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Visualising Kashmir, the Self, and History

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Graphic narratives on Kashmiris open a way to reimagine Kashmir and its people, and think about History writ large.

Towards the beginning of *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*, a graphic narrative published in 2015, a full-page panel arrests the reader's attention. A herd of hangul (deer) are gathered together by the graveside of the recently deceased Ajaz, their arms raised to the heavens, calling out to God to grant his family strength and render his sacrifice meaningful. Ajaz's father's eyes drip with tears and Munnu looks on at the scene in awe-inspired horror.

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In a more recent graphic narrative, *Kashmir Ki Kahani* (2022), another full-page panel, also towards the beginning, stops readers in their tracks. Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah, Prime Minister of Kashmir, sits on a throne with the crown on his head slightly askew, eyes popping and a maniacal smile on his face. Flags of the National Conference flutter on both sides as his long legs, spread out, trample over a burning Jammu. Leaping off the page, the accompanying words read: *So Autocracy and Monarchy had been replaced / By its twin / Democracy, Indian-style.*

Both of these dark visual vocabularies, one deeply tragic and the other tragically comic, are striking for those of us who grew up in India on a steady diet of colourfully drawn mythological and historical heroes of the *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK) series. While the ACK series allowed us to imagine the Indian nation and participate in its glorious past, these more recent graphic narratives on Kashmir shatter our long-held beliefs about the nation's past and present and question our hopes for its future.

Kashmir is one of the most painted, photographed, and filmed places in the world, but the pervasive images of its paradisiacal landscape, now pockmarked with bullet holes, impose a silence on its inhabitants. Until recently, the lived landscapes, as well as the present and past of ordinary inhabitants of the land, rarely appeared in these renditions.

But the visual medium, especially when combined with textuality and other media, can be deployed towards a more powerful end: to amplify rather than suppress, to illuminate and help us 'see' Kashmir and Kashmiris afresh. Post-millennial graphic narratives like *Munnu* and *Kashmir Ki Kahani* are voices of Kashmiris and others who seek to pierce the silence, allowing readers to not just re-imagine Kashmir and its people, but also rethink the self, our history, and History writ large in novel ways.

Their images—one etched in precise black and white lines, and the other drawn in colour in broad cartoonish strokes—capture the visual tone of the individual narratives vis-à-vis Kashmir.

Visualising Trauma

Published to wide acclaim, *Munnu* follows the life of its eponymous artist/author, Munnu or Malik Sajad, in war-torn Kashmir as he matures from a young, naïve boy plagued by nightmares to a seasoned political cartoonist. Sajad draws Kashmiris as hangul—an endangered species of red deer found in the forests of Jammu and Kashmir—while others, Indians, Americans, and so on, appear in human form. The images are angular and resemble pencil sketches or woodcuts, a nod to his father's profession as an artisan carving designs on wood blocks, at whose feet Sajad learned to draw.

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Early on, the author/illustrator inserts himself firmly in the narrative. The reader is greeted by a frontispiece of a 'family photo' with five hangul, Sajad aka Munnu, the youngest, seated in the centre surrounded by his siblings. The second page has a beautifully etched map of Srinagar's neighbourhoods interspersed by waterways, with a finger pointing to Munnu's neighbourhood of Batamaloo. What stands out, however, is the inset of an undivided—and presumably sovereign—Jammu & Kashmir, pristine white, unmarked by the

phantom borders that have haunted its post-1947 history, even as it is hemmed in on all sides by the dark forces of India, Pakistan, and China.

Munnu's choice of hangul to represent Kashmiri characters is unsettling at first, but as the narrative progresses, the reader forms an intimate visual bond with the anthropomorphised deer, their diamond-shaped eyes eliciting a deep empathy. The use of hangul pointedly reminds us of the dehumanisation of Kashmiris in the conflict and insurgency, and the tragedy of the world recognising hangul as an endangered species while the plight of Kashmiris is not given a second thought.

But it is precisely for this reason that the scenes of killing, maiming, assaulting and other kinds of violence on the bodies of the hangul-Kashmiri pull at the reader's heartstrings in an elemental way. So thoroughly has the violence reduced Kashmiris to less than human that the only way we can "see" their suffering is by rendering them into animals. The panels with hangul gathered together to collectively mourn their dead and celebrate them as martyrs allow us to not just feel, but also visualise the sorrow, rage, pain, and protest that brings together a cross-section of Kashmiri society. War dehumanises—it is an exercise of violence not simply against a group of people but against nature itself.

The reader experiences the changing faces of trauma alongside the young hangul, Munnu, as he tries to make sense of these experiences. His first reaction to the killing of a young man from the neighbourhood in the wake of a military crackdown, and the following mourning, is to attempt to visualise being inside a grave. This disturbs him so much that he is unable to sleep for nights on end. After the next crackdown and the ensuing firing that leads to the death of another young man, Munnu attempts to visualise the bullet hole in the man's body. Reality and nightmares blend into each other: Munnu dreams of his brother's death during a crackdown; as his body is lowered into the grave, Munnu screams for him to wake up, even as his parents shake Munnu awake from the nightmare. The brutal violence outside his school is mirrored in the casual violence of teachers towards students and the students towards each other. The universally experienced anxieties of growing up take on ominous overtones.

|| Just as violence haunts Munnu's narrative, dynastic politics haunts the narrative of *Kashmir ki Kahani*.

Ultimately, Munnu's trauma finds an outlet in drawing pictures, at first simple portraits copied from photographs, which elicit admiration from students and teachers. Cartoons on current events follow as he begins to critically observe the news at his brother's urging. He learns to take notice of and find the political in the quotidian and bring it to life in pictures. His first cartoon is published at the age of 13—an image of a caged hangul in darkness with a candle burning brightly on top, *KASHMIR* printed in block letters at the bottom of the cage. It illustrates the everyday suffering of Kashmiris as they live in darkness due to endemic power cuts, even as the region's rivers generate power for the rest of north India. Soon Munnu is working as a cartoonist for Kashmir's largest English-language newspaper, *Greater Kashmir*. His cartoons become more trenchant, not just in lampooning the policies of the Indian military, but quite as much the politics of the Kashmiri resistance. Drawing is an act of extraordinary courage, especially for one so young, as threats from both sides loom large.

As Munnu begins to move in broader circles, he is confronted with the question of History. A Delhi journalist remarks that Munnu needs to educate himself on Kashmir's history. Munnu is enraged; why, he wonders, does he need to learn about the past when he is living the horrors of the present? Nevertheless, as he begins his quest to understand the past, he realises that everyone has an opinion on it. For Munnu and in *Munnu*, History appears fraught: either too boring or too cynical or too politicised by multiple sides to mean much. The only way to make sense of it is to engage with it as a collective, lived experience.

And that is the way he draws Kashmir's past, leading inevitably to its contested present: striking images of its emergence from a lake through divine intervention; its growth into a famed centre of knowledge and trade; followed by invasions and occupation by outside forces; the sale of Kashmir to the Dogras by the East India Company; and the more recent post-1947 history of dispute, insurgency, and military occupation, with the Kashmiri-hangul at the receiving end of brutality throughout the panels. History is rarely redemptive in this narrative.

The Story of Kashmir

History is the centrepiece of *Kashmir ki Kahani*, illustrated and written primarily by Sumit Kumar. Begun as a web-series around the same time as Malik Sajad was illustrating and writing *Munnu*, this narrative is also an attempt by a young man to make sense of Kashmir, this time from the outside looking in. Fed on images of Kashmir as either a tourist haven or a den of terrorists, Kumar, at

that time in his mid-20s, took on the task of educating himself on the region's past and present, leading to a 3-part web series. Over the course of the next decade, the web series was developed into a full-length graphic narrative through the collective contributions of numerous individuals.

|| Munnu and Kashmir Ki Kahani end on an unresolved note, much like the situation in Kashmir itself.

Kashmir ki Kahani has a different visual and textual flavour than *Munnu*; its every panel is a political cartoon in vivid colours, the text a mix of languages and narrative styles. Its framework is much larger than *Kashmir* as it draws on Indian politics and global popular culture to make trenchant statements about Kashmir's and India's past and present. In a nod to the famous Hindi film, *Kashmir Ki Kali*—a story of the love affair between a Kashmiri ingenue and an Indian man from the plains in which Kashmir's visual beauty is on display—the narrator is a Kashmiri woman who sets out to educate the Indian (male) tourist about the much uglier and truer story of Kashmir. The cover of the graphic narrative is an arresting image of the woman and the man on a shikara, presumably singing a romantic ditty, reflected in the visor of a riot helmet worn by a security officer; in the background, a woman raises her arms in despair next to the body of a dead man, blood flowing from his head.

History is a story, the Kashmiri woman reminds the man and the readers—a story, as we see unfolding vividly in the narrative—of greed, blunders, repression, dynastic politics, and democratic backsliding. This particular story might be about Kashmir, but it is not exceptional in the subcontinent. Kashmir's story is part and parcel of the story of India. Since it is a story, the narrative is not held by the strictures of History, weaving back and forth through time as it proceeds chronologically. Some of the most effective panels rewind to the past or foreshadow the future.

For instance, as Jawaharlal Nehru ponders Kashmir's fate at his desk in Teen Murti after the outbreak of war with Pakistan over the princely state in October 1947, in the foreground sit Rajiv and Sanjay Gandhi as boys, the family dog asleep in front of them. Rajiv asks Sanjay what he is doing dressed in a surgeon's uniform with a scalpel in hand, to which Sanjay replies, "After I'm done with Tommy, he'll have no more pups!", an obvious nod to the sterilisation campaign spearheaded by Sanjay Gandhi during the Emergency.

As Nehru announces his decision to take the issue to the United Nations, 'Iron Man' Patel, integrator par excellence of princely states, raps about the folly of this move: "This ain't cool / What a fool! / Generations will regret [...] / Nehru ki chotti si bhool! / UN oh that's a laugh / So you think they'll give *insaaf*? / Gulf war one, Gulf war two / Iraq & Afghanistan too! / Make matters worse is what they do!" On the same page, a panel with a crowd of Kashmiri heads berate Nehru in Kashmiri for forever reducing their land to an international dispute. In the next few panels, Nehru at the UN General Assembly announces a plebiscite under the auspices of the UN as the best option for Kashmir; in the audience, Arundhati Roy, representing the "Republic of One", demands to know why she is considered anti-national for advocating the same solution.

Just as violence haunts *Munnu*'s narrative, dynastic politics haunts the narrative of *Kashmir ki Kahani*. The Nehru-Gandhis in India and the Abdullahs in Kashmir work hand in glove to dismantle the institutions and rules of democracy, rendering it into the "You elect...but I select!" method of Indian democracy. The moment that Abdullah anoints his son, Farooq Abdullah, as his successor is captured in a poster for a TV serial titled *Kyunki Abdullah Bhi Kabhi Kashmiri The*. The narrative reminds readers of this repeatedly through the device of Sheikh Abdullah's utterances being unquestioningly agreed to by his son (Farooq), who is then agreed to by his son (Omar), who is then agreed to by his sons (Zahir and Zamir, who have recently made their foray into Kashmiri politics). An example is Abdullah's declaration that he is nobody's puppet, which leads his nose to grow longer in successive panels, and is followed by another declaration, "As long as the people of Kashmir are behind me, I will rule Kashmir". Farooq, Omar, Zahir and Zamir agree heartily.

|| Written/illustrated by members of Generation Z, both narratives are more than simply a quest to understand the realities of Kashmir's past and present.

History does not bring about progress in Kashmir, the narrative clearly illustrates, instead moving in circles, condemned to repeating itself endlessly. In several panels throughout the narrative, Abdullah and the representatives of India and Pakistan are shown on spinning wheels, going around like mice while staying in place, each repeating their own mantras. Nothing actually changes in Kashmir or India, even though the characters might; indeed, even the characters barely change since they share the same last names.

Kashmir ki Kahani in particular thoroughly excoriates the media for its unwillingness to hold to account those responsible for these excesses, instead using them as fodder to sell more newspapers or get more eyeballs on their TV channels, even as a new profession of “experts” emerges in and on Kashmir. In a half-page panel, the narrative captures what the world understood of the Kashmir insurgency in the early 1990s, depending on the channel being watched: *revolution; uprising; militancy; mayhem; peaceful coexistence of Hindu Muslim community and Kashmiriyat; B-grade old Hindi film*.

Silent No More!

Munnu and *Kashmir Ki Kahani* end on an unresolved note, much like the situation in Kashmir itself. A disheartened Munnu walks out in the darkness from a meeting with EU officials who are disinterested in tackling the actual issues facing Kashmiris. A solar-powered flashlight, a gift from the delegation, illuminates the darkness as Munnu ponders on how to compose his graphic narrative; what confronts him is the scene of a group of young male hangul- Kashmiris assaulting a homeless hangul-Kashmiri female (344-348). In *Kashmir in Kahani*, a full-page panel presents a scene after the revocation of Article 370. An elderly Kashmiri couple wanders the streets looking for a way around a 551-day internet blackout to get in touch with their family abroad. At the bottom of the page: Earlier Kashmiris had: *Hurriyat to express their sentiments; Pro-India Politics to address their material needs; Protests to express their anger*. And finally, highlighted in red, *NOW THEY HAVE NOTHING*.

Written/illustrated by members of Generation Z, both narratives are more than simply a quest to understand the realities of Kashmir’s past and present. Their blended “multimodal” vocabularies, to borrow from E. Dawson Varughese, provide powerful examinations of the (Kashmiri/Indian) self in a rapidly changing world where information is at one’s fingertips and yet most is unreliable; where democracy is under constant assault; where violence towards minorities is endemic; and where millions of people live in precarity surrounded by rampant consumerism and plenty. They challenge state-sponsored narratives of India’s rise to great power status, illustrating instead its political decline since independence. They either reject History altogether, for “rationalis[ing] the punishment you’ve been sentenced to” (*Munnu*), or present it as an endless story of a series of callous power grabs and lost opportunities orchestrated by dynasties (*Kashmir ki Kahani*). Their images shout out loud, the words are heart-wrenching and biting satirical, and perhaps on occasion uplifting, but they compel us all to visualise and confront our own culpability in creating Kashmir, and quite as much the world we live in today.

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