

## 'JANNAT' IN A PREDICAMENT: AN OVERVIEW OF ENVIRONMENTAL DAMAGE IN KASHMIR THROUGH FICTION

**Kanika Bhalla**

Research Scholar (M.Phil.)

Department Of English And Cultural Studies,  
Panjab University, Chandigarh.

### Abstract

*The allegations of Human Rights violations on the Indian Armed Forces and the oppression of the Kashmiri masses by the Indian state have resulted not only in the physical deaths of the Kashmiris but also symbolically. The Kashmiris feel that they, along with their resources, have been exploited for profit by India whereas the natives have suffered the repercussions of the adverse impact of the Indian presence in Kashmir. The consequences include extreme environmental damage which has been overlooked amidst other more serious aftermaths of the seemingly 'unlawful' Indian occupation of Kashmir. The current paper deals with the representation of environment and related issues in Kashmiri fiction with special reference to Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator*. While the narrative establishes the victimhood of the Kashmiri natives due to oppression, it devotes a significant space to the environmental abuse too. Waheed's narrative is the story of an unnamed teenager who lives in the nostalgic memories of episodes with his childhood friends, all of whom have crossed the Line of Control to train as a militant to secure freedom for Kashmir. The unnamed boy narrates the reverberations of the Indian occupation of Kashmir on the Kashmiri natives as well as the environment and surroundings of the place once designated as 'Jannat,' or heaven on earth.*

**Keywords:** Kashmir, Indian Occupation, Mirza Waheed, Environment, Exploitation, *The Collaborator*

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### Introduction

India, a part of the Asian subcontinent, is very rich in natural resources which, if utilised carefully in a sustainable manner, can lead to economic and social development without taking a toll on the environment. Kashmir is one such small part of India, which is diverse in natural resources. From majestic pine and deodar trees to wonderfully clear fresh water, from organic fruits and vegetables to commercial crops like almonds and walnuts, everything in Kashmir exists in abundance. So much so, that the place has been designated as the '*jannat*' or the Paradise on earth by numerous poets and kings owing to its natural beauty. The beauty of Kashmir compelled Amir Khusrao to say:

*"Agar firdaus bar roo-e zameen ast,*

*Hameen ast-o hameen ast-o hameen ast"*

[If there is a heaven on earth, it's here, it's here . . .]

Unfortunately, the province of Kashmir of Kashmir has never seen political stability from almost the fifth century. The Aryans, the Mauryas, the Greeks, the Scythians, the Kushans, the Huns, the Mongols, the Turks, the Mughals, the Pathans, the Sikhs, and the Dogras have all invaded and ruled the Valley successively. The first massive cultural invasion that led to demographic changes in the Valley about three thousand years ago was led by the Aryans. The Aryans brought the caste system and the Sanskrit language into Kashmir. The great Mauryan King Ashoka, who ruled from 269-232 BC, introduced Buddhism in Kashmir to free the Valley from the Brahmanical cult of the Aryans that oppressed people with its "tyrannical caste system, ritualism, priest-craft, sorcery, witchcraft, superstition and image worship" (Hussain 14). With the decline of the Mauryan Empire, Kashmir was invaded successively by the Greeks, the Scythians, and the Kushans, who were succeeded by a dozen local rulers. Altaf Hussain writes that the Islamisation of the Valley began with the establishment of the Arab Sultanate in 1339 which lasted till 1586 (31). From the Arabs, the Mughals took over Kashmir in 1586 till the decline of the Mughal Empire in 1753. From the Sikhs, the British took over, who finally sold the Valley to the Dogra rulers of Jammu. In 1947, the two newly formed nations—

India and Pakistan—started conflict to cede the Valley into their territory, which has led to brutal violence and bloodshed till this date.

### Impact of Conflict on the Environment

In this international conflict between India and Pakistan and several other nations who have their vested interests in Kashmir, the environment of Kashmir becomes a silent victim of the armed conflicts in the Valley. Many international conventions prohibit the use of warfare that may cause widespread and long-term damage to the environment of a warzone. Still, one can notice the degradation of environment of Kashmir due to the presence of Indian Armed forces. This is evident in the Mirza Waheed's novel *The Collaborator*, which describes the impact of the conflict between India and Pakistan on the Kashmiri natives, who are inadvertently involved in the conflict without any say of their own. *The Collaborator* by Mirza Waheed questions the geo-political games played on the grievances and emotional vulnerability of the Kashmiris by both India and Pakistan, while serving as a counter-narrative to the representation of the Kashmir dispute by the two countries. Though the novel does not explicitly deal with the environmental crisis due to the seemingly 'unlawful' occupation of Kashmir by India, however, the comments of its unknown narrator speak volumes about the severe environmental damage. At one instance, he asserts:

The Pakistanis were pounding a mountain pass some distance away, the Indians were relying in kind. There would be blood, and sulphur, on the trees. Dark plumes of smoke would emerge from the green canopies. Pines, those majestic umbrella pines, would be broken, their spectacular dark green spreads turning to umbrellas of crumbling, flame, smoke and ash. There would be the quick jaunts of the successful across some gorge or gully, but there would also be those caught in the big red glare of a mortar. (Waheed 115)

One can notice the juxtaposition of the impact of the politics between India and Pakistan on the Kashmir natives as well as the environment of Kashmir. Waheed efficiently narrates the plight of the Kashmiris as well as Kashmir in these statements, both of which have become a hostage of the armed conflict. Various other examples from the novel depict that the armed forces and other groups know how to deploy environmental vulnerabilities as a weapon and how they actively gamble with them. The following comments from the narrator illustrate this sentiment that operates in Kashmir:

They are pummelling the forest ground, burning the mossy earth, making scorching holes in the green, uprooting pines, deodars and firs, and hurling their gnarled branches and roots and burned berries and blossoms far, far away into the darkness. Sometimes, I think the LoC

is like a fireworks exhibition for them, you know, where they compete to decide who has the better display, who shoots the highest, who lights the brightest, who burns the furthest. (Waheed 129)

The environmental damage due to wars and conflicts start even before the start of the wars. The stationing of the forces and ammunition requires a lot of space and resources, which leads to severe environmental damage. In the case of Kashmir too, one can notice that the Indian Army is positioned everywhere, the Army posts are present almost in every corner of Kashmir. Forests have been cleared and hills flattened to make space for the Army camps and bunkers, whose numbers have been increasing since the advent of the Indian Armed forces in Kashmir in 1947. The military forces also require testing spaces, and the Kashmir valley serves as one of the best places to do that. Even the narrator of *The Collaborator*, when he feels earthquake-like tremors one night, sarcastically but truthfully says that there is no better place to test new weaponry than Kashmir. The narrator of Waheed's novel, fed up of the daily violence, once blurts out to himself, "And what is left to finish off anyway—the maize fields you burned a long time ago, the animals you maimed in the first few months, the people you chased away like rats?" (Waheed 130). This suggests that both India and Pakistan fight for the territory of Kashmir, without any concern for either the People of Kashmir or its environment. This validates the common Kashmiri comment that everyone wants Kashmir but no one wants Kashmiris.

The emissions by the Army functioning cause serious disruption to landscapes and terrestrial and marine habitats, and create chemical and noise pollution from the use of weapons, aircraft and vehicles. As the militants hide mostly in jungles, the Army does not think twice before diminishing this valuable natural resource. During one of the Army's operations, Waheed's nameless narrator says:

The whole jungle must be on fire, smokes and fumes and soot flying everywhere—what on earth are they doing, tearing the jungle apart, mixing limb with limb, branches and arms, grass and hair, sap and blood? Exploding the pine-needled surface, taking it to a boil. (Waheed 129)

The Indian occupation of Kashmir might possibly be equated with the British occupation of India. During the era of colonisation, the Britishers exploited the natural wealth of India, in fact, the vested interests of Britain in India were only due to the abundance of high quality natural resources in India. Just as the British took away the resources of our country, the Indian Government similarly seems to take every possible benefit from the natural resources of Kashmir. It is no wonder that there is

non-availability of electricity for the Kashmiris themselves despite of the presence of more than ten major and minor hydro-electric power projects in the state. The continuous shelling by India and Pakistan on the border areas may or may not yield human loss, however, the trees are burnt down and environment adversely impacted by it.

The weapons and military materials used during conflicts also leave environmental impacts behind them. Land mines, cluster munitions and other explosive remnants of war limit the access to the agricultural land. The fertile agricultural soil and the water sources are polluted with metals and toxic materials. It is often noticed that large volumes of military scrap which is produced and abandoned, for example, the shells of bullets, etcetera, contain a range of polluting materials, which contaminate soils and groundwater whilst exposing those who work on it to acute and chronic health risks.

### Conclusion

It is no wonder that the people of Kashmir, who are more, and justly, concerned about protecting their own lives, must see environmental concerns at the bottom of the list. "Protecting the environment before, during and after armed conflict must rise to the same level of political importance as protecting human rights. A healthy environment is the foundation upon which peace and many human rights are realised," says David Jensen, UNEP's Head of Environmental Peacebuilding. In Kashmir, there seems little possibility of any probable solution in near future. However, the environmental damage in the disguise of restoring peace in this war-zone must be stopped. The civil society organisations must be encouraged to come forward and effectively organise themselves so that they can bring up the environmental concerns too into the political arena.

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