

Cartographing Childhood through a Sense of Loss: Re-contextualization of Cities through Myths, Metaphors, and Fantasies by Children of War

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Abstract: This paper investigates the intricate relationship between children, urban spaces, and the narratives they construct in response to the disruptions of war. It examines how children reimagine cities through myths, metaphors, and fantasies, presenting cities as dynamic entities that shape and are shaped by their inhabitants. The loss of familiar spaces caused by war-induced destruction and militarization of cities destabilize identity formation, prompting children to reinterpret fractured realities and preserve a sense of belonging.

The study underscores the role of visual and symbolic elements as critical tools for reconstructing fragmented realities. These elements transform urban spaces into sites of memory and resistance, enabling individuals to navigate the dislocation and trauma caused by war. Through a synthesis of historical realities and imaginative storytelling, the paper demonstrates how recontextualized urban spaces transcend immediate conflict, preserving cultural and individual identities in times of upheaval. It further examines the emergence of natural and mythical metaphors for articulating inherent human qualities – resilience and hope. These metaphors reflect the cyclical processes of destruction and regeneration, highlighting the enduring human capacity to adapt and resist.

By focusing on the narratives of children in war zones, the study reveals their role as active agents of meaning-making. Their stories illuminate the universal struggle to reclaim identity within disrupted environments, bridging personal trauma with broader socio-political realities. The study contributes to narratology, urban studies, and trauma studies by advancing an understanding of how autobiographical narratives reconstruct the relationship between urban spaces and identity formation. It affirms storytelling as a vital mechanism for resilience, continuity, and resistance in the aftermath of war, ensuring the enduring essence of cities and their people.

Keywords: Storytelling, cities, identity formation, myths and metaphors, trauma, resilience

1. Introduction

Shakespeare in his tragic drama *Coriolanus* (1628), based on the life of the legendary Roman leader Gnaeus Marcius Coriolanus declared “what is the city but the people?” in Act 3, Scene 1. The observation, made nearly four centuries ago, retains its profound relevance even today, encapsulating the intrinsic connection between humanity and its urban environments. Cities or the metropolis¹, as centers of habitation, represent humankind’s aspiration for progress and innovation, offering state-of-the-art facilities and amenities. Yet, as Aristotle aptly proclaimed, humans are inherently social and political beings, and cities extend beyond mere physical constructs to become extensions of their inhabitant’s identities. Cities encapsulate social, political, and cultural histories, with their names becoming synonymous with the collective experiences they embody – both the triumphs and the tragedies of their citizens.

Cities are a dual perfunctory – determining and coming to be defined by the cultural compass and fate of their citizens. They become inseparable from the personal and the national destiny. They emerge as a living organism and a metaphoric character in and for the lives of their citizens, performing varied functions for their occupants by offering them places of recreation, worship, organize and gather in communities to participate in political, religious and cultural activities, celebrate and mourn the achievements and passing of their compatriots, respectively. They also witness a thousand life-stories unfolding within their borders and stories that are shaped by the cities themselves. They carry hopes and aspirations of their past citizens into an evolving present, bringing more character to the boundless possibilities in the maze of their columns, bridges, and lanes. The association individuals form with their cities – through birth, education, work, or life milestones – renders these spaces integral to their personal and collective identities.

With all the promises of hope, progress, prosperity, and scientific achievements to propel the human kind to its greatness, cities simultaneously are a symbol of human suffering, immortality, corruption, greed, decadence, and decay. Beneath the façade of opulence, cities often conceal the grim realities of crime, injustice, mystery, chaos, confusion, and gross poverty. This paradoxical nature of cities with both glory and gore aesthetic, has long inspired writers and poets, who weave urban spaces into the fabric of their narratives, rendering cities as pivotal characters in both fictional and non-fictional works. Throughout history, wars have consistently marred cities, driven by disputes and the pursuit of power. These conflicts, romanticized and documented by poets and writers, often resulted in the plundering and devastation of urban landscapes. With advancements in modern warfare and the demarcation of borders segregating nations, wars began to be fought by soldiers near and on the borders defending their respective nations and civilian populations.

Since World War II, wars came straight to cities again with the Germans using aircrafts to bomb cities in order to bring them under the Nazi rule. Marjorie Ann Watts chronicles her British life before and during World War II and how it changes with the German air raids on Britain in *Slideshow: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* (2014). The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the USA which brought the Second World war to an end further jeopardized the civilian life and left them exposed and reeling under the burdens of war. These events not only inflicted widespread destruction but also left lasting psychological scars on civilian populations. In the postwar era, technological advancements in weaponry have exacerbated urban vulnerabilities, with cities becoming theatres of modern conflicts under the pretense of combating terrorism.

The destruction of cities during wars erodes cultural and historical sites that serve as repositories of collective memory. The physical spaces of cities set in mortar and concrete extol an emotional and rhythmic response from children as well who learn to synthesis and exercise their identities through the medium of cities. The obliteration of public spaces, coupled with displacement and militarization disrupts the identity formation for children growing up in war zones by depriving them of familiar environments critical to their sense of belonging. They lose access to their homes beyond the confines of their homes in more than one way – lack of public spaces taken over by prevailing armies and citizens, an argument supported by settler colonies in Palestine, a vigilant state monitoring civilian movement at all times as it happens in Kashmir, forced displacement of civilians from cities they have known as homes such as during Partition of the Indian sub-continent, or urban annihilation in conflicts such as those in Sarajevo and Phnom Penh, intensifying their trauma.

The paper explores the transformation of cities – both as physical entities and as metaphoric characters into symbols of resilience and loss. It studies the significance of cities in the lives of children growing up in war zones by analyzing the deployed myths, fantasies, and metaphors to reconstruct their sense of belonging amidst chaos. Through these reimaginations, the paper highlights how constructed autobiographical narratives navigate disrupted realities and create new frameworks for identity and continuity in the aftermath of destruction.

2. Visual and Metaphoric Reimaginings of Conflict Zones

The collective history of the cities and their people shape individual identities and provide a safety net to fall back on to trace the history and the sociological leanings of one's life, which goes adrift during war. The dissociation resulting from the loss of familiar places impacts the process of identity making in the young impressionable minds affected by war. The memory making process aids the preservation of familiarity. Maurice Halbwachs in *On Collective Memory* (1992) says

we preserve memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually reproduced; through them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated. But because these memories are repetitions, because they are successively engaged in very different systems of notions, at different periods of our lives, they have lost the form and the appearance they once had (47).

These repetitions of memories through different forms and mediums help the young to understand the conflict or the war they are subjected to and provide a more comprehensive view through autobiographies countering the reflective gaze of the outside world. John Ma in 2009 begins his essay *The City as Memory* with a scathing question, "How do you remember who you are – rather than exist as a collection of contingent moments and *ad hoc* reactions" (248)? He takes this question beyond the confines of the individual "whose consciousness gives the illusion of continuity" (248) and makes this an urgency for the collective memory of the group. But this illusionary bubble of continuity is suspended in times of war when the collective memory of the group is disrupted by overwhelming violent and powerful forces.

The construct of stories involving the origin narratives and myths related to particular places and events are extrapolated and disseminated by elders, who have retired from active social life and are entrusted by the society to function as repositories and perform the act of recollection with other adults through multiple repetitions. The foundational stories of people of a city act as an extended human family and the places of the city offer a way of perpetuating identity. These places which are human constructs are not simply "(about) men (and women), but also about a place" (248), which themselves make memory affirming their past acting in the present to pass it on to the future. Malik Sajad in *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* (2015) digs deep into the history of the Valley to learn about the issues plaguing the Valley in recent times.

As a child scared to lose his father and his eldest brother, Bilal, in identification parades or cross-firing, Munnu develops a personal shield and takes refuge in his drawings. He carves out sketches on notebooks and chalks to overcome his perennial anxiety and fear. As he learns to draw from his father, his interest in drawing develops to reflect and draw attention on problems concerning and affecting the local Kashmiris. As he continues to draw and eventually publish his cartoons in the local daily, Greater Kashmir, he reaches a creative impasse and struggles to contribute to the editorial column, Inside Out. To overcome the challenge, his brother advises him to read the newspaper daily to look for potential news articles and issues he can contribute with the help of his drawings.

Munnu takes his brother's advice and starts participating actively in the local and international news to keep himself abreast of the happenings around the world. At the risk of getting redundant, he starts a self-dialogue and meets Maulvi Sahab, who directs him and asks him not to be afraid of asking difficult questions and reprimanding different political parties for their self-interests. Munnu realizes he doesn't know the history of the Valley and that may hamper his cartoons (Sajad, 177). During the same time, he visits Kathmandu and meets a delegation of writers and cartoonists who question his politics and lack of knowledge in grasping the political situation of Kashmir.

Munnu decides to learn about Kashmir to overcome his Dunning-Kruger syndrome² using a shortcut and starts attending writers' workshops, interviews locals, musicians, resistance leaders, Kashmiri Pundits, poets, historians, and an ex-militant, who advises him with real facts and asks him to read the history on his own (Sajad, 195) (Figure 1) to understand the socio-economic, political, and historical challenges and for better contextualization of Kashmir politics, how it has affected and

continues to affect generations. The reader then undertakes the educational journey in the historical depths of the Valley along with Munnu, the cartoonist, halfway through the book in the chapter titled “Footnotes” (197–211).



Figure 1. Munnu seeks help from various people to understand the history of Kashmir and is advised by an ex-militant to learn about the complex and multi-layered history of the land himself.

Source: Malik Sajad, *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*, Fourth Estate London, 2015, 195.

Malik invests in full page length panels in narrating the history of the Valley while educating the reader along with the naïvete of Munnu. The chapter titled “Footnotes” (197) begins with a panel dissecting the Valley in two parts with barbed wires, army check points, and national flags of India and Pakistan conferring the two sides, respectively, against a darkened background (Figure 2). In the subsequent pages, Sajad delves into the history of the Valley starting from ancient times and uses local lores and mythology to explain the Valley’s genesis. He starts with the most common myth explaining the evolution of Kashmir – the Valley being a high altitude lake called Satisar in which lived the demon Jaladhabhava, who caused distress to the locals and was indestructible while living inside the water. According to Hindu mythology, the great sage Kashayapa heard of the demon from his son Nila, who lived in the city and sought divine help to bring relief to the locals. On the orders of Lord Brahma, all gods took positions in the mountains and Lord Vishnu called upon his brother Balabhadra to drain out the lake, which he did by breaching Baramulla. The water receded and Jaladhabhava was slain by the disc of Lord Vishnu. The land came to be known as Kashmir after Sage Kashyapa (Prashar, 2573) (Figure 3).

Kashmir known for its cosmopolitan nature boasts of several origin myths in different religious and cultural backgrounds. In order to understand the complete history of the Valley, Sajad narrates all the myths to his readers as well. The common demon remains the same but the deity to destroy it and bring peace upon the Valley to make it habitable for its occupants changes. In the Buddhist version of the myth, the dragon in the lake was impressed by the meditative powers of the monk and gave him residence inside the lake but the monk deceived it and continued to grow in size till it dried the lake and the demon was pushed away (Sajad, 199) (Figure 4). Sajad draws the monks in human form but exploits the anthromorphized hanguls to depict the Kashmiri people even in the origin myths. The city, free from the demonised powers controlling it, becomes a metaphor of subjugation, which awaits a miracle or a person of godly nature to rescue it from its clutches.

Michalle Gal in *Visual Metaphors and Aesthetics* (2022) on the usage and deployment of metaphors, insists

metaphor is a medium – one cannot stress this enough – a structure, a composition, an end product or artifact. A metaphor is actually the newly rearranged target that becomes a member, a real-albeit-peripheral member, of a group. It gains properties, real properties, from the source, and thereby gains emergent properties from the amalgamation of the source properties with their compositional context (3).

The employment of visual metaphors in the form of hanguls to impress upon the readers the centuries of tyranny Kashmiris have lived under is further explicated when Kashmir becomes an important city on the Silk route, where learned men and travelers are again depicted in human form and the hanguls continue representing the local people.

After establishing Kashmir and its strategic position on the Silk Route with growing art, craft, literary traditions, and philosophies, Sajad jumps to the annexation of Kashmir by the Mughals, Afghans, and then the Sikhs (Sajad, 200 – 201) (Figures 5 and 6, respectively). Taking a leap from ancient and medieval histories of colonization, Sajad then depicts the modern colonization efforts by the British who defeated the Sikhs. Finding the Valley inhospitable due to its geographical location, the British sold the Muslim dominated Valley to a Hindu Dogra ruler under the Treaty of Amritsar, 1846³ (202) (Figure 7). All throughout its tumultuous history, the locals are represented as hanguls, which echoes Italo's sentiment, "memory is redundant: it repeats signs so that the city can begin to exist" (16) and impresses upon Munnu, the protagonist and by extension the reader of *Munnu* (2015), centuries of defeat, subjugation, trampling of the locals by the powerful elite, and the existence of Kashmir as a large strategic city on the crossroads of ancient heritage and modern warfare inflicted upon it.

The Dogra rule proved to be the most tyrannical and exploitative – taxing the locals relentlessly and killing dissent in all its forms. The Partition of British India with the creation of two nations – India and Pakistan, further sidelined Kashmiris and no regard was paid to the Kashmiri Memorandum. The Kashmiris rallied and rebelled to demand freedom from centuries of foreign rule and were backed by Pakistani insurgents in their rebellion against the Dogra rule in 1947, immediately after dissolution of the British colony. The scared Maharaja sought refuge from the Indian government who agreed to help on the condition of Kashmir's ascension to India and the Indian armed forces landed in Kashmir on 26 October 1947 (Behera, 26). Kashmir, thus became a battleground of the two newly created nations and the United Nations created a ceasefire line, which was renamed as the Line of Control in 1972, after a peaceful referendum was failed sidelining the wishes of the locals, once again.

The failure to introduce peaceful elections and referendums gave rise to local dissent and various factions adopted violent measures to achieve their purposes. The rigging of the elections further dented the faith of the Kashmiri people in the Indian government and many political and non-political parties arose to demand the freedom of Kashmir. The rebellion and dissent was brutally crushed and an army rule was imposed in Kashmir under which the Kashmiris since then have lived and lost access of their public spaces. Despite the numerous challenges, Kashmiris have persevered with patience and resilience, reflected in the art forms, which speaks voluminously of the local flora and fauna. Sajad employs the hangul, a unique subspecies of the Asian red deer, scientifically known as *Cervus hanglu hanglu*, as a metaphor to showcase the locals, taking inspiration from Kashmir's rich biodiversity. Listed as Critically Endangered in IUCN'S Red Data Book and placed under the Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, hanguls are on the brink of extinction due to encroachment of forest lands for agriculture, military embankments, modernization and development of cities (Pawar).

The employment of a critically endangered local animal further adds meaning to the existing emblem of disproportionate representation and lack of opportunities for the people of the Valley and becomes a scathing critique of the policies of the nations and the conversion of a cosmopolitan rich space into a war territory. The anthropomorphosized depiction of humans, having originated in the external space still deeply rooted within the landscape of the Valley, is in constant tussle with the



Figure 2. Sajad divides the land of Kashmir claimed by India and Pakistan, respectively, with barbed wires and army checkpoints on both the sides. Source: Malik Sajad, *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*, Fourth Estate London, 2015, 197.



Figure 3. Munnu explains the Hindu myth of the evolution of Kashmir where Sage Kashyapa defeats the water demon. Source: Malik Sajad, *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*, Fourth Estate London, 2015, 198.

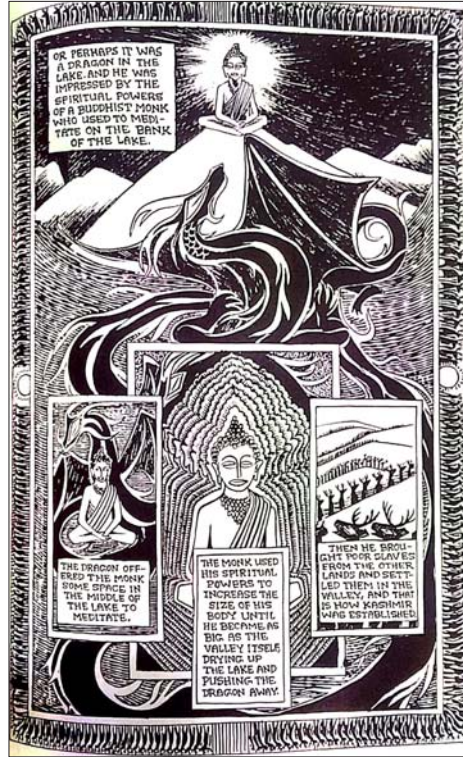


Figure 4. The Buddhist myth explaining the genesis of Kashmir after the defeat of the water demon by a monk. Source: Malik Sajad, *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*, Fourth Estate London, 2015, 199.



Figure 5. Munnu depicts the cosmopolitan and culturally rich landscape of Kashmir devoted to various art forms and philosophical traditions which developed over the centuries. Source: Malik Sajad, *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*. Fourth Estate London, 2015, 200.



Figure 6. The conquests of Mughals, Afghans, and the Sikhs fighting for Kashmir and decimating the local Kashmiris on their land. Source: Malik Sajad, *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*, Fourth Estate London, 2015, 201.



Figure 7. The British army defeated the Sikhs and after finding the land inhospitable sold it to Gulab Singh who helped the British during the war. Source: Malik Sajad, *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*, Fourth Estate London, 2015, 202.

internal factions trying to overcome the external forces of power and violence depicted through human forms and occasionally as bears⁴ (Figure 8), becomes a metaphoric language and reiterates, “metaphors reconstruct thoughts to be deep and pictures to be expressive. They reconstruct emotions to be stormy, allow willows to weep and people to flourish. They rearrange theories to be buildings. They enable relationships to be at crossroads, and later at a dead-end” (Gal, 4).



Figure 8. As his cartoon for the editorial titled *Inside Out* at the daily *Greater Kashmir*, Munnu draws a cartoon portraying the Indian Army as bear safeguarding the roads before the Republic Day of India. He emphasizes the Darwinian theory but the policemen usually portrayed as humans take the form of a giant fearsome bear ready to pounce on Kashmiris depicted as hanguls. Source: Malik Sajad, *Munnu*:

A Boy from Kashmir, Fourth Estate London, 2015, 166.

3. Navigating Childhood by Constructing Historical Fantasies

George Perec in *W or the Memory of Childhood* (2011) sums up his past or a historical mooring of his present in a single sentence – “I have no childhood memories” and “History with a capital H, had answered the question in my stead: the war, the camps” (6). Orphaned during the Second World War after losing his father on the frontlines fighting for France and his mother in one of the death camps orchestrated and run by the Nazis, he was adopted and raised by his paternal aunt and her family. He tries to fill the blankness of his past with a few photographs he has of his parents and colors the photographs with stories inspired from fantasies he reads in the books. His mother at the height of the war sent him away with the Red Cross under the pretense of injury to his arm, which is wrapped in a sling. The same incident has a different memory with his aunt asserting that the arm wasn’t in a sling and that he was being evacuated by the Red Cross as “a son of father deceased”, “a war orphan” (55).

Perec performs the act of constructing and reconstructing his memories through photographs, anecdotes, experiences, and talking with his aunt, while he continues growing up in different cities. After enlistment in the army as a parachutist, he understands the triple theme that runs in his memory of being evacuated at the height of the war and proclaims, “I was plunged into nothingness; all the threads were broken; I fell, on my own, without any support. The parachute opened. The canopy unfurled, a fragile and firm suspense before the controlled descent” (55). When as an adult, he starts understanding and putting historical events into perspective in conjunction with his own life, he realises there was “no beginning, no end. There was no past, and for many years there was no future either; things simply went on” (69). The memories are unhinged without any anchor as he moves from one city to another, from one boarding house to another, from one relative’s family to another’s, and has no inkling of his mother’s family or history and only has the fortune to learn about his father from his paternal aunt and grandmother.

In the absence of memories of his distraught and dislocated childhood marred by war, Perec tries developing a story but later forgets about it. A few years later, he revisits the story and remembers “it was called *W* and that it was, in a way, if not *the* story of my childhood, then at least *a* story of my childhood” (6) (*italics added*). The choice of the article summarizes the outcome of his life in the midst of a war and it finds its parallel with the city of *W* and the community it hosts on the tiny island off Tierra del Fuego, where the Olympic rules and motto – *Fortius Altius Citius* govern the daily life of its inhabitants. *W*, Perec says, “is a land where Sport is king, a nation of athletes where Sport and life unite in a single magnificent effort” and that “life, here, is lived for the greater glory of the Body” and the sport fashions social relations and individual aspirations (67).

Perec creates and traces the history of *W* for its reader and proclaims it was “inhabited when it was colonised, at the end of the nineteenth century, by the group whose descendants constitute the entire population of the island” and it “did not appear at all or featured only as a vague and nameless blob with scarcely determined distinctions between land and sea” (66). Perec compares the occupation of the island and the Olympic rules governing the society on the island with the concentration camps during Nazi Germany and World War II, which brought destruction and trauma to the Jewish citizens who were ordered to wear a yellow star and then systematically erased, and therefore for Perec, “*W* is no more like my Olympic fantasy than that Olympic fantasy was like my childhood” (7).

Perec registers an overwhelming loss of a private public physical space and his parents, which uprooted him from his historical roots and the means to connect with it, with an exception of tracing his paternal family name to Peretz, which is also in the Bible. He enlists the meaning of the name in different languages and states how that “Peretzes like to think they are descended from Spanish Jews exiled by the Inquisition, whose migrations can be traced to Provence (Peiresc), then to the Papal States, and finally to central Europe, principally Poland and secondarily Romania and Bulgaria” (35–36). He mentions the prominent ancestor in the family – Polish Yiddish writer Isaac Leib Peretz and then his grandfather, David Peretz who lived in Lubartow and had three children in the course of 13 years, that is, during the births of his three children – Esther Chaja Perec, Eliezer Peretz, and Icek Judko Perec, Lubartow was part of Russia, then Poland, and then Russia again, which explains the difference in the spellings of their names – Perec in Polish and Peretz in Russian. In the subsequent years, his father might have been called Andre by his colleagues, according to the hazy memories of Perec’s aunt and Perec believes his father *could* have adopted the name to conceal his identity between 1940–1945 and claimed to have come from Brittany (36) (*italics added*).

The concealment and appropriation of names to disguise their identities in the midst of war further dents the historical identity roots one can unravel to feel familiar at a place. These overwhelming losses due to the war is compensated by a fictional fantasy city *W* on the island of Tierra del Fuego, which the hero travels to with the aim of unraveling the truth about a missing person whose identity he had assumed to evade the army life he had abandoned. The fantasy world constructed in a city on an isolated island is replete with violence and echoes the survival of the fittest sentiment, which nevertheless results in death. Perec takes the reader on a journey of the hero

constructing the world of *W* and the places he had inhabited till then, which are all called with single alphabets of the Roman script – he was living in *H* for three years, his mother had died in *D* in Bavaria, the insurance agent Otto Apfelstahl wanted to meet him in *K*.

Perec weaves the story of *W* with his life during the Second World War and unravels the naming of the city on a small island when his memories of a life he knew amongst his aunts and cousins start to take concrete form and he pieces together the tragedies that have befallen upon his name and family. Panged by the woes of an autobiographer to give an authentic shape to his memories he unearths the actual meanings of certain words which until the time of writing he had only assumed. Living in the vacationing home of his aunt, of which by his own admission he has no concrete memories, he recalls a farm across the house, which later turned into a factory manufacturing plastic products. He recalls an old man who sawed wood “in the shape of an *X* (called a ‘Saint Andrew’s Cross’ in French), connected by a perpendicular crossbar, the whole device being called, quite simply, an *x*” (Perec, 76). This *X* creates a world of memories for Perec which he dissects, reimagines, and reinvents in several different ways through mathematical approaches, borrowing from experts in neurophysiology and geometry to reach a conclusion

the basic figure is the double *V*, and whose complex convolutions trace out the major symbols of the story of my childhood: two of *V*s joined tip to tip make the shape of an *X*; by extending the branches of the *X* by perpendicular segments of equal length, you obtain a swastika (卐), which itself can be easily decomposed, by a rotation of 90 degrees of one of its *S* segments on its lower arm, into the sign *SS*; placing two pairs of *V*s head to tail produces a figure (*XX*) whose branches only need to be joined horizontally to make a star of David (☆) (77).

Perec deduces the signs which governed the non-historicity and lack of childhood experiences in a happy family sheltered by his parents from a single alphabet to the historical usage of signs and the meanings that have been associated with them. He begins his analysis of the letter *V*, which when combined with another *V* makes a *W*, the name he accords to his childhood fantasy city in a fictional world he tried to create and ends with *The Star of David*. It is in the shape of a hexagram, a compound of two equilateral triangles and generally recognized as a symbol of both Jewish identity and Judaism. Derived from the seal of Solomon, it was used for decorative and mystical purposes before it became representative of Zionism after being chosen as the central symbol for a Jewish national flag at the First Zionist Congress held in 1897⁵. During Holocaust, the symbol took a more gruesome meaning when it became mandatory for Jews over six years of age to wear the badge of the Star of David in yellow color to distinguish them in public spaces and failure to compliance was severely punished.

Analyzing the letter *W*, which contains in itself two *V*s, he exemplifies the double world inhabiting the city of *W* and in the Nazi controlled Europe. Swastika, which came to symbolize the Nazi party and its ideology of racial purity is also derived from twisting and designing the same letter which created *W* and it also creates the *SS*, which is tasked with enacting the policies of the Nazi party. Adolf Hitler as the leader of the Nazi party established the *SS* – the *Schutzstaffel*; Protection Squadrons in 1925, with the aim of protecting himself and other Nazi leaders and speakers. Himmler became the commander of the *SS* in January 1929 and took direct orders from Hitler. He transformed the *SS* into an elite unit composed of the best racially pure German officers, whose aim was to ensure racial purity by “solving” the Jewish Question by conceiving and implementing plans to restructure the ethnic composition of eastern Europe and the occupied Soviet Union, by annihilating the European Jews in the concentration camps, which later came to be known as the Holocaust (Museum).

4. Symbolism and Historical Resonance in Childhood Narratives

Swastika is derived from the Sanskrit *svastika*, meaning “conducive to well-being. It was a favorite symbol on ancient Mesopotamian coinage. In Scandinavia, the left-hand swastika was the sign for

the god Thor's hammer" (Britannica). It also appeared in early Christian and Byzantine art and it was also found in South and Central America (the Maya) and in the North America (among the Navajo). In India, the swastika is revered by Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists, featuring on account books, thresholds, doors, and offerings. It symbolises "four possible places of rebirth – in the animal or plant world, in hell, on Earth, or in the spirit world" (Britannica) in the Jain tradition and is also an emblem of the seventh Tirthanakara, Suparshvanatha. From its earliest conceptions, Swastika was used as a metaphor to symbolise positivity, health, and fertility in all the cultures, but the work of "European linguists and other scholars, was taken by racist groups for whom the swastika was a symbol of 'Aryan identity' and German nationalist pride" (Museum, The History of the Swastika) and its subsequent adoption by Adolf Hitler in 1920 as a German national symbol and as the central element in the party flag of the National Socialist Party, or the Nazi Party, forever changed the connotations associated with the symbol (Hogeback).

The symbol to extol pride in the hearts of Germans also became symbolic of fear and terror among the Jews and other enemies of the Nazi Germany. The color scheme of the flag featuring red, white, and black "intentionally drew on the colors of the flag of Imperial Germany (1871-1918), which still resonated with many Germans who rejected democracy and the Weimar Republic" (Britannica). With the defeat of Nazism, the meaning of the swastika changed and is today stigmatised as a symbol of hatred and racial bias with its usage banned in Europe. It is frequently used by racist groups and by rebels challenging the established status-quo. Sajad in *Munnu* (2015) demonstrates the symbol of swastika was also used by the Indian Army to mark the houses they had checked during lockdowns and identification parades.

The atmosphere of fear prevailed in the city whenever these crackdowns were announced and houses were searched for alleged terrorists hiding in the homes of local Kashmiris. Munnu's family's fear sprouted from the fact that their house did not come under the radar of the army and was left unchecked unintentionally excusing Munnu's father and brother to join the identification parades. Assuming the worst, if the army figured out later that their house was not searched and the men did not join the parade or if their neighbour or anyone else reported their absence, Munnu's sister, Shahnaz drew a swastika to hide their absence from the parade and to console Munnu, "don't worry, Munnu. If they catch us, we'll say this mark is from the previous crackdown" (Sajad, 13) (Figure 9).

The use of swastika by the military forces in Kashmir reverberates the German supremacist ideology with the Indian religious and communalist doctrines. With the exodus of the Kashmiri Pundits from the Valley, the segregation of the Muslim minority in the Indian political and public spaces, rigging of the Jammu and Kashmir State elections by the Indira Gandhi government at the Centre, and constant demands of freedom from the Kashmiris themselves strengthened the ideology of hatred and otherness. Riots accompanied and followed by the Partition of India, wars with Pakistan, and the aggressive cultural nationalism led by the idea of saffronization invoking myths of past Hindu glory coupled with strong xenophobic sentiments, replenished with the social middle classes at the nexus of the debate contributed immensely in the politics of Kashmir, which was tabled and fought from the Hindi heartland.

Tapan Raychaudhuri examines the Hindutva politics and the factors leading to its meteoric rise in the newly created nation-state – India, and summarizes cautiously in 2000, "the Swastika painted straight in bright vermilion is a familiar symbol of bliss and well-being in every Hindu home. Tilted slightly to the right, it acquired sinister meaning on the world scene. A struggle is now in India to prevent the threat of such a tilt" (278) after the Indian Army under the powers given to it under the AFSPA Act⁶ had already used it in a state kept under constant surveillance in the early years of insurgency. Coincidentally, the exodus of the Kashmiri Pundits, demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on 6 December 1992 led by the activists of Vishva Hindu Parishad and allied organizations, religious riots in Bombay (now Mumbai) and Delhi targeting Muslim neighbourhoods alligned with the early phases of insurgency and Army rule in Kashmir.

The re-use of Swastika during the Nazi propaganda tumbling the centuries old positive symbolism associated with it and its re-emergence sporadically by xenophobic and rebellious groups asserts that symbols can attain and achieve meaning differently and can retain those through centuries often attesting their dominance repeatedly. Symbols can be developed from the city's political consensus as well which Sajad Malik illustrates by deploying an environmentally guided figurative metaphor of the Kashmir hangul, struggling to survive encroachment to its habitat suggesting the crunching space of social, political, and cultural space of the Kashmiris in the Valley. The juxtaposition of hangul symbolizes resilience amidst marginalization under the appropriation of the swastika by military forces echoing its Nazi-era connotations of surveillance and dehumanization.



Figure 9. Munnu's sister draws a swastika on the gate of their home following the routine of the Indian Army who would draw the symbol on the gates of homes they had checked. Munnu's sister's drawing quelled Munnu's fears for some time and safeguarded their home initially from the army.

Source: Maik Sajad, *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*, Fourth Estate London, 2015, 13.

5. Nature-inspired Metaphors as Symbols of Hope and Resilience

Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003) relies on black and white images to depict the childhood of Marji in Iran during the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War that followed. The dual colors follow the emotional state of Marji paralleling the brewing turmoil in the country. The panels and the backgrounds get darker as political situations tense and brighten when Marji feels safe in the presence of her family and friends. The simple style of drawing, however, is deceptive, as many panels contain intertextual allusions or other experiences that are more mature than that of the young girl depicted in the two volumes. The protagonist's confusions, difficulties, and mental turmoil are signaled both verbally and visually through the medium of graphic narrative. The ambiguity of mental processing of the events originates from the non-realist, cartoony style that eschews perspectival construction in favor of two-dimensional surface impressions.



Figure 10. Satrapi employs the metaphor of a snake to depict the impending doom, which Marji fears with a skeptical look on her face contrasting her parents' comfort, happiness, and celebratory mood, after the expulsion of the Shah from Iran. Source: Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, Pantheon Books, United State of America, 2003, 43.

Satrapi uses visual metaphor and symbolism to indicate an aspectuality that is not easily attributable to a specific character. For instance, in a panel where the small family of three – Satrapi and her parents indulge in a political discussion about the situation in Iran after the Shah has left and the fundamentalists are yet to take power. As the discussion progresses, Satrapi draws a panel in which the family is framed by a highly stylized symbol of the devil in the shape of a snake. This symbol is in complete contrast to her mother's assertion in a speech balloon, "now that the devil has left" (43), referring to the Shah. Marji's skeptical look conveys otherwise, the experiencing-I takes up an aspectual vantage point of the political discussion between her parents, lending her a retrospective analysis of the political situation, making her a narrating-I, who is mature, experienced, knowledgeable, and aware of the unfolding of the political situations and its history. Hence, as a character-bound focalization, the snake expresses the young girl's lingering doubt as to whether the devil has really left (Figure 10).

The metaphor of the snake about to bite itself is completed by Malik Sajad in *Munnu*. Satrapi reflects on the situation when the Shah has left and the fundamentalists have still not risen to power but with time as the ambiguous torch passes to Malik, the fundamentalists had not only taken power in Iran but were also rising in Kashmir. As Munnu, the protagonist, tries to overcome his dryspell of making cartoons for the Greater Kashmir daily and after exhausting ideas from his scrapbook turns his attention to the Iran-Iraq war, which was slowly becoming relevant in the politics of Kashmir as well, the snake bites its tail to feed its ambiguity of life and death. Sajad expresses his discontent and frustration for words like "peace" and "war" and draws a snake against the camouflaging environment of leaves and greenery devouring itself. It is a stand-alone panel deflecting away from Munnu's struggle of coming up with a relevant cartoon for the daily and highlights the pain of all the Kashmiris who are fed the false narrative of peace in a state rife with conflict and constant army vigilance.

Snakes are enigmatic living beings symbolizing evil and destruction while also epitomizing fertility and renewal in various cultures and mythologies. It is particularly true for Persian and Kashmiri mythology where the snakes have been revered as protective dieties but also used to instil fear of the

devil⁷. Myths and history form a dual relationship feeding into each other through the experiences of the human kind. Satrapi and Sajad explore the primary function of myths – their ability to explore and explain situations, offering an escape and building resilience in difficult times and telling stories of coming into existence; and substantiate William Bascom’s thesis “myths are the embodiment of dogma; they are usually sacred; and they are often associated with theology and ritual. Their characters are not usually human beings, but they often have human attributes. Myths account for the origin of the world, of mankind, of death, or for characteristics of birds, animals, geographical features, and the phenomena of nature” (4).

Sajad finds inspiration in nature again when he depicts the hollowness the word “peace” offers not only in the context of Kashmir but also Iraq, while the city and the country are struggling with “war.” By employing the ouroboros – a circular symbol in the form of a snake or a dragon, which is devouring its own tail, Sajad and Satrapi represent the eternal cycle of destruction and rebirth as the by-products of war and peace (Sajad, 173; Satrapi, 43) (Figures 10 and 11), which continually feed into each other and on the lives of the civilians, and extend the metaphor for life – implying death and birth in a continuous cycle through various seasons.



Figure 11. Sajad expresses his pent-up frustration with the words “peace” and “war” the people of the Valley have been grappling with by employing the metaphor of an ouroboros, symbolizing destruction and regeneration simultaneously. Source: Malik Sajad, *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*, Fourth Estate London, 2015, 173.

Satrapi and Sajad exemplify how visual media amplifies the emotional resonance of autobiographical narratives by creating stylistic and metaphoric characters. They rely on historical knowledge systems and imaginative faculties of the reader to grasp the meaning of the metaphors employed in recontextualizing the cities, signifying that visual culture has been part of human civilization since ages and various records and cave paintings testify to the claim of the immense role they have played in our lives. The forms of visuals have been inspired by their environments and can be derived from various sources such as

those of smiles, of houses, of trees, of frustration or anger, which emoji (both static and animated) manifest so well. They could be particular, the identity of which is not gained by a membership in a group, such as the forms of specific monuments, of a personal piece of jewelry to cloth or one’s grandmother’s tea set. Visual forms are carried through the generations, cherished, quoted, and alluded to. They are reused, they impart pleasure and comfort, they are borrowed or reproduced, they build cultures tier above tier, they arrange thoughts, ideas, and ideologies and they furnish our ontological sphere. *Visuality is in our nature. Visuality is our nature* (Gall, 14) (italics original).

6. Conclusion

The paper studies the intricate relationship between children, urban environments, and the narratives they construct in the face of war. The dynamic entity of cities – shaping and being shaped by inhabitants, are employed as metaphoric characters of resilience, identity, and collective memory. Through the examination of *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*, *Persepolis*, and *W or the Memory of Childhood*, it becomes evident that war disrupts urban spaces and displaces people uprooting them from their traditional communities. The use of visual and symbolic elements – the endangered hangul by Sajad, black and white imagery by Satrapi, and layered use of metaphors by Perec offer distinctive reconstruction of fragmented realities. The paper demonstrates how myths, metaphors, and fantasies enable children to reinterpret loss and cultivate a sense of continuity during tumultuous times.

The exploration of natural, seasonal, and mythical metaphors highlight the resilience inherent in human creativity. While wars devastate cities and leave lasting scars on people, these narratives affirm the enduring hope for renewal and regeneration. The historical realities are bridged with imaginative storytelling transcending immediate contexts and serve as poignant reminders of humanity's ability to adapt, resist, and remember. The narratives of children growing up in conflict and war zones illuminate the universal struggle to reclaim identity and meaning within disrupted urban landscapes. They remind us that in the shadows of destruction, the desire to preserve and resist persevere through storytelling and memory ensuring the essence of cities and the endurance of their people.

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Notes

- ¹ Metropolis is derived from Greek words meter and polis meaning mother and city, respectively. Historically, the word has been used to refer to the founding city-state in Ancient Greece and in modern terms, the word refers to urban areas comparatively more developed with more economic and lifestyle opportunities. Metropolis is usually a prototypical city on which other cities are visioned to be developed or modeled after.
- ² The Dunning-Kruger effect is a cognitive bias in which people with limited competence in a particular domain overestimate their abilities. It was described by David Dunning and Justin Kruger for the first time in 1999.
- ³ This was the second treaty of Amritsar, signed after the First Anglo-Sikh War between the British East India Company and Maharaja Gulab Singh Dogra. The treaty established the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir under the suzerainty of the British Indian Empire.
- ⁴ Munnu, the budding cartoonist, draws the Indian army man as an overbearing, scary, and carnivorous predator preying on the local Kashmiri, himself, depicted as a hangul, to symbolize the tyranny and dehumanization of the Kashmiris. The cartoon represents the repression of the Kashmiris which increases in lieu of safety measures taken by the Indian government and the army during Republic Day celebrations in the country (Sajad, 166).
- ⁵ The Star of David in blue printed against a white background is the official flag of Israel today.
- ⁶ AFSPA stands for The Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act, which was passed in September, 1990. If the governor of Jammu and Kashmir or the Central Government, is of the opinion that the whole or any part of the union territory (then state) is in such a disturbed and dangerous condition then this act can be imposed. According to Attar, writing in 2014 in *Jammu & Kashmir and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act*, “the Act has been in force since the last two decades without a lull in between. It has facilitated violations of human rights on account of several of its draconian provisions” (Rabbani).
- ⁷ Persian stories and legends such as The Zahhak Legend and the Two Intertwined Serpents, The Two-Headed Serpent of Mount Damavand, the Story of Rostam and Sohrab, The Serpent and the Simurgh, and

the Story of Ardashir I present snakes as evil, destructive, cunning, and contriving creatures. It is also depicted and associated with life, death, fertility, and rebirth, as it sheds its skin and becomes anew. It represents the dual nature of the world and acts as a constant reminder of the struggle between the good and the evil.

Snakes are an important symbol in Kashmiri folklore and mythology as well. The Valley is believed to be inhabited by a snake who was driven out by divine powers to facilitate human habitation, as Malik Sajad has shown in his memoir. The Legend of Heemal and Nagrai is another popular example, Kashmiris – Hindus and Muslims, alike, quote referring to their worship of the Nagas.

The symbol of snake also has a cross-cultural intertextual reference to the Genesis story in the Hebrew Bible and Zoroastrianism, the ancient dualistic Iranian religion, snakes as one of the animal species is associated with the evil Ahriman. The five Hadiths of the Sunnah also mention snakes as deadly enemies.

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