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**An e-Lecture**

### **Discerning Kashmir's Contemporary English Literature**

The discordant nature of historical and political understanding on Kashmir has resulted in a seemingly unending discourse. In this regard, the responses and endeavours of the exploration of its discontents in both the literary and non-literary realms has increased manifold. The vast majority of writings on Kashmir, written from hegemonic positions and far removed from its suffering centre, it can be said, often come up with their own monolithic projections regarding the realities of the conflict. These writings often betray their own arguments by their indulgence in propagandist and rhetorical posturing. However, with the emergence of many indigenous voices now, particularly in the literary realm, we are witnessing fresh perspectives and voices which aim to portray their lived experiences of the conflict, and hence offer a break from the previous narratives. Among the various narratives published in the recent years, many important works which have caught readers' attention worldwide are Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator* and *The Book of Gold Leaves*, Shahnaz Bashir's *The Half Mother* and *The Scattered Souls*, Siddhartha Gigoo's *The Garden of Solitude*, Nitasha Kaul's *Residue*, to mention a few. Basharat Peer's memoir *The Curfewed Night* is another literary feat. These writers and their writings have truly heralded the beginning of Kashmiri English literature which appeals to a wider global audience. As would be explored here, this literature has come to acquire its distinct feel and sensitivity besides the universal ingredients which it duly shares with other literatures regardless of time and space. Besides these writers, many others are taking to different artistic expression like poetry, music, painting and graphic arts to express their profound angst at the existing conditions of the conflict. In significant ways, the writings under discussion fall within the ambit of "resistance literature" as they provide witness to many profound issues like identity, justice, struggle, and oppression which are usually absent in the mainstream narratives on/of Kashmir. They are providing voice to the people whose voices have been deprived by the extreme conditions of the conflict. In doing so, these writings provide an alternative and heterogeneous account of a reality that seems to counter the view of the "other" hegemonic discourses that neglect very basic and yet very important facets of Kashmir's reality and experience. In the context of literature, the term

‘resistance’ (*muqawamah*) was first used by the Palestinian writer, critic and martyr Ghassan Kannafani in his study *Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine: 1948-1966*. Ghassan Kannafani argues: “If resistance springs from the barrel of gun, the gun itself issues from the desire for liberation and that desire for liberation is nothing but the natural, logical and necessary product of resistance in its broadest sense: as refusal and as a firm grasp of roots and situations. The extreme importance of the cultural form of resistance is no less valuable than armed resistance itself.” As much of the contemporary scholarship alludes to, it is now an established fact that narration/narratives—whether factual or fictional—do not describe reality in absolute terms only; rather, they attempt to present fresh perceptions and dimensions that offer new trajectories of reality.

For centuries, Kashmiri literature was said to be characterized by its peculiar quintessence of mysticism in which the idea of Kashmiriyat was nourished and propagated. As the history progresses ahead through its typical fluidity, each and every condition appropriately gets altered. As Georg Lukacs argues in his famous work *The Historical Novel*, the progress of humanity is “a historical process” and that “a true historical novel” is one which comes into its own “by virtue of artistically portraying the rising awareness of man’s location in time ... [is] conditioned by social and economic development” (42). Consequently, he argues that historical novelists do not need “the re-telling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events” (*ibid.*). Remaining oblivious to one’s real historical conditions and taking sojourn into escapist terrains has a great danger of creating self-destructive quietism. Unfortunately, much of the Kashmiri literature, for the most part, has not been able to cross this threshold particularly when the last four centuries in our history have passed under occupation and immense oppression. Many of us have been compelled to aspire for a literature of our own which is in total consonance with our reality and experiences. When blood is being spilled on the streets, cities and villages are being burnt, and honour is being wantonly violated; is that the moment for a foray into a Neroian world? The concept of Kashmiriyat itself has under gone a great historical shift. Like other conceptions of identity, it is not static as our history has proved. As Chitrlekha Zutshi states in her book *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity, And The Making of Kashmir*: “To suggest that a Kashmiri identity, Kashmiriyat, defined as a harmonious blending of religious cultures, has somehow remained unchanged and an integral part of Kashmiri history over the centuries is a historical fallacy. Certainly, Kashmiri identities have followed a distinct trajectory

depending on a host of factors, including state and economic structures, political culture, and the religious milieu at particular historical moments. One can even go so far as to say that Kashmiri political culture has been imbued with a sense of belonging, not only to the homeland, but also to religious communities, sects, and localities. However, the content of these identities has changed over the centuries in response to historical circumstances. The story of this narrative gradually unfurls in relation to state, political economy, region and religion"(55). Without appearing self-assertive, there is a necessity for greater commitment, engagement and sensitivity to our immediate reality and conditions.

The writer of a work of literature does not aim at presenting historical facts in the same way that a historian or a journalist does. Instead, he looks beyond facts to the spirit underlying those facts. This does not necessarily disfigure the essence of facts and truth. This lends credence to the idea that an event, which might have a mere statistical importance for a historian or a journalist, could reveal many underlying angles of perception when presented in a work of fiction. In their own ways, our new generation of writers, in their writings, reflect on the situation of the Kashmir of the early 1990s when Kashmiris took up arms against Indian rule and ushered in the era of a full-fledged militancy. In our contemporary history, the renowned Kashmiri-American poet, Agha Shahid Ali, can be regarded as the first chronicler of Kashmir's current pain and then rendering it to the world's eyes. Agha Shahid describes the calamity of the 1990s in the following words: "Summer 1992 — when for two years Death had turned/Every day in Kashmir into some family's Karbala." This is the immediate historical backdrop against which the writings of our new writers are set as they endeavor to explore these realities by reflecting the perspectives of the people who face oppression from all sides. The attempt is to frame a voice which is independent of the hegemonic discourses. It is a subtle pointer to the hidden realities that mark the militant phase of the Kashmir conflict. These new narratives can be seen as historiographies which sensitively bring to fore many unknown or unexpressed dimensions of the Kashmir conflict, thereby drawing attention to a long-neglected human story. In doing so, these writings represent a stream of writing which has grown out of the realities of armed struggle and conflict. Though the texts, under mention, grow out of a specific and critical historical reality, they convey a multiplicity of versions and facets that armed conflict in Kashmir has stimulated. These are not mere accounts of victimhood; rather, their power lies in them being testimonies of humanity which is what great literature is all about. Just as Olive Senior argues: "Literature is above all, storytelling...

Storytellers, poets, writers, have always found ways of confronting tyranny, especially in spaces where such actions are dangerous and deadly. Throughout the ages, writers have developed and employed myriad literary devices and explored the fullest limits of language through satire, magical realism, fantasy, fable and so on. Writers over the ages have found ways of talking about issues – like politics – without seeming to talk about them. The function is not to present the world as it is, but to present it in a new light through the narrative power of art. Literature does not ask "What is it about?" It asks "How do we tell it to make it real?" (Senior 2013).

The literature that is emanating from our writers' pens cannot be categorized as merely a "literature of protest" or "literature of propaganda" as some self-assuming critics would lead us to believe. The sensitive reflection of profound dimensions of human condition at a certain point is the real characteristic of literature. Through the art of fiction, these writers have attempted to give an outlet to the suppressed aspirations and collective memories of violence and loss of home. In their narratives, memory, identity and time play a very significant role. These works of art give an indirect account of the oppression and violence, the immeasurable pain, the agony and human loss arising out of a situation in which society is fragmented and home and homeland have been lost. Finally, these works also show how literature can challenge the contorted truths of power structures in the contemporary world just as Salman Rushdie argues in his essay *Outside the Subject*: "It seems to me imperative that literature enter such arguments, because what is being disputed is nothing less than what the case, what is truth is and what untruth. If writers leave the business of making pictures of the world to politicians, it will be one of history's great and most abject abdications... there is a genuine need for political fiction, for books that draw new and better maps of reality, and make new languages with which we can understand the world."

The idea of loss becomes the new metaphorical ingredient of this type of literature. Out of its specific set of circumstances, it tries to develop a new aesthetic out of the elements of a lost joy and the existing moments of suffering.

