

Rumours of Spring – A Commentary

A series of essays – this text will comprise more commentary than it will a book review. “How do you ‘review’ a memoir?” I have often asked myself, and hence refrained.



I

For a language under attack, Italicising is apologising.

In Farah Bashir’s Rumors of Spring, Vejbyoar is Vejbyoar, not Bijbehara, and not *Vejbyoar* either. Sovur is Sovur, not Soura, and not *Sovur* either. Zaena Kadal returns to Zaene Kadal, not Zaina Kadal or *Zaene Kadal*.

Words have shedded their italicised, anglicised and Indianised forms; their colonised skins; their apologist, conformist, normative skins and taken their raw indigenous forms.

Tengpur. Pophtaeth. Kandkaer. Tasruf...

Kashmiri words, fitted seamlessly into English sentences, transliterated and not translated, have been given a sense of equality through fluidity, ridding the language of its colonial hierarchy, stripping it down to its primal purpose of communication. Entire Kashmiri words have been fitted into English sentences, without offering italicisation or an explanation, presenting Kashmiri as a language in textual literature, just as 'effective' at communication and expression as English or any other.

In Farah's Rumors of Spring, ideas and thoughts haven't been choked into passive submission. Devil's advocacy hasn't been summoned. There is mention of resistance, there is mention of tyranny, there is mention of occupation, there is mention of unending trauma, and yet with no apologist dialogue, no self-reductive pain, and no self-victimisation. There is only addressal and reclamation. There is *struggle, people and memory*.

II

The politics of culture before the culture of politics

In a reverse chronological order at the extremities, the book navigates the construction of memory/history around the death of the author's grandmother in the chilly month of December, many many years ago. The funeral of the child's grandmother serves as a pivot carrying you into the past and the future simultaneously and addressing the longing for an adored grandmother; plaguing a girl child growing up in a patriarchal society under a military occupation.

In the stories and memories narrated in the book, Farah looks at occupation under a merciless microscope. She dissects it and reminds us of its true nature by putting its subtly hidden symptoms on wide display. "How different would my life be, if I weren't born a Kashmiri," you ask yourself. You are taken back to your childhood where your parents would spend days and nights trying to figure out ways to send you away from this *heaven on earth*.

The symptoms we have long forgotten at the hands of repetition and complacency are brought to the fore and the (Kashmiri) reader finds themselves asking how much of the everyday oppression they have gotten used to. The micro that makes the macro. The smaller parts that make the bigger picture. *The politics of culture before the culture of politics*. Of what comprises an occupation's battlefield – the anxieties of infants, the triggers of young people, the breezy wooden windows lost to tear gas and stray bullets, the fear of the night, the fear of the light, the extreme responses to loud, sudden sounds and different smells and the associations of the childhood, the trauma.

As a Kashmiri you are not allowed to laugh at the banality of such violence, and you are most definitely not allowed to cry at the deterministic perpetuity of it.

Prayers become eulogies,

Prayer grounds become martyr graveyards

The book reminds us how the occupation changes not just the demography and geography of a land, but the physiology of its people as well – the cells at the very core of existence, morphing, breaking, damaging, to adjust to the new hostile environment of always having to look out for, and fight; sometimes hide, from the apex predator.

For a book written about 'conflict', a word that has in itself inspired scores of scholastic text and PhDs, Farah disentangles the jargon from the pain of an occupied people and sets aside the euphemistic sophistry which tends to reduce trauma to sound-bytes and word-counts and *medical* conditions. This, while managing to never romanticise, and never exoticise.

Even a Kashmiri, perpetually surrounded by India, perpetually surrounded by trauma that we no longer seem to be able to discern, is shaken from their reverie and reminded that the occupation is always going on. *Always*. As we speak; on 'normal' days. On days when KFC and neon-board buses are brought in. On days when street lights are shining. On days when electricity stays the day. On days when newspapers make it to the doorstep.

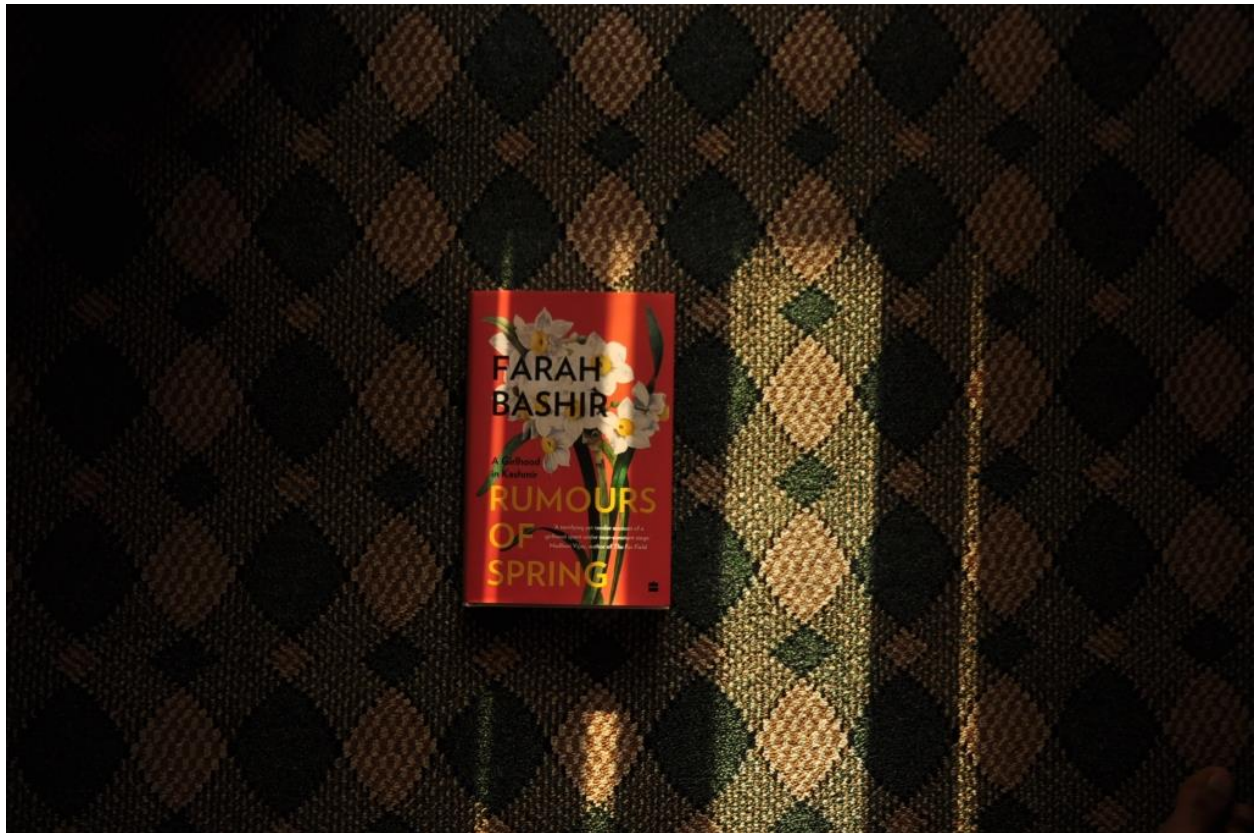
III

Epicenters of cross-hairs

In times of inequality and tyranny such as these, the human mind and body gets accustomed to anything and everything. The small shocks, where your windows are not for sightseeing anymore, but serve as epicentres of crosshairs for armed foreign men, where your school bus-stops are now army bunkers embroidered with barbed wires and clanging bottles of cheap whisky, where you, with your heart in your stomach, duck and crawl in the hallways of your home, saving yourself from sudden sounds and stray bullets, where a child home late could be a dead child, where you hide yourself from being perceived – from the army's gaze, where checkpoints and barricades give you paralysing anxiety, where your makeup makes you a target, where teargas changes your life and in more cases than some, takes it from you. "*How is this normal?*," you are tacitly implored to wonder, as it continues around you.

Farah reminds you of your childhood, of *Khwaja-e-Khizr*, an indigenous mythical personality we have frisked many a thumb for, the *kyenzcha*; the rides through the downtown, the spice markets, and then in the same breath, the crackdowns, the house searches, the guns, the boots, and the bayonets which managed to find their ways into our daily lifestyles with post apocalyptic ubiquity.

A word in the book that keeps coming up is 'funereal' and it connects the book as if by a thread. The casual nihilistic tone of the book (which is anything but) resembles the numbness of grief at a funeral, but also reflects the normalisation of violence in our daily lives to an almost stoic extent.



IV

Paraphernalia of occupation

To understand occupation, one must first understand the paraphernalia of occupation. What makes the superstructure what it is and what constitutes it. Surely there are the military structures and their guns and fighter jets, but is it just that? There are unanswered questions like: what does a young girl in military occupation look like? To circumvent the pain, she pulls strands of hair like 'hot needles' from her scalp and finds ways to cope with pain, through pain; ways that leave her scalp bald and bloody, with tufts of hair that she collects on her bed-stand.

Resting on her bed-stand are the paraphernalia of occupation.

Pophtaeth and her salutes to the army that she hoped would save them, Hina's marriage and Farah's loss of a carrom partner, the poultryman thrown out for 'security' reasons, the omni-presence of bunkers, and the fear of the armed

men whom the people of those times tried to ward off with holy water and godly intervention knowing very well that such an occupation can be fought by an all-powerful being. The immunity, the impunity, the audacity of the occupation in occupying public spaces and driving the occupants out of their homes and shops.

As she returns to the mind of a Kashmiri child looking at armed occupation, she observes that “Neither mud, nor blood stains showed on camouflage’. At one of the windows in her house, which turns up mysteriously ajar every day despite the family’s attempts at shutting them all from tear gas, Farah discovers that her *poptaeth*, from that window, overlooks a marching horde of armed men and salutes them repeatedly, in hopes of being spared for having proved such an impressive display of patriotism and reverence.

“I just hope they vanish before the next visit,” Bobeh (the author’s grandmother) remarks at some point in the book, when talking about bunkers. *They still haven’t.*

The fear of the armed men has found space in the supernatural realm; Holy water, trips to sages, shrines and temples are employed to ward them off, in the hopes that only godly intervention can fight such monsters at your doorstep.

Even now, the bunkers, though reduced in number, are everywhere.

V

A temporal siege

The army, as you observe, wasn’t here and isn’t here to rain war on militancy or ‘terrorism’ or resistance. The bunkers – such a large number – exist to lay siege to the hearts and minds of every last Kashmiri. They are outside our very ‘affluent’ households for a reason. They are at every ‘safe’ junction for a reason.

The mental health epidemic of the 90s, one deduces, did not emerge as a result of globalisation/ post-world war/introduction of addictive media/ catastrophic failure of state systems – It bore an obvious correlation to the armed

occupation and the state violence of the 90s. The pre-90s Kashmir, the 90s Kashmir – a world which hadn't yet come to terms with the language around mental health and its 'disorders' was suddenly met with trauma that was alien to them.

The author combs the newspapers for news and finds only obituaries. Later in the book, she would find her own way of bidding a final goodbye to all those lost.

VI

A ghost in the glass

For a valley which borrowed animism from its pandit populations, the rigid post-colonial monotheism fostered intolerance through such an intervention.

The book speaks of the inclusivity of different factions of the society, the borrowed animism in the form of the 'bird-spirit', the warmth of neighbourhoods, the feeding of strays, the empathy for the world. The components of a society which were not yet touched by rigorous modern political drama, eventually mashed and boiled in the cauldron that was housed in New Delhi. The reader is compelled to draw a comparison to the present times.

The radicalisation of the Kashmiri society, which had largely managed to stay a world apart, was aggravated greatly, if not directly influenced, by the Indian occupation. The presence of armed forces increased, and gave immunity to the quotient of violence in the valley, leaving it open for people to replicate. One fine morning when the author looks at herself in the mirror and sees a ghost in her place, the reader is reminded of this terror of the mental health epidemic, brought forth by India.

VII

CASO in Connaught Place

It wasn't and isn't *just* what India did to Kashmiris in Kashmir but what India told Indians to do to Kashmiris in India. On the streets, at airports, at immigration counters, while looking for housing, in times of a terrorist attack, etc. The quintessential Kashmiri experience is to have to travel to Indian cities in search of education and livelihood and have an Indian with crossed legs on a very plush mattress, ask you 'so what's your take on Kashmir' knowing very well that they want you to say things they already believe in. In India, life for a Kashmiri is like navigating a minefield. You have to be an acceptable version of a Kashmiri.

Farah picks up a colorful Indian paper which sells 'bouncy' mattresses on its front page to its front page citizens. While India was/is dishing out comfortable bouncy mattresses to its people, it was/is dishing out deaths in Kashmir. Fates and lives were/are different across distances and even our horoscopes failed us. *"You will feel the urge to expand your horizons, try new things, bigger and better things,"* Farah's horoscope would read.

To understand the difference between what we in Kashmir consider real and what they in India do, I imagine an uber somewhere in Navi Mumbai driving over a landmine and leaving bits and pieces of flesh scattered on the sidewalk – "a family of 5 found hanging from high tension wires – in 1000 pieces. Possible Sangh connections". Or houses being tear-gassed in Lutyens, for wanting a discount on a Sunday sale at Zara, or a Cordon and Search Operation (CASO) every morning in Bangalore, right after they leave for a day's work, or other cities where their libraries and kitchens are ransacked, where their plasma TVs are stuck with bayonets, or an encounter in Connaught place with the latest Starbucks as a hideout which is then eventually blown up with 20,000 INR as compensation. Such brazen-dehumanising-reductive-daylight violence is only reserved for Kashmir. In fact it is deliberate, just like the omnipresent bunker.



VIII

It is what it is

In this debut book, periods are not ‘that time of the month’, a girl’s breasts are not ‘the front part’ of her body, religious fundamentalism is not radical resistance, popular sentiment isn’t an excuse to sabotage, Kashmiri Pandits are not swaying between Jagmohan and Islamist extremism, and haven’t been reduced to political arguments and brownie-point agendas. They have been given respite; a space. Their pain has been addressed for what it is. Their existence has been remembered and missed.

When sentiments are running high, contemporary activism and literature tends to appease and take sides with populism. This text has steered clear of that.

The book speaks of the occupier gaze and the male gaze, and how these mutually nurturing, and not mutually exclusive institutions come together to

oppress women. Of how the gaze of the Indian army forced the author to wear a hijab, and how the gaze of Kashmiri men forced her friend to wear one. After they threw acid on her face.

IX

The Kashmiri militant woman in academia

For long, the academia of our era, both Indian and Kashmiri, have spoken about the Kashmiri-militant-woman narrative in vacuum, selling Kashmir as a 'more' emancipated place for women, a place where women exercise mobility, march on the streets and fight the Indian occupation head-on with a stone – a feminist haven. One looks at such an act and asks the question: if Kashmiri women can do something so extravagantly bold like fight a Goliathan state such as India, then surely they can do something as simple and 'superficial' as smoking a cigarette in public?

The Kashmir's militant woman as the only narrative justifying the presence of rights of women has invisibilized the other truths – the truths that women do not come nearly close to exercising their rights the way that men do, that they cannot smoke in public in Kashmir while men can, that they cannot walk for a minute on the streets of Kashmir without being catcalled, that middle-aged women are plagued with weight-gain, knee and joint issues, disproportionate depression; that young women cannot do something as simple as being a hip-hop artist while the society uplifts men for doing the same, that women cannot drive a mile without being verbally harassed, that women's bodies and minds have been ghettoised and controlled by male narratives.

In Rumors of Spring, Dukhtaran-e-millat hasn't been vindicated. Perhaps around the same time that Asiya Andrabi was exercising her *extravagant* vigilante freedom to rummage through the lover's points of Kashmir, enforcing hijab on those who didn't wear one, Nuzhat, a friend of Farah's, was sprayed (by Kashmiri men) with acid for not wearing a hijab. A society which idolises one woman and lynches another at the same time must surely not have

interests in female emancipation, but in female control. To understand this dissonance in behaviour and perception, one must look carefully at the nature of the allowed acts. Is it possible that a society that has space for women running vigilante groups enforcing hijab, can possibly not make space for a woman smoking by the road?

Autonomy is the freedom to be just as good, but also just as bad.

IX-I

The mobility of the Kashmiri-militant woman

The question I ask myself is – what allows for the spatial mobility that Kashmiri women enjoy during protests, or during the act of protesting? And why does this freedom of spatial mobility not translate to being able to smoke a cigarette in public? If the nature of such mobility is freedom, and not selectivity, that is.

In lockdowns and curfews, men are forced to ask their women to buy groceries because they aren't seen as threats by the army the way men are. I postulate that this accidental consequence results in mobility for women to step out of the house. Normalising the sight of women in the marketplace, is what, I imagine, provides the kind of contextual physical mobility that allows them, for instance, the freedom to pelt stones. The mobility I refer to here, is tangible. Mobility in its physical and spatial sense. The infantilization of Kashmiri muslim women by the Indian armed forces (in addition to that by Kashmiri men) seems to have created space for this mobility. Not as an effort intended for emancipation of women, but as a combined effort and unforeseen 'side-effect' of occupation, sexism, and infantilism.

To elaborate more on the nature of such mobility that I speak of, here is another example. Over the last few months of the covid lockdown, which was largely enforced during the day, Kashmiris have, after a very long time, resumed staying out late at night. A shock by the military in the 90s forced them to stay indoors after dark, and another shock brought forth by covid lockdowns normalised p.m vehicular mobility again. There are traffic jams on the foreshore road as late as 10 p.m. Something that was inconceivable just a few months ago.

This mobility in the night was given way for, by the day lockdown, when traffic and crowds weren't allowed during the day; breaking that barrier that made people think that staying in during the night was necessary; resulting in an accident of occupation.

The advocacy of Kashmir as an incorrigible place for female freedom – ideas that help the Kashmir-supporting Indian activist, the rich Kashmiri academician, but not the Kashmiri society – make the society a sensitive, sore talking point, a perpetually hurting victim never to be touched and never to be healed. In this regard, in *Rumours of Spring*, literary focus has been devoted to cultural and societal scrutiny as well, in addition to political scrutiny. “Like separating coal bits from grains of rice”.

To allow dialogue around only the ghastly affected, invisibilizes the *subtly* abused. When visibility is given only to the aesthetic of gorey brutality, the everyday monotonous brutality is forgotten. *Banality of violence is a product of idolisation of violence*. It is easy to forget that the everyday monotonous brutality is what constitutes and enables the gore. In a world such as that, brutality only serves TRP.

The dissonance in the nature of an atmosphere for autonomy of women is brought forth here.

X

(Tyrannical) states can be fought only with good stories.

The book, *Rumors of Spring*, through itself, through and through, is a saga of reclamation: reclamation of language for a people, reclamation of memory for a child, reclamation of a story, reclamation of the subconscious which the occupier lays siege to, reclamation of culture which the *other* appropriates and abuses, reclamation of narratives of feminism and autonomy, reclamation of space and infrastructure.

Farah's book is simple. As simple as a distill can be; a distill of eons of occupation. This is a memoir of a woman, a Kashmiri woman; a memory of a

young girl, a Kashmiri girl, but more glaringly, it is the memory of an occupied land.



**All Photographs by the Author

Author Bio:

My name is Tabish Rafiq Mir and I am political writer, essayist, and a satirist hailing from Indian Administered Kashmir which is where I have spent the largest parts of my life noticing the changes in the flora and the fauna, so to say, of the politically charged, conflict ridden environment that is my homeland. After completing my studies as a civil engineer in 2017, I began working as a journalist by interning and soon after being employed with news organisations in Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir. My writings on the effects of armed conflict on human societies, [media ethics, and erasure of cultures have been published internationally, including The Polis Project](#). On my blog, I have been publishing essays since 2017, a number of which have been reproduced and quoted extensively in journalistic and academic spheres, including classrooms. Through my practice of self-publishing, I have stimulated debate within a vibrant community of

people with regard to discourses grounded in the right to self determination in the face of state excess.