

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 4, April 2019

www.ijellh.com

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A Brief Study on *Munnu* as a Graphic Novel That Narrates Trauma

Abstract

A traumatic life is the reality of Kashmiri Muslims. They have to deal with various kinds of traumas as death and destruction is a part of their daily life. Malik Sajad's graphic novel *Munnu* explicates the life of Kashmiri Muslims and the torture they experience. The text expounds the fear and anxieties of the Muslims and how they end up as people who are faceless.

Keywords: Kashmir, trauma, graphic novel

In Scott McCloud's graphic novel exploration of the medium, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, he states that comics are "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence." *Munnu* offers an alternative history of Indian administered Kashmir, drawing on the author's life to tell the story of Munnu as he grows up to become Sajad. It is drawn through the perspective of those sections of the Kashmiri Muslim community who is oppressed both by the state as well as by the militants who came back from Pakistan after receiving training in the use of weapons against the Indian state.

Sajad locates his work in the tradition of Art Spiegelman's celebrated *Maus* by representing the Kashmiris as deer and the Indians as humans, and thus Sajad equates the

trauma of the Kashmiri Muslims to that of the survivors of the Holocaust. This serves as a commentary for the culturally literate reader because the Kashmiris, like the Jews in Spiegelman, are hunted animals. The awed, frightened, tearful visages of the deer is reassigned its symbolic value: from the iconic Hangul deer of the region, it becomes a symbol of the hunted animal. The Kashmiri thus wears the face of the hunted deer. The graphic medium serves Sajad, to develop his themes of terrifying nationalisms, haunting, embedded violence, loss and cultural crypts through both word and image.

The very first page of the narrative, after the section title ('Family Photo'), locates Munnu within two specific locales and spaces: the family and the nation. The family becomes a safer place for Munnu where he engages in art and where he could have his enjoyable experiences of eating sugar. As Munnu is the youngest in the family, he is pampered by all the other siblings. The outside world for him is a place of suffering and trauma. The text begins in a sad note by the mother asking Munnu and his siblings to stay inside the house though it is the day of Eid. The mother does not want the mothers of the "martyrs" to see the siblings together as she feels it is like "rubbing salt in their wounds".(3)

"Crackdown" in Kashmir is depicted in *Munnu* as a kind of their daily routine. Every man is taken out from their home for identification parade. If the informers identify the militants, they are arrested by the army. For the little Munnu, it is the time when his father is away and when he can draw on the woodblocks without any interruption. In the circular panel (12) is shown his favourite sugar beside him.

Munnu's experiences at Darasgah were that of suffering and pain for a little boy like Munnu. The "moulvi" punished him as well as other children for even very minute mistakes. Munnu fell for a girl Saima that was really a blessing in disguise for him to stop his religious studies. Falling in love also is portrayed as a sin or it shows the masculinity of violence which is far away from the soft romantic feelings.

In page 27, a striking image of Dr Maqbool who does autopsies on people who are killed in crossfires, custodial killings and mine blasts are shown. He stands in the midst of numerous tombstones and does the autopsy on a person. The panel too reminds one of the numerous loss of lives in the Valley.

In the book there is a constant reference to the paisley and chinar woodcarvings. Munnu's father is an artisan who chisels beautiful designs in wood. The paisley and chinar woodcarvings are a part of the Kashmiri traditional art. Unfortunately, when the Kashmir turned out to be a conflict ridden space, these arts had to be replaced by designing in copper utensils. Thus the loss of the traditional art turns out to be a cultural trauma for these Kashmiri Muslims. Once they lived in harmony with the nature. Now the father has to use the artificial material like the liquid tar to do his carvings which worsened his health condition.

The splash in page number 35 denotes the funeral procession of Mustafa who was the Munnu's relative. He was killed by the Indian army during the "crackdown". Mustafa was very close to Munnu's family and his death was a hard blow on all of them. Though Mustafa is a militant when he found an AK-47 cartridges in his nephew's bag, Mustafa hung him upside down. The panels on pg 38 show the brutal treatment given to those who are suspected. They were shot dead and were dragged through the streets of Batamaloo until there is no skin left on the skin.

The text is also critical of those Kashmiri Muslims who take advantage of the situations. A man named Imtiaz takes all the toffees and other valuable things from the martyr's grave and he use these to present as gifts to girls. The young Munnu almost kills the hens of his neighbour who points out Munnu's door to the army because sometimes his father escapes the checking as they don't notice their house which was amidst a lot of trees.

Young Munnu is traumatised by frequent killings in the Valley. Munnu's experience here becomes the experience of the entire generation of Kashmir. In the case of Munnu his

elder brother Bilal was always there for him. Munnu is sympathetic also to the Pandit community who were forced to flee the land of Kashmir by the militants.

Dreams are symbolic in the text. The trauma becomes a part of their psyche. The splash in pg51 powerfully draws the mental state of Munnu. It reflected Mustafa's grave and his ghost broke open the grave and floated in the open and came to the room where Munnu was sleeping with his parents. This nightmare repeated for many days. His psychological self is disrupted by the murder of Mustafa who was really close to him. In the dream, Munnu even saw his own brother Bilal in place of Mustafa. Thus, these dreams projected the inner fears and repressed anxieties of people living in a contested or conflict ridden space.

In page number 65, the splash provides the picture of the grave of a boy called Ajaz. In the name of "frisking" and "crackdown", the army officials engage in raping and murdering of the Kashmiri Muslim women. Women's bodies become the site of oppression in any place of conflict. The other community or the other self sees them as the tool to show their hyper masculine self and thereby claiming a victory over the other.

Sajad portrayed the educational system in Kashmir as equally oppressing. The violence that they have internalized from the army is inflicted upon the young children in Kashmir by those who teach them. Thus, the institutions like the Crescent become emblematic of ruthless behaviour to the young children. Munnu dreads schooling in such hostile circumstances.

When tensions arouse in Batamaloo, Munnu and his family moved to his grandparents' house in Eidgah. Munnu and his siblings were happy and lived there in peace. But back in Batamaloo, Munnu found big rats all around his house. Munu caught them, drowned them in water and tied a thread and around its corpse and threw it in the garden. Though the panels of young Munnu with these strings seem humorous, it is also symbolic of how the victims become the perpetrators of violence.

The section entitled “Footnotes” is an important section. It reflects the scrupulous effort of Sajad to show Kashmir in its entirety. It weaves into it the various cultures, traditions, religious practices along with the history of Kashmir. It traced the history of the Mughal, Afgan and Sikh invasion and followed to the British rule in the land and the rule by the Dogras. It also looks at how the Partition and Pebiscite changed the fate of the Kashmiris.

Militarisation and resistance is much more than the backdrop of Munnu's life. It is woven into every aspect of his existence. Art is a source of pleasure for young Munnu; he teaches himself to draw the chinar leaf and the "curves of the paisley". But there is little chance of retaining innocence under occupation, "sketching the photos of the unrecognisable, disfigured people from the newspapers," Munnu tells us. The first image that he masters – gaining popularity among his friends – is an AK-47. But later Munnu chooses the way of speaking out any kind of oppression in the Valley. He grew up to become Sajad-the graphic novelist. But there is a continuation of the traumatic experiences. In the last section titled “Solar-Powered Flashlight” Munnu still is in darkness which is highly symbolic. The three men in the panels assaults and rapes the girl. She is traumatised as is unable even to understand what is happening to her. If the girl represents Kashmir, Sajad seems to tell that along with the militants, the common man living in the Valley becomes equally responsible for the perilous condition of the land. Sajad through his art plays the part of making the society aware of the degeneration of the land.

Conclusion

Sajad uses the form of the graphic novel to challenge the discourses of grandeur about Kashmir. Sajad uses a medium which is not seen as something serious to depict the trauma of the Kashmiri Muslim community. By using the medium which is generally seen as trivial, Sajad subverts the grand notions about the land. The medium also gives Sajad the much-

needed space to allegorically represent various traumatic conditions of the Kashmiri Muslim community. On viewing the graphic narrative in the light of the conflict, this medium challenges all systems of oppression like the Indian army, the militant revolutionaries as well as Pakistan. The use of any other verbal medium has the threat of accusing him with the charges of sedition. Thus, Sajad encodes his protest against all these systems which causes trauma to the community. The text questions the notion of Kashmir as a paradise. He subverts the notion of Kashmir as a beautiful place which is presented in photographs.

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