

CLEANSING THE VALLEY:  
SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *SHALIMAR THE CLOWN*  
AND MIRZA WAHID'S *THE COLLABORATOR*

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In the Indian subcontinent, militancy is more often than not an expression of resistance against state polity and/or its implementation. While this prompts questions regarding the strident assertion of development indexes by governments, it also reminds us that literature, from the Victorian novel onwards, has enabled enunciations regarding the flipside of the progress made under capital intensive market economies.<sup>1</sup> Literary texts and their critical analysis provide in this regard the space wherein subjectivities marginalized and silenced by unequal opportunity can find articulation. In our contemporary world, this discontent is manifest in the mass protests and militancy or terrorism which has sadly become a part of our daily existence, either as direct experience or through media or social media reportage.

In the subcontinent today, ethnic conflict is not an unusual occurrence and individual assertions of ethnic identity have acquired more political prominence today than ever before. As evidenced, the repercussions of this are more tragic than ironic.<sup>2</sup> However, while ethnic conclaves have become the single most damaging threat to the idea of a national identity, it must also be acknowledged that it is from these spaces, constructed on account of marginalization that the nation-state and its policies may be questioned and perhaps transformed.

This paper purports to explore one such dimension of ethnic assertion and the claim it stakes over land and territory, namely, the ethnic cleansing enacted in the valley of Kashmir against the Pundit community at a time when global geo-politics focussed on the intervention of communism in the region of Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> Following decolonization, the people of Jammu & Kashmir were faced with the question of accession to one of the two newly formed nations of India or Pakistan. The matter was contentiously resolved

in favour of the former. While Article 370 of the Indian Constitution guarantees the region autonomy in matters of governance, the area has experienced a state of unrest ever since Indian Independence.<sup>4</sup> Localized perceptions of social and economic marginalization coalesced into a grassroots militancy which coalesced over the years into acts of civil and political terror leading to a state of paranoia and intolerance as witnessed in the valley today. I purport to explore two completely different facets of this unrest as represented in Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) on the one hand and Mirza Wahid's *The Collaborator* (2011) on the other.

Before I embark on a discussion of the texts, I should clarify that since literature is the primary medium of my analysis, I will be treating the literary texts modes of witnessing. In this regard, I understand and acknowledge that fiction is often decried as an unreliable witness—twice removed from the 'truth'. Typically speaking, the act of witnessing involves recounting from memory an event or action for which contrary perceptions may exist. It is assumed that this re-telling entails objectivity and will adhere to realist parameters. Statements by an eyewitness are then procured under oath and in the presence of judicial bodies of state. Despite this, eyewitness accounts have been known to contradict one another, thereby throwing into reasonable doubt not only the truth-value of the very act of witnessing but refuting the singularity associated with the idea of truth. Contrary to ideas of empiricism and rationality, this polyvalence propagating multiple "truths" is enabling and completely in tandem with post-modernist insights regarding the nature of truth and reality. It is on this account that literary criticism is known to perform what Derrida has theorised in *Of Grammatology* as deconstructive readings and shows the importance of literary insights or truths.

Another well-known fact about fictive renderings is that despite the adage 'fiction', literary texts have been banned if not burnt across the span of human history and death threats issued with alacrity to authors. This is because narratives filtered as they are through the subjectivity of their tellers perforce implicate the author in the textual controversy and this despite Foucault's scholarly assertion regarding the "death" of the author. In, thus, engaging with the discourses of its time and place, literature resists and challenges power structures and this provides the impetus for silencing textual voices.

The valley of Kashmir literally located on the northern-most frontier of the Indian nation state is the site for contestation for the two above mentioned narratives which may broadly be classified a postcolonial texts fuelled by resistant imaginings.<sup>5</sup> By postcolonial

here, I mean the aftermath of the epic cross-cultural encounter facilitated by colonization. Ideally, this cultural collision should have led to the formation of hybrid, multi-cultural societies which would meet what Rushdie in *The Moor's Last Sigh* has referred to as “the most profound of our needs”, and which he in *Shalimar the Clown* explicates as: “.... putting an end to frontiers, for the dropping of the boundaries of the self” (Rushdie, 2006, 433) or more practically, as:

Europe, free of the Soviet threat and America, free of the need to remain permanently at battle stations, would build that new world in friendship, a world without walls, a frontier less Newfoundland of infinite possibility (Rushdie, 2005, 20).

It is this version of utopia where ethnic identities are absolved of their political sting that Rushdie exemplifies in *Shalimar the Clown*. He does this through his protagonist Maximus Ophlus, an erstwhile Ambassador to India and also an anti-Nazi resistance fighter who in his dotage is content to live out the remainder of his privileged, even if tainted, life in immigrant friendly California. This hybrid space is home to diverse races, Chinese, Pilipinos, Russians and Indians among others, all manage to find a welcoming home here. Race or ethnicity amounts to no more than physiognomic details. The narrative begins, however, not with California but in the valley of Kashmir where at one time, as the text demonstrates, such hybridity and tolerance flourished.

While Pandit migration from the valley on account of economic reasons has been an ongoing process, in this presentation I will be focussing on the exodus post-1985 following the pan-Islamic radicalization that transpired in the valley around this time.<sup>6</sup> Communities, other than the majority, were perceived as *kafirs* or infidels and were told to forsake their ancestral homes, convert or suffer annihilation.<sup>7</sup> This spelt the death-knell for a culture which had flourished in the valley—*Kashmiriyat*, a composite yet discreet mix of Shaivism, Buddhism and Sufism—the three major religious and ideological worldviews which have informed social and political life in the valley. In terms of contemporary political vocabulary, *Kashmiriyat* is closely akin to cosmopolitanism or a secular social consciousness. By locating cosmopolitanism in Kashmir prior to the Independence, Rushdie shows that it is not a modern, first-world phenomenon but existed and flourished in a not-so-ancient Indic civilization. While respecting difference, Kashmiri Pundits and Kashmiri Muslims partook of a set of superstitions, tradition,

folklore, festivals, music, poetry, exotic food, bawdy wedding songs as well as the gossamer pashmina popular in the region and social necessities such as handling *kangaris* of burning hot coal.<sup>8</sup>

As regards cosmopolitanism I take recourse to Bruce Robbins understanding which he explains as:

... a fundamental devotion to the interests of humanity as a whole, cosmopolitanism has often seen to claim universality by virtue of its independence, its detachment from bonds, commitments and affiliations that constrain ordinary nation-bound lives....But many voices now insist that the term should be extended to transnational experiences that are particular rather than universal and that are privileged (Robbins, 1)

Rushdie's description of life as lived in the village of Panchigam in *Shalimar the Clown*, comes close to Robbins idea of cosmopolitanism as "devotion to the interests of humanity" (ibid) but before we proceed it will be worthwhile to keep in mind the debate regarding cosmopolitanisms whereby Arjun Appadurai asserts that "emergent cosmopolitanisms have complex local histories" (Appadurai, 64). Appadurai does this in opposition to the idea put forward by Susan Koshy whereby she locates the idea entirely and exclusively within the experience and transformations that occur within Asian-America communities. Koshy bases her assertion on the transnational migration undertaken by these communities as they move from tradition-bound Asian societies to a modern western world. The comingling of cultures that occurs subsequently is what Koshy defines as quintessentially cosmopolitan. It is this idea of the West as the shrine of cosmopolitanism that Appadurai counters and Rushdie illustrates through *Shalimar*.

A word about Rushdie's politics while undertaking the writing of this text is in order. Rushdie partakes of a Kashmiri-Muslim lineage, as the texts of the *Midnight's Children* and *Joseph Anton* bear witness, as they also do his liberal, westernised, upper-middle class upbringing. *The Satanic Verses* earned him a *fatwa* issued by *mullah* Ayotallah Kohmeni. The *fatwa* levelled charges of blasphemy against the author, and the Iranian state then supported the *mullah's* order, thereby forcing Rushdie to go incognito for more than a decade. During this time Kohmeni refurbished the death threat while the Queen of England conferred knighthood onto the author and Rushdie finally migrated to the United States of America. When he undertook the writing of *Shalimar the Clown*, Rushdie was safely ensconced in the academic world of Emory, USA, but meanwhile the attack on the twin-towers of the World Trade Centre had polarized the world in

indelible ways. While this trajectory locates Rushdie as yet another artist of the floating world—that rarefied space which Pico Iyer has referred to as the space of the “global citizen”, it also proves that ethnicity would henceforth be a force to reckon with. So, if *The Satanic Verses* had earned for the author the wrath of fundamentalist fractions how could he now placate ruffled feathers and yet not endanger the goodwill of the Western world? With *Shalimar the Clown* Rushdie manages to achieve just that.

Iterating the ease with which one may cross national boundaries in today’s world, the narrative states:

Everywhere was now part of everywhere else. Russia, America, London, Kashmir ....Our lives, our stories flowed into one another’s, were no longer our own, individual discreet.

This, however, is not without damning repercussions, as the text proceeds to clarify: “There were collisions and explosions. The world was no longer calm.” (Rushdie, 2005: 37)

The text begins in a tiny hamlet called Panchigam located by the river Muskadoon. In this village society learning is valued and the ideals of tolerance and mutual respect are cherished. Dispute regarding religious beliefs is practically non-existent or is settled through dialogue and sage counsel as the marriage between Shalimar, the “clown prince of the performing troupe”, the *Bhand Pather* and Pundit Kaul’s daughter Bhoomi or Bhoonyi as she prefers to call herself, indicates.<sup>9</sup> Evil, though not absent, is exemplified as the human vulnerability prompted by emotions of jealousy, rage and revenge but this is nonetheless a far cry from the cold-blooded blood-letting of the ethnic wars which loom ominous in the horizon. Forces of globalization, technological advancement and geo-politics impact this civil community as the discourse of ethnic apartness finds presence through the preaching of the “iron mullah”, who claims to preach “truth” and nothing other than the “truth”, and thus begins the polarisation intended to demarcate the true followers of the faith from the others —the infidels.

As demanded by the subterranean political currents contouring Rushdie’s novel, the characters in the text carry symbolic functions. This is as essential for Rushdie’s politics as it is integral to his narrative strategy. For instance, all the actions that define for the reader the character of Max Ophelus are in tandem with the symbolism associated with a typically western ethos. Max thus symbolises America and when we are informed rather late into the narrative Max is the arms supplier for the *jihadist* movement fast gathering

momentum in this tiny hamlet, it is in keeping with character and symbol. Likewise, the breathtakingly beautiful Boonyi symbolizes the valley of Kashmir. This is bolstered by her role in the text as an artist with the *Bhand Pather*, and the manner in which she gracefully combines through her personality the Pundit and Muslim cultures as coexist in Panchigam. Her marriage to Shalimar likewise symbolizes the composite culture of *Kashmiriyat*. Her encounter with Max is the impact of western authoritarianism on this civilization. Her flight into the degenerate world of glitzy-glaty Delhi with Max, as his mistress, while reflecting on human culpability, desire and want symbolise the setting in of physical and psychological degeneration of this once pristine paradise. The ill-fated relationship between Boonyi and Max, (Kashmir and America), also reads like a parable, warning the fairer sex against aspiring beyond the boundaries of their station in life. This is further illustrated by Boonyi's fate, as her daughter, India, born out of wedlock is snatched from her arms and she is shunted back to Pachigam. For the villagers, she is now *nazaar badoor*—the shunned, slighted scapegoat, left to die in the snowstorm; a warning to other women lest they transgress. Gender boundaries clearly remain intact despite Rushdie's progressive musing regarding the watering down of ethnic borders and boundaries.

The complexity of the symbolism associated with Boonyi accrues from the fact that this was the time when the valley was undergoing tremendous political and social change. As the village pariah, the symbolism associated with Boonyi is reminiscent of the stalemate that existed between the political representatives of the valley and national governance. To this is added another facet. Boonyi remains undefeated and in isolation not only does she recover but attains clairvoyance. She knows that she will die at the hands of Shalimar, her husband and she awaits this moment as it offers a final release from the burden of existence. Boonyi's steadfastness are as indicative of the aspirations of the younger generation of Kashmiris and also of their cry for political freedom or *Azadi*. Bolstering this representational shift is Shalimar's metamorphoses from the naïve and trusting village lad, the celebrated tight-rope performing artist of the *Bhund Pather* and Boonyi childhood sweetheart to a hard-core terrorist.

Seeking vengeance against Max, Shalimar joins the band of *jihadists* under the iron-mullah in order to learn the art of cold-blooded murder. The tension in the narrative now hinges upon Rushdie's representation of *jihad*. Just his acting skills standing him in good stead Shalimar convinces the iron mullah and the band of militants of his shared ardour for their cause:

He stripped off his shirt and shouted out his acquiescence—"I cleanse myself of everything except the struggle! Without the struggle I am nothing!" He screeched his assent "Take me or kill me now!"—and he stripped off his underwear.

It is here that he learns to slaughter his victims: "like a *halal* chicken bleeding to death by a deep neck wound caused by a single slash of the assassins blade" (4), waiting for the day he will avenge the dishonour done him by Max. Prophesying the future of the post 9/11 world, the narrator now warns: "An age of fury was dawning and only the enraged would shape it" (272).

The term *jihad* draws on an epistemology that harks back to the origins of Islam. Interpretations of the term reflect on its transformative value such as vanquishing the evil within—also referred to as the greater *jihad*, wherein this transformative inner war acquires precedence over the material gain. Popular contemporary usage of the term borders more around the vanquishing of infidels.<sup>10</sup> While the jihadists at the training camp have complex personal histories, with tragic loss and like Shalimar many seek vengeance and they too speak the language of peace, truth and love. At the camp they are trained to be ruthless killers. Rushdie's representation of this defining facet of contemporary Islam is in this regard not monolith, rather the pan-Islamic ethos that Shalimar encounters in the training shows the pluralistic and even hybrid character of the faith rather than the narrow parochialism it is popularly associated with.<sup>11</sup>

However, it is not just the Islamic radicalization that proves to be detrimental to life but the new nationalist brew concocted by the Indian state. Charged with harbouring extremists, the valley bears the full brunt of atrocities of the armed forces. Rushdie's destruction of Panchigam is symbolic of the end of Kashmiriyat or cosmopolitanism. The women are veiled. Life is completely obliterated from the place where love, art and humanism had once blossomed and flourished. Ethnicity has worked its magic.

During this time Kashmir faced one of the worst instances of ethnic cleansing of our times. This finds scant mention in the text as narrative voice states it as: "Kill One, scare ten", and proceeds to catalogue the places where "calamity struck": "Trakroo, Uma Nagri, Kupwara, Sangrampra, Nandimarg", deflecting attention from the terror to the failure of state bureaucracy instead:

There were six hundred thousand Indian troops in Kashmir but the pogrom of the pundits was not prevented, why was that. Three and a half lakhs of human being arrived in Jammu as displaced persons and



for many months the government did not provide shelter or relief or even register their names, why was that. When the government finally built camps it only allowed for six thousand families to remain in the state, dispersing the others around the country where they would be invisible and impotent, why was that. The camps at Purkhoo, Muthi, Mishriwallah, Nagrota were built on the banks and beds of nullahs, dry seasonal waterways, and when the water came the camps were flooded, why was that. The ministers made speeches about ethnic cleansing but the civil servants wrote one another memos saying that the pundits were simply internal migrants whose displacement had been self imposed, why was that....and the pundits of Kashmir were left to rot in their slum camps, to rot while the army and insurgents fought over the bloodied and broken valley....why was that why was that why was that why was that why was that. (296-297)

The only act of terror in Kashmir which the narrative dwells on, is the slaughter of Boonyi at the hands of Shalimar, undertaken more in the spirit of an enactment of vengeance performed towards restoration of honour. The spirit of the killing may be explained by referring to Julia Kristeva's idea of the "abject" which she describes in *The Powers of Horror* as essential for human existence. The abject according to Kristeva, exists:

On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture....loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste or dung. The spasms and the vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns away from defilement, sewage, and muck (Kristeva, 2).

As a part of the self, such as excrement or menstrual blood, which must be expunged, the murder of Boonyi symbolizes the death-knell of *Kashmiriyat* —a loved and cherished part of the self which must be expunged.

Unlike Rushdie's long-distant gaze, Mirza Wahid's *The Collaborator* presents the insurgency more from an insider's point-of-view. The text describes life in the valley under the pall of death and violence as polarized positions between the state and militants hardened beyond communication. The Pandit question does not arise any longer as the exodus is complete. The narrative is once again set in a village but in this case along the Line of Control and inhabited by a close-knit community of "settled" Gujjars, nomadic tribes who traversed the hills and mountains depending on the season. Now, however, they are constrained on account of the establishment of nations and stringent laws regarding border-crossings. With blurred



ethnic origins, and not quite the true-blood Kashmiris, one would imagine that the Movement—as the *Jihadist Tazneens* chose to call themselves—would have bypassed them for the more succulent crop of freshly victimized city youth of Srinagar, but then, who would know the mountain paths better than the Gujjars and know where the Line of Control may best be traversed—they who staked their claim on the mountains before nations arrived! With words such as *Saarahad Paar* seeping into the vocabulary of the everyday, and whispered clandestinely whenever sons mysteriously disappear from the village, *Kashmiriyat* is a concept by now relegated to the vagaries of literature.

The ramifications of the death and terror that stalk life in the valley cannot be more apparent than in the witnessing of the *haal* of mothers whose sons have disappeared, either for interrogation or to join the movement. Village life is relegated to a state of perpetual mourning as photographs of disappeared now referred to as *shaheed* adorn homesteads. *Jihad* is the discourse of the times and this is announced in no uncertain terms as the sudden appearance of masked youth proudly marching with Kalashnikovs, in brand-new “ActiOn” shoes, of this the one-street town, swiftly and proudly announces the militant aspect of their resistance. As *jihad* spreads its wings, the wherewithal provided, as per the narrative logic, by Pakistan—as the narrator clearly states, army battalions line up to protect the border against infiltration and to stamp out terrorism. The young army Captain posted there, duty-bound, needs more booze to dull his sensibilities if not his vocabulary. Bodies pile up, a putrid smell permeates the saffron valley and a collaborator is needed to clean up the mess and identify for the army the local youth who for the army are terrorists. The lute song of the shepherd Azad has turned into a lament.

As the narrator’s group of *jigri dosto*s are drawn into the enveloping vortex, he begins to live more in self-imposed isolation and the crevices of memory as language no longer affords the joy of shared communication. Communication is practically reduced to no more than a tool to beguile the oppressor and consists primarily of words, such as the “yesssir’s” or the “sirji’s” thrown the way of the army captain. This shattered village community shares more through gestures, performances and the graffiti which appears on the walls and signifies the spirit of the times more than spoken words or shared communication. For instance, the imam’s manner of intonation as he reads the prayer sends out coded messages for his *ummah*. Resistance is, thus, enacted on a daily level and in a manner that may arouse no

suspicion. In this emotive, Sufi land where the poetry of Lal Ded once communicated the ability to transcend the material world and body, words have now lost their ability to convey joy, love or happiness. Yet, strands of a common national imaginary can be traced through the songs of Mohammad Rafi, once a source of entertainment now signifies the lads who have crossed over that they are well. The narrator's friend Hussain uses this method to send greetings to the ones he has left behind, perhaps forever. The narrator dreads the day he may have to frisk Hussain's lifeless, possibly violated body for ammunition and for an identity card, which would proclaim his new, adopted militant identity. The self-loathing that this induces can no longer be encapsulated by Frantz Fanon's description of the post-colonial subject but is more like the epigraph from Aga Shahid Ali's poem: *I see Kashmir from New Delhi at midnight*.

The two texts considered in this paper show the transformative phases of life in the valley ranging from *Kashmiriat* to the brutalizing tactics of mass terror. What is lost in this power struggle is the ethos of humanism, tolerance and respect for differences—the founding principles on which civilizations rest. In this scenario of increasing violence and intolerance then, works of literature are of singular importance, as literary texts perform what Barbara Harlow in *Resistance Literature* stated thus: “Imaginative writing is a way to gain control over the historical and cultural record....and is seen from all sides as no less crucial than the armed struggle” (Harlow, iv).

### Notes

1. The trajectory of the novel in England is closely related to the onset of capitalist modes of production. The effect of this, particularly in matters of class and gender, has been vividly expressed by novelists of the Victorian period; for detailed information refer to Margaret Drabble (ed.) “The Oxford Companion to English Literature”, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, among others. Progress within the South Asian paradigm has been accomplished with impunity regarding its effects on the natural environment and sadly, often at the expense of destroying the means of livelihood of indigenous communities. Indigenous resistance to this is clubbed under the adage “terrorism” or “militancy”.
2. For more on ethnicity, refer to Paul R. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*, New Delhi: Sage, 1991.
3. This is a Shaiuite, Saraswat Brahmin community native to the Kashmir valley having settled there mainly under the Dogra rule.
4. This article is drafted in Part XXI of the Indian constitution and grants autonomous status to the state of Jammu and Kashmir.
5. I refer here to the nostalgia underpinning representations of the homeland by authors of the diaspora.
6. The figures of the exodus vary, ranging from 100,000 out of a total of 140,000

- pundits in the valley to 150,000 to 190,000 out of 200,000. Refer to Sumanta Bose, *The Challenge in Kashmir: Democracy, Self-Determination and a Just Peace*, New Delhi: Sage, 1997; T.N Madan's essay "Kashmir, Kashmiris, Kashmiriyat: An Introductory Essay" in Aparna Rao's *The Valley of Kashmir: The Making and Unmaking of a Composite Culture*, Delhi: Manohar, 2008 and Iffat Malik's *Kashmir: Ethnic Conflict, International Dispute*, Oxford University Press, 2005.
7. The Oregon Legislative Assembly, in 2009, recognized 14 September 2007 as Martyrs Day acknowledging the campaign of ethnic cleansing inflicted on non-Muslim minorities in the valley. Pakistani intelligence agencies, ISI, and infiltration by *mujahideen* from Afghanistan are factors directly responsible for this shift.
  8. Refer to Sudha Koul's memoir *The Tiger Ladies*,
  9. In the subcontinent, the term "bhand" refers to traditional performing folk entertainers and in Kashmiri dialect the term "pather" implies the storyline being performed. Over time this has evolved into modern versions of street theatre with professional dancers and musicians. In the *Bandh Pather* of Kashmir, humour, satire and farce has always been an integral component making the role of the clown one of paramount importance. Refer to Peter J. Claus, Sarah Diamond and Margaret Ann Mills's *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka*, Taylor & Francis: 2003. In his study of the Bhand's of Kashmir, theatre exponent M.K. Raina stresses the secular outlook reflected in the liberal incorporation of elements of classical Sanskrit theatre and other theatre forms of India. Their language too is a mixture of Kashmiri, Dogri, Punjabi, Persian and a few English words: "The Bhands ... reflect their firm belief in the faith of a unique fusion of Kashmiri Shaivism and sufi traditions of the valley". Refer to M.K. Raina's article "The Bhand Pather of Kashmir" in [www.koausa.org](http://www.koausa.org)
  10. *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*. Ed. John L. Esposito, Oxford University Press: 2014.
  11. This phase of radical Islamization marks a shift in the political scenario of Kashmir. It involved the active intervention of Islamic jihadists from Afghanistan following Soviet intervention there. This was different and apart from the earlier home grown resistance of the JKLF.

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