

Curfewed Night and the Emergence of Kashmiri Anglophone Resistance Literature

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Abstract: For marginalised sections of society, literature can be an arena to express dissent and protest against societal norms. Literary texts that challenge dominant societal power relations are designated as resistance literature. Resistance literature emerges from conflict zones and seeks to oppose and subvert the dominant discourses of power and hegemonic practices. Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night* signalled the beginning of such a literary genre from Kashmir by challenging hegemonic nationalist discourses on the Kashmir conflict. This paper aims to show how *Curfewed Night* falls under the scope of resistance literature and heralds a new subgenre within the canon of Indian English literature.

Keywords: Resistance Literature, Kashmir, Hegemony, Power, Indian English Literature.

Introduction: Literature as a Medium of Articulating Resistance

One of the most enduring qualities of literature is its ability to move the sensibilities of readers and make them learn about new realities of the world. As a form of a cultural product, literature has got an inherent capability to "redefine" socio-political situations and realities (Tompkins xi). Barbara Harlow asserts that literature can also become a platform on which political struggles can be pursued (2). The role of art, and particularly literature, as a medium for expressing political dissent of marginalized people, cannot be overstated. Leon Trotsky states that "Art is an expression of man's need for a harmonious and complete life . . . which a society of classes has deprived him;" hence "a protest against reality, either conscious or unconscious, active or passive, optimistic or pessimistic, always forms part of a really creative piece of work" (56). Artistic creations, like works of literature, can address the readers' emotions directly and are hence, a potent force for social change. Terry Eagleton observes that art can "make us see," "perceive," "feel," and literature can accomplish this "with a 'naturalness,' spontaneity and experimental immediacy" (56, 83). Similarly, Ngugi wa Thiong'o asserts that "All art aims to evoke; to awaken in the observer, listener or reader emotions and impulses to action or opposition" (6). Thus, literature can enact and mobilize forces of resistance. Over time, the term "resistance" has evolved into a compelling discourse against oppression, repression, inequalities and violence; and literature has assumed a vital role by giving oppressed people a medium for voicing out their grievances. Literary texts that are specifically devoted to such issues require persistent attention; especially if they originate from a conflict zone. Barbara Harlow asserts that such texts emerge from a collective movement which engages two specific struggles at the same time. The first struggle focuses on social transformation through political liberation while the second one is a resistance the "historical and cultural record" of the conflict (6-7). This resistance arises to challenge domination and seeks to counter hegemony. The domination can be

political oppression, coercive practices like physical torture and military occupation. Similarly, hegemony deals with specific ideological frameworks and social structures which can create and sustain the situational contexts required to indoctrinate, subordinate and persuade a population to conform to specific sociopolitical conditions. This includes subtle ways to control people's thoughts and behaviour through the use of propaganda, rituals, education and media reports. It is these conditions of domination and hegemonic practices that create the context for resistance to emerge in a society (Portier-Young 23-26).

Literary texts that seek to oppose, reject, deny and challenge any form of hegemonic practice and system of domination can be designated as resistance literature. Barbara Harlow defines resistance literature as something that "calls attention to itself ... as a political and politicized activity" that is "directly involved in a struggle against ascendant or dominant forms of ideological and cultural production" (28-29). Harlow asserts that resistance literature should not be studied like traditional literature as it is inextricably linked to certain socio-political conditions (9). She stresses that resistance literature positions political contexts at the centre and it cannot be divorced from its historical background. Harlow adds that besides historical and political contexts, it is also imperative to assess authorial intention in resistance texts because the politics inside the text is its most vital feature – "the theory of resistance literature is in its politics" (30). The Kashmiri author, Basharat Peer's Anglophone memoir, *Curfewed Night*, is significant in this regard as it contests dominant, statist discourses on the Kashmir conflict and highlights how abusive counterinsurgency practices of Indian state forces have engendered large scale human rights violations in Kashmir. By analyzing Peer's portrayal of Indian counterinsurgency operations in *Curfewed Night*, this paper argues that the text falls under the scope of resistance literature, and signals the emergence of a new subgenre within Indian English literature that seeks to subvert hegemonic, statist discourses on Kashmir.

The Context of Kashmir

Kashmir has been embroiled in conflict for the last thirty years with militants fighting the Indian state forces to seize political control in the Kashmir valley. Kashmiris have long resented India's involvement in the political affairs of the Valley, and have regarded the Indian state as unjustly stifling their democratic rights by installing weak local regimes (Butt 110). The state elections of 1987, popularly considered as being rigged in favour of pro-Indian political parties, made it clear to them that the Indian government would never allow Kashmiris to control their own political destiny (Dos Santos 70). The lack of a transparent democratic political process contributed to the rise of separatist tendencies in Kashmir (Noorani 19). In 1989, young Kashmiri men initiated an armed insurgency against the Indian state and crossed the Line of Control into Pakistan to acquire weapons and "combat training" (Bose 95). After returning, they started targeting Indian establishments, security personnel and people deemed to be supportive of the Indian government (Bamzai 253). The government responded by deploying a huge number of security forces to carry out counterinsurgency operations in Kashmir, which led to the militarization of the region (Kaul 75). The counterinsurgency measures of the Indian forces, especially with regards to the civilian population, have drawn severe condemnation; Mona Bhan and others allege that state violence is justified by "claims of humanitarianism premised on principles of democracy, good governance, development, and rule of law" (14). The Indian forces were accused of committing human rights violations in the form of "extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, enforced

disappearances, torture, and sexual assault” (Dos Santos 77). Shubh Mathur informs that national security laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), and Disturbed Areas Act (DAA) ensured that the forces are able to indulge in such actions with impunity (45,133).

Regularized exposure to violence served to suppress Kashmiri civilian society, and the use of extremely coercive military tactics ensured that the Indian state does not lose political control in the region (Chatterjee et al. 51). But, the government has maintained that a “low intensity conflict” is raging in Kashmir and militarization is necessary to neutralize the threats of militancy (Schofield 186). Chatterjee asserts that the government’s practice of labelling Kashmiri protestors as dangerous or potential militants has normalized the use of violence as a tool for securing India’s political objectives (25). The consequences of militarization have been devastating for Kashmiri civilians; thousands have been killed, maimed, tortured, raped and even disappeared from under the custody of the state forces (Mathur 1). The State Human Rights Commission of Jammu and Kashmir reported that over two thousand bodies, bearing torture marks, have been discovered in unmarked mass graves; and most were identified as local residents and non-militants (South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre 20). Nevertheless, the Indian government continues to assert that these people were all either local or foreign militants who were killed while trying to cross the Line of Control (Chatterjee et al. 14, 25). The presence of the Indian security forces in close proximity unsettled the daily lives of ordinary Kashmiris. The “violent reordering of space and place” with “prisons, bunkers, barracks, concertina wires, and checkpoints” disrupted civilian movement and resulted in daily “confinement” inside their “homes and neighbourhoods during periods of state-imposed curfew” (Bhan et al. 4). Thus, the conflict has brought immense suffering in the lives of local civilians who have to live under the shadows of both the Indian state forces and the militants.

The Indian state has consistently maintained that militarization of the Valley is necessary for ensuring national security and that Pakistan is responsible for creating instability in the region; the government stresses that large numbers of Pakistani militants infiltrate into Kashmir and cause disturbances along with a few misguided local Kashmiri youths (Butt 118-122). However, this stance has drawn immense criticism; Bhan and others argue that the Indian government has reduced the “Kashmiri resistance” to be a “handiwork of external forces” and deny “the local origins of the movement” (7). A battle of narratives has emerged as a consequence, while the Indian government maintains that militarization is essential for ensuring peace, others regard it as a military occupation (Schofield 174). Under such circumstances, literature can be an ideal medium to voice the concerns and struggles of ordinary Kashmiris and provide us with a deeper understanding of the situation that civilians face in the conflict zone.

Curfewed Night

Basharat Peer’s memoir *Curfewed Night* (2008), which is written in the form of a novel, details the common Kashmiri civilians’ perspectives on the Kashmir conflict and highlights the pitiful conditions that they lived through, during the 1990s when militancy was at its peak. Pankaj Mishra opines that the text reflects the Kashmiri angst against Indian society and prescribes everyone to read it as it “challenges” their “most cherished beliefs in democracy, rule of law and the power of individual conscience” (*Curfewed Night*). Javeria Khurshid describes the text as a “cry” on “behalf” of the Kashmiri people voicing their

“gut-wrenching” stories of sufferings; it “captivates ... readers into pondering over the devastation, and coerces them to ask ... whether this desolation was necessary?” (3). Being a Kashmiri himself, Peer had witnessed first hand the transformation of the social terrain of the Valley when the insurgency began and his memoir reflects his personal experiences. *Curfewed Night* is seminal in its depiction of the abusive practices that Kashmiris had to endure (like restrictions on their movements, shootouts at protest marches, sexual and physical torture, et cetera) at the cost of their personal and psychological lives. Peer’s narrative tone and style are textured by rhetoric and a subtle affect which amplifies the emotional turmoil that Kashmiris suffered because of the mischance of their fates. As a cultural production, the text provides Kashmiris new avenues for depicting their history. Suvir Kaul feels that for Kashmiris, such literary expressions make the “experiences of violence central to their political commentary” and allows them to rethink about their history and struggle. Thus, Peer indulges in a “crucial form of activism” that challenges the “meager international attention” which Kashmiris had received previously (Kaul 73, 79). He seeks to develop a “critical consciousness among Kashmiris” about new ways to narrate their history that can counter “the state’s efforts to silence alternative narratives” by allowing only “hegemonic forms of history and memory” to thrive (Bhan et al. 18). In this regard, Aaliya Anjum and Saiba Varma insist that the Indian media’s representations of the conflict “delegitimize” the concerns of Kashmiris and the “non-accountability for years of human rights abuse” makes them think that the Indian media “can’t feel or represent” Kashmiri “sentiments” (13). Basharat Peer puts an end to this marginalized representation by disputing dominant statist discourses, thereby helping readers perceive the Kashmir insurgency in a new light.

The very title “Curfewed Night” is suggestive of the horrifying experiences of civilians during the sudden, incessant curfews that the Indian forces would impose to curb militancy. Through a series of interviews and personal recollections, Peer illustrates how Kashmir deteriorated from a relatively peaceful, beautiful valley to a conflict-ridden land where people are ruled by fear and uncertainty. He confesses that he had written the text to fill, what he perceived was, a huge vacuum in the literary world regarding the Kashmiri experience. While people from other conflict-ridden areas, like Palestine or Tibet, had given literary expressions to their sufferings, Peer was dismayed by the lack of similar endeavours from Kashmir (95). Hence, the ground realities of how the state policies affect ordinary civilians remain unknown to the outside world; and only the filtered, state discourses are presented through the media (Hakeem 103-5). Peer feels compelled to fill this gap by writing about the untold “memories and stories” of the miseries of the Kashmiri people; he hopes to demonstrate “what happened to families whose kin had died in the conflict” and who had neither the financial nor political power to seek justice (166).

Representation of Indian Counterinsurgency Operations in *Curfewed Night*

Peer fondly recalls the pre-insurgency period in Kashmir when crimes like murder were almost non-existent (3), but he had also sensed social “alienation and resentment” against India and the “symbols of Indian nationalism” like the Indian flag and national anthem (11). He recounts that Kashmiris, across all sections of society, were united in their demand for secession after the 1987 elections and civilian protests were organised against the Indian government throughout 1988 and 1989. In late 1989, the insurgency finally began when their “bottled up resentment” exploded, and militants received

“immense popular support” and were “seen as heroes” (13). Peer was just thirteen in 1990 when, at a civilian protest gathering, the Indian troops opened fire and killed about fifty unarmed protestors (14). This incident, known as the Gawkadal massacre, left indelible impressions on the Kashmiri psyche – as revealed by the interviews that Peer takes.¹ A hawker, who was present at the time, informs that he can arrange meetings with “women whose men were killed” and show photos of the massacre, provided Peer brings a camera to record his statements and broadcast it on national media (119). His condition reflects how common Kashmiris wanted the world to learn about their suppression. Peer records the experience of a survivor, Farooq Wani, who informs him that the only intention of the troopers was to kill protestors; he specifically recalls one “murderous officer” who had found him alive and fired a “volley of bullets” at him. The effect of such incidents is severe, as Peer observes in Wani who was still overwhelmed by those traumatic memories (120). The text informs that such incidences were not isolated and there were a “series of other massacres” in 1990 which made Srinagar a “city of protests” and a “city of massacres” (122).

Widespread incidents of forced custodial detentions terrified civilians. Peer mentions that the paramilitary would barge inside people’s homes at night and arrest young men, many of whom went permanently missing from the forces’ detention camps while others suffered inhumane torture (14). Random curfews were often imposed, for indefinite periods, which restricted people indoors and prevented them from even venturing out to buy grocery supplies or visit hospitals in case of emergencies (47). Curfews also cut people off from family members who were outside or lived separately and since access to personal telephones was uncommon at the time so civilians had constant anxiety for their loved ones (15). Civilian protests against such infringement of rights were futile and were crushed with violence (Butt 112). Kashmir was pockmarked with army camps after thousands of additional troops were stationed there, and locals were ordered to carry identity cards with them whenever they went outside. Soldiers could stop them anywhere and check their cards, thereby restricting their freedom of movement. Peer observes that a soldier stopping anyone “meant trouble” as anything could happen: a random “identity check, a possible beating or a visit to the nearest army camp,” civilians could even be forced to perform menial labour (48). He mentions an incident when his uncle Bashir was assaulted by a soldier, who had inquired about his native village, to which he replied Islamabad instead of Anantnag, Islamabad being the local name of Anantnag. Bashir was psychologically scarred after the incident; he would shudder at the sight of soldiers even when they came to his shop to buy utilities (49).

Peer describes the atmosphere of terror, desolation, and anguish that permeated the lives of civilians:

Fear and chaos ruled Kashmir ... Fathers wished they had daughters instead of sons. Sons were killed every day. Mothers prayed for the safety of their daughters. People dreaded knocks on their doors at night. Men and women who left home for the day’s work were not sure they would return; thousands did not. Graveyards began to spring up everywhere, and marketplaces were scarred with charred buildings. (30-31)

When someone joined militancy, his family faced severe harassment from the soldiers who would raid their houses, threaten and beat up innocent family members, and molest their women (38). If militants visited their families or were spotted around a civilian locality, security forces would burn down people’s houses in that area (44). Such incidents would be followed by multiple cordon-and-search operations, locally referred to as

"crackdowns," where civilians would be detained outside while their homes would be thoroughly searched.² Peer shares his own experience of a crackdown when the army had cordoned off their village and ordered all the men to "assemble in the hospital lawns by six." The women had to "stay at home" and open "the doors of every room and every cupboard" (50), as soldiers invaded their privacy to look for "militants, guns, or ammunition." The men had to present their identity cards and go through an identification parade in front of an informer who would identify militants (51). Peer recalls that his heart "galloped" when he faced the informer who, fortunately, did not recognize him. However, his sixteen-year-old neighbour, Manzoor, was detained for further interrogation as he had often engaged in casual conversations with militants (52). The physical torture that Manzoor had endured during his detention was apparent in his limping gait and the "bruises" that were "all over his body" (55). Peer reveals the extent of such custodial brutality when he says that parents of unmarried girls were worried as "most of the dead ...were young men" and others had "deforming injuries, depressions, and non-existent careers" which lowered their chances of finding suitable grooms for their daughters (107). Every Kashmiri man, young and old, was a target for the security forces and the soldiers were "particularly suspicious of anyone with any kind of facial hair" (55), the fear of torture was such that older men stopped dyeing their hair black as grey hair made men "less of a suspect" (56).

The most "infamous torture centre" in Kashmir was Papa 2, where hundreds of detainees, unable to withstand third-degree torture, died, while those who survived "were wrecks" (137).³ Peer narrates the experience of Shafi, who was detained there for seven months. Shafi had to share with twenty men a bloodstained room that had no toilet, and prisoners had to use polythene bags to relieve themselves. The lights were always switched on, and during interrogations, they had to stare at "very bright bulbs" (141). Consequently, Shafi almost lost his eyesight. He could not afford surgery, which reduced his chances of finding employment or getting married. He informs Peer that soldiers would role a "heavy concrete roller" on the prisoners' legs, and give them cigarette burns (142). In what Shafi calls "psychological torture," prisoners were forced to chant pro-Indian slogans daily or face more torture. Another detainee, Ansar remarks that one does not "live a normal life after that torture" (143). He reveals that prisoners would be stripped, tied up and submerged into a "ditch filled with kerosene oil and red chilli powder," and the soldiers would burn their bodies with stoves to draw out information (143). Besides physical and psychological torture, prisoners were also subjected to sexual torture – copper wires were used to give high voltage electrical shocks to their genitals. Ansar claims that this resulted in the loss of fertility, and many "could not marry" (143). He, himself, had to get medical treatment for urinary tract infections for two years before getting married. Peer observes that such "attacks on their masculinity had left them vulnerable" forever (144). Besides impotence, electric shocks also led to permanent kidney damage in many prisoners (144). Sexual violence was also perpetrated on women on a massive scale. Peer interviews Mubeena Ghani who was raped by an "unknown number of BSF men" on the night of her marriage, after paramilitary forces shot at the bus carrying her wedding party (154). Mubeena was bleeding from gunshot wounds when she and her chambermaid got raped (54). Rashid, her husband, survived with five bullets lodged in his back but half of his family had died. Mubeena was, subsequently, ostracized by her in-laws who saw her as a "bad omen," and Rashid could not work for almost a year. Traumatized by her experience, Mubeena still gets "shivers at the sight of the uniform" (155).

Peer mentions that thousands of men had gone missing “after being arrested by the military,” and was referred to as “disappeared persons.” Instead of setting up inquiries to look into these disappearances, the government claimed that “the missing citizens...have joined militant groups” (131). Their family members have, in general, given up hope but some still fight for justice. These people, like the seventy-year-old Noora, organize protest gatherings and congregate in parks in Srinagar, holding banners and placards. Noora’s son had been taken away by the paramilitary eight years ago; he had gone out to play cricket and has been missing since (132). Similarly, Javed, the sixteen-year-old speech-impaired son of Parveena Ahangar, was “taken away from their house in 1990 during a raid” (132). Ahnagar denied the government’s offer for monetary compensation if “she accepted that her son was killed in unknown circumstances in the conflict” (133). Peer reveals that the rules regarding government compensation are questionable since the government only provides relief if the family claims that their men were killed in “militancy related action,” meaning that they were killed by militants (162). There are no provisions for relief if security forces killed them. Many people were forced by their financial conditions to accept the compensation by, falsely, claiming that their men were militants killed in action (163). Peer cites the example of his relative, Gulzar, who was a schoolboy when the army killed him. He had, unknowingly, made fun of an army officer’s son at school and, the following evening, soldiers took him from his house to a cowshed and “detonated a mine” (165). They claimed that Gulzar was a militant who had mistakenly blasted that mine. Gulzar’s family was forced to accept this statement as they needed the government’s compensation. Peer informs that the forces also used innocent civilians to apprehend militants. He cites the experience of Shameema, whose seventeen-year-old son was used as a human-bomb by the Indian army and killed. During an encounter with militants, the forces picked up both her sons, Bilal and Shafi, from outside their home. At the encounter site, Shameema found Bilal with the troops, Bilal informed her that the soldiers had sent Shafi inside the “militants’ house with a mine in his hands” (169). The soldiers physically assaulted Shameema and tried to send Bilal inside the house too, but Shameema managed to escape with him. While leaving, she saw the soldiers “push an old man towards the house with the mine in his hands” (169). Bilal became “psychologically disturbed” after the incident, and would get agitated “every time Shafi is mentioned,” forcing Shameema to give her son intoxicants to calm him down (170).

Peer’s portrayal of these abusive Indian counterinsurgency methods reveals how Kashmiris lived with constant threats to their lives, as women may get raped and men can be beaten, detained, tortured, killed or go missing. The resultant psychological damage of these abuses is intense mental trauma and victims are forced to relive their moments of pain throughout their lives; justice continues to elude them and compels them to accept their fate.

Situating *Curfewed Night* as a Resistance Text

Resistance literature contests hegemonic narrative discourses by writing back to dominant social structures about marginalized peoples’ experiences. It exposes societal oppression by offering a self-defining narrative that articulates regional sentiments, personal trauma, and seeks answers and accountability. Writers of resistance literature “consider it necessary to wrest that expropriated historicity back, reappropriate it for themselves in order to reconstruct a new world-historical order” (Harlow 33). Thus, resistance literature is a repository of “popular memory and consciousness” (Harlow

34), that facilitates more nuanced analyses of historical issues affecting people. In *Curfewed Night*, Peer narrates popular memories of oppression and thus, creates a literary space to preserve them. He uses contextual resistance, to represent the experienced realities of civilians, to argue against statist discourses that advocate the militarization of Kashmir.⁴ Thus the text participates in the Kashmiris' struggle for demilitarization of their homeland. Written in English, the text appeals to a global audience to witness its testimonies and rethink about Kashmir. Like all resistance literature, the text focalizes on the marginalization of ordinary civilians and positions them in the middle of the narrative. Peer's visceral detailing denounces the injustices meted out to Kashmiris in the name of counterinsurgency. The recurring trope of using historical contexts to highlight human rights abuses, allows him to create an alternative narrative about the Kashmir conflict which engenders the context for transformation in both the readers and the subjects of the text. Thus, *Curfewed Night* emerges as a resistance text that demonstrates the power of literature to subvert hegemonic narratives and demand social changes. The text is a pioneer, in this regard, because since its publication in 2008, several other Kashmiri authors (like Mirza Waheed, Shahnaz Basheer, Nayeema Mahjoor, Siddhartha Gigoo, et cetera) have come forward and narrated their experiences of the conflict in Anglophone novels. These authors also contested other dominant discourses on pertinent issues of the conflict and enabled readers gain a deeper view of the troubled sociopolitical terrain of Kashmir.

Conclusion

Resistance literature speaks out against dominant, hegemonic discourses and wrests back "control over cultural production" (Harlow 12). *Curfewed Night* enables readers to gain a more nuanced understanding of Kashmir's ground realities and become more aware of the conflict. It is the first Indian Anglophone text, to emerge from the conflict-ridden land of Kashmir, which highlights the severe abuses that Kashmiris suffered after the militarization of the Valley. By speaking out for those whose voices had, otherwise, become insignificant and muted, Basharat Peer appeals for justice to be offered to those who have resiliently endured oppression. Through his narrative, Peer contests statist discourses which advocate stringent militarization, and pleads people to learn about how ordinary Kashmiris have suffered since 1990. Thus, in its narrative content and intent, *Curfewed Night* falls under the scope of resistance literature and it seeks to make readers unlearn preconceived notions about Kashmir and see the conflict from a more humanitarian and insightful perspective.

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Notes

¹ For more information on the Gawkadadal massacre, see Schofield 148.

² For more information on crackdowns, see Bose 125.

³ For more information on Papa 2, see Mathur 15.

⁴ Dean Rader discerns two forms of resistance in texts: contextual and compositional. Contextual resistance is at a thematic level, where the text's central message asserts defiance to a dominant narrative; and compositional resistance is at the text's structural level and relates to narrative elements like plot structure (Rader 5).

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