered by the socio-political climate, as Budshah says,

We are no enigma. We have nothing to say. We are overwhelmed by the misery, the pain that surrounds us. We have always strived for an honourable place for our people on the face of God’s earth. We have a dream. You have asked as to what we want. We want to develop a prosperous self-confident, bold, modern nation fit to take its place in the comity of nations- a nation free of hunger, disease, and ignorance. A nation that is tolerant, humane and just. We want each man to respect other men, without reference to caste, creed, faith and religion. We want education, healthcare, sanitation, power, industries, hospitals, bridges, roads, factories, airports, science, technology, computers, satellites, electricity and we want electronics. We want to preserve our ethos, our culture, our language, our woods. We want to preserve the Dal Lake, the chinar; we want to preserve the Hangul, we want to preserve all our shrines, we want to preserve Hazratbal, and we want to preserve Tulumula. We want all this and much more. (Nazki 257–258)

In the case of Kashmir, where two major religions, Hinduism, and Islam, dominated the socio-cultural and political milieu during the monarchy and democratic setup, the entanglement of religious faith with the delineation of its constitutional status resulted in turmoil and turbulence—the violent period of the 1980s witnessed fringe elements selectively targeting the

people based on their faith. The neutral position of the various elements regarding the political problems of the day would have played a significant role in maintaining peace and stability.

Bridging the Gap through Characters: Historical and Contemporary

The novel was written over a period of twenty years. In an interview, Ayaz Rasool Nazki affirms:

My book has been officially classified as historical fiction. In my opinion, my book is rooted in history but is not a book of history. What I attempt is the recapitulation of the past as an essential element of the present as well as the future. It is a continuum essentially indivisible, that is why my characters taken from past come alive in present and become contemporary. (Nazki)

In a post-modern style, it encompasses the old and rich heritage of Kashmir that witnessed the political, literary, and religious giants, from rulers to saints, that once impacted the socio-political climate of Kashmir. The narrative is an amalgam of fictional and real characters spread across the centuries, hinting at the rich heritage. The commingling of past and present characters is an attempt to highlight the glorious days that Kashmir once witnessed and draw attention to the violence and religio-political strife that plagued the paradise on earth. The fundamental rights granted by modern democracies are questioned by highlighting violations on different levels. The myths and superstitions are also brought into focus to satirically present the stark realities of the past and present that are known but seldom understood or acknowledged.

Nazki has reflected on the political turmoil that ravaged Kashmir from time to time to contrast it with the peace and prosperity that once resided within the hearts and the geographical dominion of Kashmir. Nazki has used multiple anachronisms intended to appeal to the secular sensibilities of the people and draw comparisons between the past and the present. The literary

techniques and figures like metaphor, juxtaposition, and anachronism draw a satirical portrait of the political leaders who failed to preserve the heterogeneous climate on peaceful lines. The societal divisions among powerhouses explicitly reflect the disintegration down the strata, thus endangering the religious sanctity and syncretism of all faiths and belief systems.

The character Fani in the novel is modelled on the Indo-Persian scholar and poet Fani, the pen name of Shaikh Mohammad Mohsen. Through his miserable state (being paraded by the paramilitary), Nazki highlights how a state seethed in violence and anarchy is exposed to the horrors of political mayhem. In the novel, Nazki makes Fani the mouthpiece of secular beliefs and ideology, whereby Fani says,

faith and religion are two different entities, one may supplement the other, but the two never intermingle. Faith was simple and unitary in disposition. The ultimate being was supreme, omnipresent, and all-encompassing. This was faith, common to all people in the world. On the other hand, religion constituted a set of beliefs and practises that, depending on time and space, could differ among men. Faith, on the other hand, was one indistinguishable quantity, undivided and whole. Faith could coexist with any religion, whereas religions couldn't and would clash one with the other. (166)

Gani Kashmiri was a poet recognised in Kashmiri, Persian, and Urdu literature. Like other historical figures, he also features in the novel as a character who becomes a part of the crowd paraded and rammed out of their homes. Nazki also mocks the policies and framework adopted by the security divisions in Kashmir by portraying how Gani, convicted by the informer and given an alien identity, "Gulbudin Hekmatyaar," is declared a militant and driven to the infamous interrogation centre Papa 2. His character highlights everyday politics, where innocent or guilty people are exposed to violence and brutality.

Kashyapa is a revered sage in Hinduism. There are multiple mythical narratives regarding his existence in Sanskrit and Indian scriptures. Many scholars believe that Kashmir got its name from Kashyapa Rishi. In the Puranas (the sacred literature of Hinduism, a

collection of myths and legends), it is mentioned that Kashyapa drained the Kashmir Valley to make it inhabitable. According to the legend, Kashmir was a huge lake called Satisaras (named after Sati, Shiva's consort), and it was drained by Kashyap. Nazki, in the novel, has portrayed the historical Kashyap (the sage) and the modern-day Kashyap (a Kashmiri pandit migrant) in sheer contrast with one another, where the historical Kashyap proved to be a saviour, making the place habitable for survival and sustenance. On the other hand, the migrant Kashyap is driven out of his homeland due to the political turmoil. From a wealthy and respectable citizen, he is reduced to a homeless migrant within hours of displacement and dislocation. Kashyap's luxurious life receives a big jolt as he leaves behind the entities that defined his position in society.

The political power head shown as responsible for the exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits is Jaldbhava - Commander-in-Chief of a militant group. Jaldbhava is one of the demons that recurs in Kashmiri folklore and used to reside in the lake that had submerged the valley. As a demonic figure terrorising the people, his modern counterpart has also been fashioned in the same role. Nazki fuses the myths with the facts to compare the two sides of the same coin. Jag Lochan, one of the characters, bears a resemblance to Jag Mohan, an Indian civil servant and the 5th Governor of Jammu and Kashmir. His tenure witnessed the migration of Kashmiri Pandits, who were encouraged to leave for Jammu. Jag Lochan, in the novel, performs a similar task of controlling affairs. He stands for political decisions that completely changed the socio-political dynamics of the region years down the line. Maqbool Dar, in the novel, is shown as a rebel in defiance against the state and its policies. He is modelled on Maqbool Bhat, a separatist leader who was tried, convicted, and ultimately hanged. Maqbool and his companions, Ajab Malik, and Lassa Khan, are shown as fringe elements in the novel. These constitute the section

of society whose political ambitions clash with the political agenda of leaders and the governing principles.

Lalleshwari, also known as Lal Ded, is revered as the mystic poetess of Kashmir from the Shaivic school of philosophy. Lal Ded features in the novel as a mystic, approached by the Kashmiris to seek divine revelations and truth. Her alter ego, Lally Tigress, is presented as the self-styled commander-in-chief of a militant outfit, “Dukhtaran.” She is modelled on Asiya Andrabi, leader of Dukhtaran-e-Millat, a separatist organisation. Nazki has presented a comprehensive picture of the different sections of society where men and women participated directly or indirectly in the catastrophe. Maharaja Bahadur in the novel is modelled on Gulab Singh, founder of the Dogra Dynasty and the first ruler of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, who, through the Treaty of Amritsar, purchased Kashmir for 7500000. In the novel, the Maharaja is shown as a tyrannical figure who makes the villagers pay the lion’s share of their produce towards the King, highlighting the suppressive and repressive regimes that have throttled the existence of Kashmiris from time to time.

Yusuf Shah, one of the characters in the novel, has a resemblance to the 16th-century Sultan, Yusuf Shah Chak, the native ruler of Kashmir from the Chak dynasty. The Mughal and Chak dynasties and their relations are presented in the novel, highlighting the foreign invasions that the Kashmir mainland witnessed back then. Nazki has used modern-day nomenclature related to war and political turmoil: militants in place of rebels, human rights violations in place of killings, and suppression rampant during foreign rule in the pre-democratic era. The ruler Yusuf Shah Chak was imprisoned by the Mughal ruler Akbar, while the novel’s character is nabbed and driven to Papa 2 (an interrogation centre operated by the Border Security Force from the inception of the Kashmir insurgency in 1989 till 1996). Nazki introduces the ruler Yusuf Shah Chak as a crownless king caught between two opposite ideologies.

In a society fragmented on different planes—religious and political—it becomes challenging to draw the lines considering security and safety measures. Kashmir is an apt example in this context. The political and nationalistic agenda varies on different levels, coupled with religious differences. A volatile environment makes everyone suspicious of one another. The people with whom one shares a communal bond and peaceful relations are also brought under surveillance. In the novel, it is mentioned in various places that “times are difficult. We do not know a friend from a foe” (253).

Nullah Khan is one of the characters shown as part of the two opposite camps, RAW and ISI, a collaborator with no clear agenda or propaganda. He represents that section of society that collaborates with opposite groups to pursue their agendas, securing their authority and position during the strife. Another prominent figure in the novel is Zain ul-Abidin, who belongs to the upper echelons of society. Giyas ud Din Zain ul-Abidin was the eighth sultan of the Shah Mir dynasty of Kashmir. He was popularly known as Bud Shah (the Great King) among his subjects. His reign was predominantly peaceful, and he is known for his policy of religious toleration and public welfare activities. During his reign, the Hindus that had left Kashmir during his father’s reign were called back. As a political leader, he allowed non-Muslims to practise their religion without imposing Muslim law. In the novel, he is labelled a terrorist by the security forces in a clampdown on the procession carried out by Kashmiri Pandits, of which he is a part. Through his character, identity politics is brought to the fore, feeding the Hindu vs. Muslim narrative created as a discourse. As a Kashmiri Muslim in solidarity with the Pandit’s exodus, he is held responsible for the explosions that rocks the protest march. He is declared an agent of the ISI, leading to his arrest and incrimination in several cases.

Budshah wanted to return to his land. He had seen enough. He had travelled enough. He had thought enough. A plan was shaping up in his mind. A plan that envisaged establishing a united, bold, self-confident Kashmir. A land where all lived in eternal

peace, where no one was discriminated based on his creed, his faith. His Kashmir was to be a state firmly dedicated to the development of human intellect in all its manifestations. (211)

The imprisonment and interrogation of Gani Kashmiri, Yusuf Shah Chak, and Bud Shah signify how absolute power vested in the authorities muzzles the voices and throttles the existence of people. The reference to interrogation centres and jails in Jammu and Kashmir highlights the miserable and horrendous conditions within their walls for the convicts brought in, whether innocent or guilty. Yusuf's death in the novel brings to the fore the subsequent treatment meted out to people who defy the orders of authoritarian regimes.

Immediately, men ran into Yusuf Shah's room, removed his clothes and brought him out, and then paraded him naked through the jail premises and took him to the death cell. Here they chained him in a filthy, dark cell. Two men entered and, with iron bars, beat his whole body blue and red. He bled from his multiple wounds. In the morning the floor of the cell appeared red and Yousuf Shah passed out. (82)

Similarly, Lally Tigress's interrogation, coupled with sexual abuse, pinpoints the inhuman and brutish treatment carried out in the name of interrogation regarding state welfare and its policies by its guardians.

Thunder struck her eyes. She was naked; there was not a stitch on her entire being. Her limbs securely tied as she could not move...she felt as if her flesh was expanding in all directions [...]. she felt a claw descend on her big naked breast. She squirmed in disgust but did not dare to open her eyes. The claws dug deep into her breast. Nails sunk into her being. Then she felt thousands of claws all over her, tearing her, crushing her, tormenting her [...] she lay there, utterly torn, bruised and chewed. Her whole body was in a mess. (100 -101)

Kalhan Pandit, one of the characters, is modelled on Kalhana, author of *Rajatarangini* (River of Kings). The novel depicts him as a Kashmiri Pandit enmeshed in the socio-political catastrophe. He oversees the records that shed light on ancestors and the heritage of their

community. As a recorder of genealogy, he is mistaken for maintaining the records of militant outfits that interrogate him.

Nazki refers to characters who were well known in their periods as sages, literary figures, and political powerheads and strips them of the aura and influence they once possessed, treating them like ordinary Kashmiris exposed to the volatile socio-political atmosphere. An ordinary Kashmiri who is powerless against the vicious forces that have existed and are still rampant is reflected through these characters. The meaning is implicit in the circumstances that engulf these characters. In a way, Nazki relies on the anachronistic style to situate the characters in circumstances that were not present in their times. The modern setting gives a realistic touch to the portrayal of the sufferings of Kashmiris, irrespective of caste, creed, religion, or gender. Nazki has also presented the feminine and masculine perspectives of the troubling period. The female character Lally Tigress embodies the resilience and resistance the female community has shown in the wake of conflict. The demonic figures represented by Nazki stand for the collaborators who had a key role in endangering the valley's religious syncretism. The reference to jails and interrogation centres is a metaphor for contemporary investigative techniques and machinations. The historical figures poignantly contrast the glorious past with the ravaged and war-torn present. An ordinary Kashmiri Muslim or Kashmiri Pandit's plight is foregrounded through the renowned personalities of the past.

Towards the end of the novel, all the major characters are shown participating in the auction and bidding of Kashmir with various political heads like Miss Robin Hood, Maharaja Keran Rajput, Mullah Nateg Shirazi, Rinchen, General Akram Khan Bhatti, and Mahaballi. All the stakeholders lay claim to the mainland. Nazki has obliquely mentioned the nationalities and allegiances of various stakeholders who try to lay hands on this 'property' for their gain,

highlighting how various forces have tried to control the region for their selfish interests at the cost of the peace and prosperity of the natives.

Conclusion

South Asian literature, among myriad thematic issues, predominantly highlights the political, religious, and cultural underpinnings of countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. In the Indian context, the geographical dominion is seethed in social and cultural value systems intertwined with its political framework. The Hindutva ideology and the growing Islamophobia have engulfed the Indian states over the past few decades. Religious and political commingling has significantly impacted the dynamics of different regions and states in India. These notions are eloquently reflected by Nazki while portraying the dynamics and varying parameters of Kashmir. The literary output from Kashmir in various languages draws attention to the social, cultural, religious, and political frameworks of the mainland. Writers, through literary musings, have tried to draw attention to the lost ideals of Kashmiriyat owing to the catastrophic elements on social and political lines. Through different characters, the divisions in Kashmiri society, as reflected by Nazki, highlight the vulnerable status of an ordinary Kashmiri. Once the political stability is shredded to pieces, the various stakeholders, and self-proclaimed leaders spring up, further deepening the fissures. Nazki also draws attention to how pluralistic societies enrich the socio-cultural climate of a state or a country, but once the conflicting ideologies dissolve the harmonious halo, violence, and conflict deepen the cultural, political, and religious bias. Most writings about Kashmir have broadly discussed religious tolerance and communal harmony, yet the treasured notion of brotherhood is often questioned, given the historical narratives. Moreover, Nazki also reflects how religious intolerance challenges political and cultural pluralism, thus hampering the growth and stability of a state or country.

The fictional narratives about Kashmir emphasise how multi-culturalism and polyethnicity can be established on peaceful lines while addressing the social, political, and economic demands of diverse groups to sustain the healthy functioning of a society. In contemporary times, policies should be drafted to recreate history, where Kashmir would again be the hub of religious tolerance and communal harmony. The restoration of peace through dialogue among various civil and political stakeholders would ensure the collective participation of Kashmiris, irrespective of faith or religion. Through the government's welfare policies, the state can be steered towards growth and prosperity by preserving the multi-cultural ethos. Through the collective effort of the state and the citizens, the essence of Kashmiriyat can be resuscitated and resurrected.

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