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ECHOES OF SILENCE: UNVEILING FEAR, VIOLENCE, AND TRAUMA IN FARAH BASHIR'S *RUMOURS OF SPRING*

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Abstract
In the aftermath of violence and conflict, a profound silence often descends, overshadowed by the weight of collective grief and trauma. This silence, born out of the sheer magnitude of suffering, renders language inadequate in expressing the depth of human experience. Nowhere is this phenomenon more palpable than in the literature emerging from or about the Kashmir Valley, a region perennially marred by strife and unrest. Yet, amidst the pervasive silence, there emerges a courageous endeavor to articulate the lived experiences of Kashmir's ordinary people, trapped in the vice grip of exceptional circumstances beyond their control. This burgeoning literary movement defies the odds, blossoming amidst the thorns of unrelenting violence, punctuated only by fleeting moments of uneasy calm. Farah Bashir's seminal work, *Rumours of Spring: A Girlhood in Kashmir* serves as a luminous beacon within this narrative landscape. Set against the backdrop of 1990s Kashmir, a time when the valley transformed into a veritable inferno, Bashir's memoir offers a poignant portrayal of life amidst insurgency and counter-insurgency. Through the eyes of a young girl, Bashir unveils a harrowing tableau of killings, shootings, curfews, and the omnipresent specter of violence that became the unsettling norm. Notably, Bashir's memoir marks a watershed moment, as it provides a unique perspective on the conflict era - one that has long been neglected in the annals of history. By centering the narrative around the experiences of a young girl grappling with the bewildering changes engulfing her homeland, Bashir gives voice to the myriad untold stories of Kashmiri youth, who found themselves adrift in a sea of uncertainty. This paper endeavors to delve into the themes of fear, violence, and trauma as represented in Farah Bashir's memoir. Through a nuanced analysis, it seeks to illuminate the resilience of the human spirit amidst the darkest of times, and the transformative power of storytelling in reclaiming agency and bearing witness to the collective struggle for peace and justice.
Keywords: physical and mental violence, fear, trauma, resilience, agency.

Farah Bashir, born in Kashmir, was a former photojournalist with Reuters and currently working as a communication consultant. *'Rumors of Spring'* is her first book published in 2021 that won her the best Debut Author Award in 2022, narrates her childhood memories of deadliest and most horrible period of Kashmir conflict during 1990's when thousands were killed amid insurgency and military crackdowns. Bashir's memoir provides a rare look of insurgency and military conflict from a Muslim woman's point of view as it shows the impact

of war on her teenaged mind and body. "Farah Bashir takes us through her coming of age against the backdrop of conflict-ridden Kashmir, the growing violence, insurgency and militarisation outside begin to break through and enter domestic spaces" (Verma). The book takes us to the dark era of insurgency and uncovers the fear and anxiety of Kashmiri people when violence and torture became norm of the day. Bashir's narrative is vitally important as it "stands alone at the intersection of a feminist bildungsroman and an account of Kashmir in the 1990s" (Verma). Farah Bashir states that the book is a "memory of an adolescent girl who had lived in a war and survived, as she had watched dignity and humanity erode steadily" (Mir). The memoir is written "from the perspective of an adolescent girl who is appalled at the suffering both material and emotional"(Mir) and divided into six sections; Evening, Night, Early Hours, Dawn, Morning, Afterlife, further divided into thirty five chapters; each touches various aspects of Farah's life following the death of her grandmother. The memoir reveals the conflict years of Kashmir through an innocent girl who was not able to understand the social and political upheavals of the time. Farah, like other Kashmiri people, lived in an atmosphere of fear, anxiety and uncertainty. She states, "As a teenage girl, growing up in a conflict-stricken territory happened to be a dual struggle: to make sense of the militarisation of domestic spaces and to learn new social etiquette, informed by war, to navigate life. It was crucial to record what a teenage girl went through in one of the most important events in Kashmir's contemporary history in the last 150 years (the previous two being Amritsar Treaty and the 1931 uprising). A girlhood and adolescence, which is both familiar and universal and yet turned into a searing, heightened experience by the anxiety and fear of war" (Phukan).

The title of the memoir is taken from a poem by Agha Shahid Ali and is very ironic that represents the painful reality of Kashmir valley. The month of spring is considered as month of change but there is no change in the lives of people of valley, as Bashir mentions, "to expect change in the season in a month's time felt less like a reality but more like rumors of spring" (Bashir 10). They have been trapped in the conflict since partition of India and Pakistan. During the insurgency and counter insurgency the so called paradise changed into hell. Bashir has documented how life of common people changed due to militancy and military occupation and how violence captures "domestic spaces, commercial arenas, beauty parlours, post offices, schools and streets become fragile thresholds blurring boundaries between the outside and the inside, the living and the dead, the individual and the collective, and both homes and bodies, the quintessential emblems of privacy are transformed into sites of political infiltration, intervention, and determination. Bashir's narrative reproduces with heart wrenching tenderness the total permeation and destabilisation of lived experience in its most intimate, microscopic dimensions by external forces of policing and control" (Patranobish).

The beginning as well as end of the memoir is death of her grandmother. "My heart sank. Was someone hit by a bullet? Who could it be? Was Father injured at the shop? Was Mother hit by a grenade shell or a shrapnel? As these thoughts came to my mind, my throat tightened, as if I was being strangled. I could barely breathe…as I slowly climbed up. 'Go, have one last look at your grandmother'" (Bashir 2). The recurring theme of death, grief and pain makes it the center of the narration which symbolizes the significance of death of innocent people in the conflict and the deep, lasting and irreparable loss it caused. The death of Bashir's adolescence is symbolic which runs through the entire memoire. She mentions in an interview; "Bobeh's

funeral also juxtaposes two deaths; different kinds of death. Bobeh's death was a natural death and then also deaths within deaths, and how other deaths also happen, which were not natural" (Sayeed). Bashir talks about the everyday curfews and crackdowns that changed her life upside down, "curfew swelled up the air with fear and uncertainty. It controlled everything. It disciplined people inside their own houses" (Bashir 1). Bashir describes how the family's living room went from being a location where everyone gathered to enjoy each other's company to one where the lights had to be kept off or kept dimly lit at all times to avoid drawing undue notice from troops patrolling the streets. Anything might be used as justification for inspecting residences for alleged weapons or covert militants. She mentions in an interview, "life was changing on an hourly basis but much of it remained the same, especially prolonged curfews" (Mir).

Bashir's life is split into two distinct periods: before 1989 and after 1989. She had been eagerly waiting the day when, like her elder sister, she too would be permitted to visit a salon, so she was overjoyed when, at the age of 12, she finally got her chance. The two sisters had a narrow escape when gunshots broke out in the streets while she was out. When they returned home, they saw their family in a state of fear as word of the murder of a child of Bashir's age was spreading. Later, they would find out that the unidentified child was her cousin. "My second cousin, exactly my age, had also gone out with his father. They had been out to buy shoes for him for Eid. As they were returning home in their car, he was hit by a bullet. His last words to his father were, 'Myeha log haelyis toat. I am feeling warm on the side of my stomach.' He bled to death on his way to the hospital" (Bashir 8). After that, even routine things like going to the bus stop, preparing for tests, doing laundry inside their own home, or opening a window to let fresh air in were fraught with anxiety and fear. "Open windows were an easy and unobstructed passage for bullets and grenade splinters to make their way inside. Even a peep could be dangerous" (Bashir 11). She further narrates, "It hadn't been long since an asthmatic and unassuming neighbour, the grandmother of a friend, paid a heavy price for causing a stir at night. One night, she experienced a shortness of breath and decided to let in some fresh air. As she flung one of her bedroom windows open, the wooden planks jostling against each other made some noise. Just then, a bullet flew in from nowhere and hit the seventy-five-year-old woman, killing her instantly. Instead of catching fresh air to ease her laboured breathing, her heart was neatly pierced… I'd have rather continued to lie quietly, cry, and let my hair soak up the tears through the night, than attract dangers for the family" (Bashir 45).

Personal memories are weaved across historical events and narrated through the eyes of an adolescent girl. She mentions about exodus of Kashmiri Pandits, the fall of Babri Masjid and the 1993 siege of the Hazratbal shrine. The roughly 40-day siege made the populace fearful and hopeless. She recalls the funeral procession of Mirwaiz Maulvi Mohammed Farooq, the chief cleric and political figure who had been shot dead in his home, and the funeral had turned into the carnage creating the intense fear and violence. Bashir's words paint vivid pictures to give a real experience of the suffocation, trauma, and anxiety of living under a surveillance. A poignant story describes how she and her pregnant sister became stuck at a grocery store and worried about their parents, especially her father who was held up somewhere due to a gunfight and mother who went seeking for him.

> "Where was Father? Hopefully at his friend's shop? Was that shut? Maybe Mother was with him too? It was odd. I couldn't remember

> anything that I had seen ten seconds ago. I was trying to recall if what I had just seen on the streets was blood or a body lying in blood. A black, dense fog came over me, wiping out the details of the scene, involuntarily. 'What if the troops stop me, what should I tell them? Would they ask me why I was walking alone? Why weren't they shooting me already?' With those thoughts, I bent to enter the grocer's half-shut shop the shutters outside which had been lowered further. Hina seemed in a semiconscious state. I rubbed her hands. She didn't ask me anything, either about Father or about Mother. We waited for almost an hour, maybe less, but whatever time passed, it felt like eternity" (Bashir 127).

The fear of losing someone close is a constant phenomenon. Everyday there were news of only kidnappings, killings, disappearance and crackdowns that created atmosphere of anxiety and depression. Bashir like many other of her age suffered from PTSD. She narrates,

> "In 1993, just before I turned seventeen, I showed symptoms of heightened anxiety. I'd get palpitations, sleeplessness, and was inexplicably restless. I often contemplated various means by which to commit suicide. For weeks, I wouldn't speak more than a few words a day. I preferred to stay inside a dimly lit room during the day. I detested sunlight. Anything that the sun touched seemed torched to me. If a ray managed to pass through the thick curtains, that remained drawn throughout the day; it felt like it was going to consume the whole room, including me. Doctors diagnosed the condition as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD, like they did for everyone else. Mir, a friend of mine, once joked that the acronym's expansion needed a revision in Kashmir. It should have stood for Perennially Traumatic Stress Disorder, he said" (Bashir 49).

The trauma and anxiety of being helpless and voiceless makes her do some strange things. She develops a habit of pulling her hair. She writes; "In a moment of confusion and fear, I plucked a chunk of my hair from right behind my ear. It hurt to pull the hair out, but my hands needed to clutch at something. I pulled some out again to punish myself for not being able to make sense of what had befallen us as a people" (Bashir 6). Self-mutilation can be a poignant manifestation of profound mental trauma. In Xinran's 'The Good Women of China' a young girl, subjected to abuse by a male relative, resorts to harming herself. After being hospitalized, she deliberately impedes the healing process, inflicting further wounds as a desperate attempt to maintain a semblance of control and avoid returning to the cycle of abuse. This tragic act reflects the intricate ways in which individuals, particularly women, may turn inward, resorting to self-inflicted pain as a means of grappling with the anguish they have endured. Bashir narrates how she lost desire to look good to avoid gaze of men who have guns, weapons and uniform as well. The militaristic gaze make her feel vulnerable. She feels that she has no agency, no voice and no rights. "she makes herself invisible and less attractive by wearing a headscarf, plucking out her hair, not washing her face for days, not wanting to look attractive in any way, so that she doesn't attract unwanted attention" (Moddie).

Farah, through her memoir, gave voice to thousands of voiceless women who silently suffered the physical and mental violence. The memoir also talks about the mass gang rapes of the

Kashmiri women by army in Kunan and Poshpora, "I couldn't shake off a strange, nauseous feeling of fear that gripped me. We had heard about the unspeakable things that happened to the women from two villages: Kunan and Poshpora. Farah mentions, "To get to the depths of a society, lives of ordinary women have to be examined in entirety to grasp what militarisation did and does to a people. In territorial conflicts, women are dual recipients of violence. Their bodies are used to shame and subjugate people which damage their psyches. These losses are unaccounted for with colossal consequences. They alter societies and expose our unpreparedness" (Mir). The memoir is Bashir's ambitious attempt to convey the grievances of a generation that witnessed mental and physical violence. It challenges the readers to reflect on the injustices done to the Kashmiri people that people have been too quick to forget and too eager to point the finger at. The readers are left with a mark of suffering and are forced to think and reflect where they stand. The absence of overt political expositions is another aspect of the book. The tales are told in their natural state; raw, untainted, and utterly human. Bashir says in an interview, "One text is not enough to contain the multitudes of the decades of conflict. The period I have written about is from 1989-1994 and there is still more to write. The book is not only about the conflict or causalities but also about a way of life that no longer exists in Kashmir. It is about the transformation of a teenage girl into a young adult that coincides with the transformation of Kashmir." Politics of the country, which cannot be avoided or glossed over, are hardly ever covered in detail directly that makes the narration look more real and personal from an adolescent perspective. However, this is where the story's beauty resides. Although it avoids outright stating its political views, it immerses the reader in the hopelessness of her people and urges to consider how the bigger political realities impact the mundanity of our daily life and alter its course forever.

Conclusion

Essentially, the book is a collection of short stories of atmosphere of fear, violence and trauma, an anthology of the ills that Kashmir has experienced since the 1989 uprising, along with the political squabbling and subsequent military mobilization. Every time a new page in the book is turned, the adolescent protagonist recounts another heartbreaking tale of friends who have been harmed by the army and the militia. On each new page, in a way, the frustration of a people who were denied the dignity and rights of being human. "Every page is an open wound, as not even one person mentioned is untouched by the disproportionate violence of the Indian military. The book documents Kashmir turning into what it has since come to be known as: a beautiful open-air prison and one of the most densely militarized zones in the world" (Zia). *Rumors of Spring* is comparable to a Kashmiri girl's rendition of *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank and is focused on an intense and honest investigation into the events in a young life that, defiantly in the face of the worst possible circumstances, continues to develop. The Book raises some unavoidable questions; 'What is the life of a Kashmiri girl today?' 'What is the world doing to address this issue?' (Ijaz) In the midst of this conflict, it is crucial that we open our ears to all the voices. Each person has been impacted in unique and often devastating ways. Let us fervently hope that the global perspective transcends simplistic binaries and truly recognizes the relentless struggles for survival endured by so many, particularly women and children. The world is awash with facts, readily available for those willing to listen and learn. These facts serve as a clarion call, urging us to awaken and reawaken a sense of empathy and

compassion. In these times, when narratives seek to dehumanize entire populations, it becomes imperative to shine a light on the daily trials faced by individuals. Farah Bashir's poignant words in 'Rumours of Spring' echo this sentiment, reminding us of the grim reality where even the blinding of children is somehow normalized. May we, as a global community, rise above the noise of division and truly see the human faces behind the statistics. Only then can we begin to understand the profound impact of conflict on the lives of ordinary people, and perhaps, find a path towards genuine empathy and healing.

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