

**“A Labour of Love”: Mirza Waheed’s *The Book of Gold Leaves***

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**Abstract:**

After ‘*The Collaborator*’, Mirza Waheed has again focused on Kashmir, his homeland, but this time in a slightly different way. We have a romantic love story at the centre of narration. Set in the interior of Srinagar city, the novel focuses on how the beautiful and peaceful ways of life come to an end for Faiz and Roohi, two lovers dreaming of a blissful married life. The events and happenings surrounding them microcosmically represent today’s Kashmir. The paper, taking recourse to the different incidents and episodes in the novel, focuses on Waheed’s attempt to give voice to the victimized and the oppressed and forge a counter hegemonic discourse to bring to light the untold stories of Kashmir. Love blossoming amidst war gives hope to Kashmir, once a paradise now burning like hell.

**Keywords:** Kashmir, Military, War, Love, Jhelum, Violence

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“While you are busy burying your filth in it, while little tyrants plunder the mystic arcs of its bridges, while the occupier lays siege to it, the river has tender things to attend to – it has a love story to write” (Waheed, 23).

Like his first novel *The Collaborator* (2011), Mirza Waheed’s second novel *The Book of Gold Leaves* is also based on Kashmir. *The Collaborator*, “tinged with melancholy and grief” (Penguin Books: 4 June 2015) portrays the torture, sufferings and the mayhem that Kashmir under Indian military occupation has to undergo during the turbulent years of 1990’s. The whole story is presented to us through a young Kashmiri boy living in village Nowgam near LOC, who is forced to work as a collaborator, an informer for Indian army resulting in his woeful doom. It can best be described as the first indigenous novel that subverts and rewrites the dominant narrative of the bordered state by recounting the ghastly, soul-stirring tales of repression from the border, the first critique of the bordered and framed state narratives in creative Kashmiri writing in English that had never been articulated before.

In this sense, *The Book of Gold Leaves* is a continuation of *The Collaborator*. However, in this novel we have a soul stirring tale of love and romance that forms the core of the novel. In his review of the novel, Anthony Cummins writes that “Waheed’s new novel returns to the same phase of the conflict {as in *The Collaborator*} but this time keeps the bloodshed to the background of a romance set in the city of Srinagar” (The Telegraph: 23 Dec 2014: 4:30PM GMT). With reference to its predominant theme, *The Book of Gold Leaves* has been described as a tale of “love in times of war” (Greater Kashmir: 22 January, 15). Two young Kashmiri’s, a boy and a girl, engrossed in love and struggling to keep their affair a secret are suddenly face to face with a situation that demands hardships and sacrifice. Known for its scenic beauty and hospitality, Kashmir, the paradise on earth is tarnished and plagued with war that ensues between the opposing forces of India and Pakistan backed militants. That makes *The Book of Gold Leaves*

“a devastating and painfully honest story of love, loss and betrayal” (Greater Kashmir: 22 January,15).

Although the novel recounts specific events and happenings, and reads like “a memoir or an ode to an area torn apart by war and chaos” (Universe in Words: 6 July, 2015: 12:36 AM GMT) a gripping novel, *The Book of Gold Leaves* can well be classified as historical fiction per se and in many ways echoes Salman Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown* that revolves round two young lovers Shalimar aka Nouman Sher Nouman and Booni Koul. Pachigam, the small village where the two lovers live becomes a microcosm for whole Kashmir, and the destruction of the village symbolizes the devastation wrought upon Kashmir as a result of conflict. The love between the two lovers, a Muslim boy and a Hindu girl and the peaceful idyllic ways of life in Kashmir are cut short as a result of Indian military adventure in Kashmir and a subsequent revolt by the local people. In Waheed’s novel, Khanqah in Downtown Srinagar plagued with bunkers and army vehicles, becomes the microcosm for Kashmir and the whole novel revolves round two young lovers Roohi and Faiz. Rushdie’s novel ends on a tragic note with Shalimar assassinating Booni and pitted against her daughter Kashmirira in darkness unlike Waheed’s novel which ends with the two lovers married and locked in an embrace dodging the gun yielding Major Kumar. Faiz, the male protagonist of the novel is a young papier-mâché artist, a dreamer, who longs to create a vast painting ‘Faluknuma’ with gold colors, “the biggest canvas he has ever embarked upon, his life’s work” (Waheed, 7). A master craftsman, Faiz falls in love with Roohi. He watches Roohi praying in the shrine at Khanqah and is captivated by her beauty. She too has been dreaming of a lover who will come and take her away:

“Roohi is prostrate before God. Caressing the aged velvet of the prayer mat with her forehead, eyes, and finally her lips, she begs Khoda Saeb to make her one wish come true, for the boy of her dreams to come and take her away. Roohi wants a love story” (Waheed, 8).

They meet secretly in the Khanqah and dream of a blissful life together. Although, Roohi and Faiz belong to two different communities, Faiz being Shia and Roohi Suni, they differ in other aspects also. Roohi is witty and well educated belonging to a well off family, while Faiz has no formal education and is struggling to maintain his family. All this is overcome, but in the meanwhile, the time has changed for the worse. For Roohi and Faiz the idyllic first days of love are threatened as violence creeps up. Srinagar, their home and their place of dreams is turned into a garrison, a virtual battle ground. The intense militarization of Kashmir is reflected through Major Sumit Kumar’s military plans about Srinagar city:

“At the mouth of each street and lane, there is or will be a bunker. At the other end of each street and lane, there is or will be a bunker. Three sandbags and a line-drawn machine gun mark the bunkers on Kumar’s chat. In total, his grid will cover twenty six localities, starting from the school to Nowhatta at the one end, Raeze Kadal towards the north, Khanqah and the MP School area towards the south-east, Naid kadal and the Khanyar police station on the east, and up the Fateh Kadal in the south-west. Fifty-two main bunkers and twenty-six small checkpoints in all” (Waheed, 59).

There is an increased presence of uniformed armed men on the streets. Indian army and the militants are fighting each other. The school in which Roohi studied is occupied by Indian troops commanded by Major Kumar. He is a young brooding and introspecting officer with good intentions but is soon disillusioned when he finds himself unable to avoid the rather inhuman and ruthless dictates from his higher ups. The infamous ‘Zaal’, a weird vehicle that strolls down the streets, swoops and swallows young and old alike and stories of torture, disappearance and killing are abuzz in the air.

“In comes the vehicle, then. Grey, its nose hound-shaped. Mir Zafar Ali realizes it has taken the cloud of dust, this motor less than a minute to speed through Kalashpora and to get just a few feet from him, and that’s when he sees something, a quick blur, emerge from the wings, sweep off two people and disappear. No sign again of the two men. He is lucky to have witnessed a full swoop near him... He sees it more clearly now: a green net, shaped like a garden-swing with a dark rubber exterior, opens out from the body of the vehicle, swings down in the same motion and traps his leg in it. Mir Zafar Ali is dragged for forty feet or so, during which he understands that he may have actually escaped this trap. The machine relaxes its jaw-like grip and makes a fresh swoop near the auto-wallas. As he lies on the road, his elbows burning from the graze, his trousers torn at the buttocks and his Haji skullcap lying like a deflated ball near a shop front, he sees the vehicle swallow Seythha, the best-known and highly trusted auto-walla, with another drive. Now it’s the turn of the Khanqah residents to scream with dry mouths, as the truck speeds on after another partly successful swoop near the group of boys in the centre of the bazaar”. (Waheed, 98-99).

The turning point in Faiz’s life comes when Fatima, his ‘godmother and beloved matriarch of the Modern kindergarten and Primary School of Habba Kadal” (Waheed, 87) falls to the bullets of Indian army along with many other school children.

“The men in the bunker have a machine gun. A shining new IOF Tiruchirappalli piece. The machine-gunner knows what he has to do. He is always ready. He lets the tripod go into a free swing and pulls the trigger. First into the lane from where the rocket came, or

seemed to have come, then right and left, then everywhere. He doesn't stop on seeing the school minibus. He doesn't even spear the sky" (Waheed, 85).

Unable to reconcile with the death of his godmother, Faiz decides to take up arms in order to take his revenge and more to drive the outsiders away from Kashmir. He crosses over the border and returns a guerilla, expert in making bombs. Commenting upon the novel, Albinia writes that it was not a political agenda but rather a personal motive of revenge that pushes Faiz to join militant ranks. "The catalyst for Faiz is personal tragedy: the death of his innocent godmother, blown up by a jittery Indian soldier. Following her death, Faiz cannot sleep, and it is emotional trauma, rather than any political or religious argument, which sends him across the border" (Financial Times: 24 October, 2015). However, this seems to be only superficial. Waheed seems to be working in terms of allegorical patterns where the main characters and their stories act out as an allegory for the whole of Kashmir and the political conflicts with which he is primarily concerned are played out microcosmically in the lives these characters. He recreates the tragic history of Kashmir by making the main characters participate in the process of history shaping itself. As the novel proceeds, narrating the accounts of all the major characters, Faiz, Rohi and even Shanta Koul, the readers realize that it's not only the fate of individual characters but also the fate of the whole nation and that the personal is deeply political. Faiz himself confesses to his fellow militant: "I couldn't take it any more. It was too hard. They're too cruel. They shouldn't be in our homes" (Waheed, 125-26).

The novel gives us a glimpse of how a peaceful way of life symbolized by a peaceful coexistence of different religious communities, religious syncretism and love for art is torn apart by violence, and how even nature and environment becomes a casualty in such turbulence. Kumar writes that "the river Jhelum runs like a thread through this book. Waheed's description of the river from its days of pristine beauty to its present-day decay and grayness appears like a metaphor about much of Kashmir in this book" (The Asian Review of Books: 20 June, 2015). Throughout the novel we have references to river Jhelum and Dal Lake and the environmental degradation that is rampant as a result of occupation.

"The river made the city, and the city has tried to unmake it over the centuries. While it brings the heavenly waters of the emerald Verinag spring from the hem of the Pir Panjal Mountains, the city thwarts its dreams, pouring refuse, bad wishes and dark stories into it. Of late, it has also started carrying the dead many tales of cruelty drowning in its onward rush, and with them, the dark deeds of the oppressor, too" (Waheed, 23).

The novel from this angle could well be studied from the perspective of Ecocriticism, “an earth – centered approach to literary studies enlisting literature and literary sensibilities in thinking about the environment and human impact on it” (Jonathan Culler: 1997, 127).

Faiz and Roohi get married and their love and romance continues despite hostile circumstances. The killing of Roohi’s father brings a sad sense of trust deficit and suspicion that creeps into the society. Amid all this gloom and sadness, it is the loyal and unswerving love of Roohi and Faiz that casts its presence throughout the novel. The novel ends with the two lovers behind a window curtain with their shaking and jerking but inseparable shadow visible from a distance to Major Kumar pulling the trigger of his gun.

“Kumar first raises the machine gun skyward ... And he turns away from the crowd, the shrine, towards the roof of the houses opposite. He pulls the trigger just as he sees two shadows standing in a window a few hundred feet away. The shadows shift, shake for a moment, but do not separate (Waheed, 330).

Despite the ugliness and brutality of war, it’s the love between Roohi and Faiz that is at the centre of the narrative and at the same time keeps the novel together. It’s the love story that keeps the novel going. The love, hope and despair that surrounds the two lead characters is characteristic of every other Kashmiri caught up in this ugly war.

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