

Structures of Hegemony and Patterns of Resistance in Kashmir: A Study of Selected Short Fiction by Akhtar Mohi-ud-Din

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Abstract

Akhtar Mohi-ud-Din, a Kashmiri writer writes about the people who are economically deprived and politically marginalised. What is significant about Mohi-ud-Din's body of work is that it does not simply reveal the socioeconomic conditions of the deprived population but it also offers an insight into the very evolution of this society and, the gradual but inevitable rise of consciousness among the people, challenging and puncturing the status quo. Akhtar Mohi-ud-Din's work reveals a society where hegemony is maintained by coercion coupled with consensus. The consensus is not earned once for all. People resist and challenge the hegemony continuously and therefore liberty does not become a state of being rather it is an incessant act, a becoming. The paper is an analysis of his short fiction to show how liberty becomes a continuous exercise of protest rather than a state of being, and how the hegemonic power structures are demolished and re-established.

Hegemony is understood as domination by consent according to the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. The masses are not dominated by force but the ruling class subtly propagates an ideology that earns them the consensus of the people for their own domination. Paradoxically, hegemony leads to and is strengthened by economically deprived and politically marginalised societies. When Frank O' Connor, the American short story writer, remarks in his book, *The Lonely Voice*, that

the short story is essentially about 'the submerged population', he refers to the condition of "submergence" created by hegemonic structures in various forms. Connor describes the submerged population as one that 'is not submerged entirely by material conditions; it can also be submerged by the absence of spiritual ones'.

Akhtar Mohi-ud-Din's works also have 'the submerged population' at the centre. However, what is significant about Mohi-

ud-Din's body of work is that it does not simply reveal the socioeconomic conditions of the 'submerged population' in a particular society, that of Kashmir in this case, but it also offers an insight into the very evolution of this society and, the gradual but inevitable rise of consciousness among the people, challenging and puncturing the status quo. This rise of consciousness among the people in general and the 'submerged population' in particular would ultimately lead to their liberation. Akhtar Mohi-ud-Din's work reveals a society where the 'submerged population' is controlled largely by coercion; however, this is slowly but gradually moving to the point where economic deprivation would be hard to maintain and coercive politics would not suffice. The people in power would need to produce or create new truths if they have to stay in power. Mohi-ud-Din does not show the evolution in the consciousness of people through their resistances only; rather he mostly mirrors it inversely through the changing political structure and power relations. His stories reveal that coercion has been a successful technique because of lack of consciousness among the masses and their economic deprivation but since the society is changing, coercion would not suffice. In a sense, Akhtar is writing the history of this society to the point where this society is not simply oppressed but is dominated by hegemonic structures.

Many of Akhtar Mohi-ud-Din's works are set in a time when Kashmir was ruled by a monarchy. Communication between the common people and the monarch took

place through a mediating class of people called *zaildars*. 'Zail' refers to an administrative unit which consisted of many villages, and the head of this administrative unit was referred to as a *Zaildar*. *Zaildars* were a rich land-owning class who were mainly responsible for collecting revenue from the peasants. But this class of *Zaildars* was not a class of mere revenue collectors rather they were active members of the monarchy that were instrumental in maintaining the status quo of the king and also creating one for themselves. They did it by exploiting those under them through coercion and physical intimidation. They were the people who were powerful and therefore to be feared.

In the story, *The Hour of Paradise*, we see how an "unseemly joke" at the *Zaildar's* daughter, Fota, by a servant lad, whose father, Samad Dar works as a tenant on the *Zaildar's* land, has caught the whole village and those in its vicinity in the darkness of fear and terror. The narrator recounts the atmosphere of the village after the rumour of the "unseemly joke":

The whole village was overwhelmed by an ominous silence; a deathly stillness fell over the land. Even the dogs ran with their nozzles thrust towards heavens, as though they were cursing the God Almighty for having created them to see this day.

Mohi-ud-Din 2010:37

Though there is no scene of violence as such in the story but the terror that has sent a shiver down the spine of the whole village at the rumour of this "unseemly joke" suggests that punishment is only thing that

the villagers associate with the *Zaildar*. As soon as the rumour spreads, the narrator predicts Samad Dar's fate:

I knew that Samad Dar would now be annihilated completely.

Mohi-ud-Din 2010:37

Indeed Samad Dar *is* annihilated. He goes mad, after his son goes missing, and finally dies. However his son turns out to be alive in the town where he has taken refuge to escape the wrath of the *Zaildar*. We see that Samad Dar dies of grief for his missing son or the fear of impending punishment at the hands of the *Zaildar*. What is interesting is that nobody in the village asks whether the deed was actually committed by Samad Dar's son. Rather everyone is wondering at the punishment that would be meted out to Samad Dar and his son or perhaps to the whole village. The *Zaildar* is not a single person but an institution, an authority that rules by physical intimidation. He represents the law of the land.

The *Zaildar* was not only feared and respected in the village... Even the government officials were obliged to him because... he would get them out of any scrapes they might get into. It was said that the old Maharaja himself had graced the occasion of his marriage with his presence. His property stretched over acres of land. Most certainly half of Kashmir was his. Hence the quaking fears in our hearts.

Mohi-ud-Din 2010: 40

In another story, *The Game of Snowballs*, we see that a *Zaildar* named Khwaja Muma hosts a game of snowballs for his and his

guests' entertainment in the biting cold of the winter. The poor workmen who are called for the entertainment are supposed to throw snowballs at each other and in turn they will be treated to a sumptuous lunch:

In the biting cold outside, it was difficult to run over the snow and fling snowballs right and left. [the workmen] looked upon the prospect with dread. Hugging their kangris close, they prayed to God that Khwaja Muma might still change his mind and cancel the day's match.

Mohi-ud-Din 2010: 126

But we see that they have no choice whether they want to play or not. Nabira is old and suffering from asthma but he dare not refuse to play the game for Khwaja Muma.

Old Nabira coughed and panted every five minutes for he was a victim of asthma. He looked up piteously at his master so that at least he might be spared.

Mohi-ud-Din 2010: 126

When the match ended, Old Nabira was ordered to have lunch in the cellar. Nabira was shivering with cold and refused the lunch. He wanted to go home and rest but his refusal was taken as impudence and Khwaja Muma flared up:

Run in you cur, will you? Grown too big for your boots, you son-of-a-bitch? Nabira scampered in like a frightened mouse and sat down to lunch.

Mohi-ud-Din 2010: 127

When Nabira went home, he came down with fever and died after a few days. These stories suggest that the frequency of the

physical violence meted out has created some kind of an ‘invisible panoptican’¹ in this society. Thus, in *The Hour of Paradise* we see that when no witnesses of punishment turn about, some people go to the Zaildar’s house to satisfy their anxiety.

Moreover, *Zaildars* are not powerful only by means of their property or their connections with the king but also by means of the values and virtues that become standard social codes for the villages under them to follow. Thus in *The Hour of Paradise* Fota is not just an individual but a symbol of the division that separates “us” and “them” created by the likes of the *Zaildar* and internalised by the villagers. As Bill Ashcroft et al. puts it in *The Empire Writes Back*:

The ‘truth’ ... of oppressed, or repressed, or silenced communities is ideologically determined. It stems from a construction of the self as subject in relation to the Other. In oppressed communities, however, this relationship is not viewed in Sartrean terms as reciprocity: ‘in and through the revelation of my being-as-object for the Other... I must be able to apprehend the presence of his being as-subject’ (Sartre 1957). Such a reciprocity allows mutual relations between self and Other in which both may at various times willingly function as objects for the Other.

¹ Panoptican is a method of surveillance in the modern prison. The term “panoptican” was the name suggested by Jeremy Bentham for the central observing tower in the prisons that allows guards to see continuously in

each cell of the prison even though prisoners cannot see them. Foucault uses the term as a metaphor for the internalised and sophisticated coercion used by the modern state to regulate its control of society.

But in post-colonial societies, the participants are frozen into a hierarchical relationship in which the oppressed is locked into position by the assumed moral superiority of the dominant group, a superiority which is reinforced when necessary by the use of physical force.’ This society has internalised the superiority of the *Zaildar’s* family and the idea of virtue represented by Fota. Fota is praised for her virtues that are only heard of. Gaffara remarks:

And such a daughter, who does not even show herself to the sun or the Moon!

Mohi-ud-Din 2010: 43

The narrator’s wife while cursing the servant boy sings praises of Fota’s her virtues, and therefore reinforces the difference between the *Zaildar’s* daughter and the other village girls:

Was she a village wench to be treated thus? Even angels could kneel in prayer on the hem of her garment.

Mohi-ud-Din 2010:43

Gaffara joins in:

And she with all her learning too! Do you know what? I have heard she would put her teacher to shame in her recitation of the Koran

Mohi-ud-Din 2010:43

In the narrator's words, she was a model of virtue for the village maidens to follow. We see that while people praise Fota for her ideal womanhood, a characteristic of which is to veil oneself from strangers (men), they never examine or question the conditions in which it is achieved. Fota belongs to a family that is rich, that can afford servants, that has all that it needs brought to it, besides being maintaining the distance from the other inferior classes of the society. In contrast, the common village women can exist only in a close social bonding. They, for instance, have to go to the field to help their men folk, to wash their clothes at the streams and so on. Furthermore, after four years, there is again a rumour. This time it is that of Fota's being caught flirting with a servant lad and ironically, again the village is enveloped in the darkness of terror. Thus it represents a stage in Kashmiri society where the people's consciousness is not raised to a level where they can question the irrational base of their economic deprivation and coercion by the people in power.

Other stories reveal how the society is changing in a way that envisages its growth of consciousness. In a story titled *Chunah Sapdaan!* (Does It Not Happen!), we are introduced to a society that is caught in a revolutionary fervour. The monarchy has just been overturned and the land has been taken away from the landlords and given to the tenants. This economic transformation seems to have influenced the very character of the people who would now stand up against their oppression. Malik Sahib, the landlord who is fleeing to the city thus muses in utter amazement

on the change in the villagers. The narrator recounts:

[Malik Sahib] would recall the face of each and every peasant. He would recall his (peasant's) face in times of monarchy and the one he sees now. He wondered at the change of times. The peasant who used to look at him piteously like a lamb, whose knees would give in at the mention of floods, Patwari (a village accountant) and the police, the same peasant has now become a tiger...

Mohi-ud-Din 2010: 22

Throughout his journey to the city, Malik Sahib wonders at the nature of the new government, the People's Rule, but when he reaches the city, a new reality encounters him. He meets a friend, a Tehsildar who has been loyal to the king, and when he enquires of him about the people in administration during the king's reign, he is flabbergasted. To his sheer amazement, every one almost continues to hold his earlier administrative position. It is revealed that even though there has been economic restructuring at a certain level but the power structures continue to be the same. This raises hopes in Malik Sahib of getting his land back; however these hopes are soon deflated. Even though, the administrative structure has been transformed by the entry of a few people into it, the story makes it clear that even the replacement of these few people would make the return of monarchy impossible now. This also suggests that the struggle of the people does not end here and this is not the ultimate point of evolution in the

society. As Foucault in an interview published in Skyline² says:

The liberty of men is never assured by the institutions and laws that are intended to guarantee them. This is why almost all of these laws and institutions are quite capable

of being turned around. Not because they are ambiguous, but simply because liberty is what must be exercised...The guarantee of freedom is freedom.

Thus the people in this society would have to keep transforming the power structures by continuously exercising their liberty.

Furthermore, at the hotel where Malik Sahib is staying in the city, he witnesses that a woman has been kidnapped by the police and is being raped by a police officer in the adjacent room. He goes to wake up the watchman and tells him about the incident, the watchman mocks him

²skyline: a newspaper and sends him back to his room. Malik Sahib remembers that he too had been an accomplice to the same police officer in a similar incident with a peasant's daughter 12 years ago when he was in a position of power. This forces him to muse on the difference between the former rule by a monarch and the new one by the people. While apparently it suggests that nothing has perhaps changed in this society, but the act of complaining to the watchman by Malik Sahib becomes highly symbolic of the change in this society. Malik Sahib in his capacity as a landlord had himself been the oppressor but now the way this incident of injustice affects him is revealing. The cries of the woman in the adjacent room tear him asunder. These

parallel incidents from the past and the present and Malik Sahib's reaction to them are implicative of the transition in this society towards a better one. This change in Malik Sahib is his emergence from the 'submerged condition' of the spiritual nature. So we see that the people have now achieved a consciousness which has led them to exercise their liberty.

Mohi-ud-Din's work shows that this society has now progressed to a point where the monarchy has been replaced by the people's government what in modern terminology is referred to as 'parliamentary' regime. As Chris Jencks remarks in *Culture*:

The 'normal' exercise of hegemony in ... the parliamentary regime, is characterized by the combination of force and consensus which vary in their balance with each other, without force exceeding consensus too much. Thus it tries to achieve that force should appear to be supported by the agreement of the majority, expressed by the so-called organs of public opinion –newspapers and associations. . . . Midway between consensus and force stands corruption or fraud (which is characteristic of certain situations in which the exercise of the function of hegemony is difficult, making the use of force too dangerous).

Thus people in power cannot now maintain their status quo only through coercion but now they need consensus. For the consensus, they need to produce truths and win the consent of the people through various insidious methods. It, in turn, implies a greater and more acute consciousness on the part of the masses.

In another story, *My Lips Are Sealed*, we see that Qadir Chhaan³, a State sponsored hooligan is used by the authorities as a ploy for terrorising the people into subjugation and at the same time providing the cover for their tyranny and brutalities.

In an incident, Qadir Chhaan beats a pedestrian in Lalchowk mercilessly which provokes the people to intervene. Meanwhile the CRP (Central Reserve Police) men, clad in the uniform of KAP (Kashmir Additional Police), baton charge the people to use the incident for creating a category that they call “anti-national elements”. As we see, the following day, all the newspapers both national as well as local carry the news of an incident of Hooliganism but in a reverse manner. The news story reads as follows:

As reported by the eye witnesses a gentleman namely Qadir Chhaan stood in Lal Chowk when some anti-national elements attacked him. He was badly injured. If it had not been for the timely intervention of the KAP who dispersed anti-national elements Qadir Chhaan would have been martyred. The government of Jammu and Kashmir is advised to take strong steps to curb the activities of anti-national elements so that the lives of peaceful citizens can be safeguarded.

Mohi-ud-Din 2010: 163

³Chhaan: Kashmiri term for carpenter

Not only does the news create the category of ‘anti-national elements’ and that of ‘martyrdom’ but through a negative form, it creates a category of something that might be called “national”, a category that

will be defined by those in power. We may ask why Qadir Chhaan should have been a “martyr” rather than a simple victim of violence. The CRP being clad in KAP uniform is equally suggestive. It implies the fraud that Jenks talks about. What is more significant about the distorted report is that it reveals that the idea of “national” is an unstable category that is precariously stabilized by a denial of the right to freedom of expression and by making a free press an impossibility. And what is significantly more revealing is the suggestion of collaboration between the authorities and the press as indicated by the advice in the report to the government to curb the “anti-national elements”. Thus coercion would no longer suffice; truths are being produced to maintain the status quo.

Also, though Qadir Chhaan is known to people as a hooligan, his is a ‘submerged condition’ of economic deprivation manipulated through coercion. We come to know that Qadir Chan used to work as a labourer at the *ghat* (a place where ration is distributed among the people). The independence of a neighbouring country that claimed the valley of Jammu and Kashmir as an integral part of it had led to the inflation in the valley. The whole hierarchical system had been entirely replaced by a new one. Qadir Chhaan could hardly make both ends meet. His mother, who had been sick, died and, he could barely provide for her funeral. He was seething with anger at those in power. When a group of people were eulogizing a leader whom Qadir Chhaan particularly blamed for all the miseries of the people, he beat a man in the group mercilessly till

he dropped dead. Being the sole breadwinner of his family of two daughters and a wife, he did not want to go to jail. So he conceded to become a hit man for the CRP, working for those in power. Qadir Chhaan narrates:

[Since then] I beat up whosoever they tell me to. They get me drunk and then they send the CRP along with me. I am their hit man. Sometimes I wish somebody would strike me and I get killed. But then they don't allow even that. As soon people start attacking me the CRP goes for a lathi charge to protect me. I have been through so much.

Mohi-ud-Din 2010: 170

Thus we see that the means of coercion are no longer a class of economically privileged people but include the "submerged population" too. But what is significant is that this 'submerged population' is conscious of the very mechanism that has created it and therefore unreliable for the authority. For instance, unlike the people under the *Zaildar*, Qadir Chhaan in his capacity as a collaborator is not completely subjugated or manipulated.

References

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His collaboration is a strategic one that contains the seeds of rebellion within itself.

Moreover, enquiring of the condition of the "submerging" of Qadir Chhaan, the writer introduces himself thus:

"I have come to meet Mr. Ghulam Qadir," I addressed the lattice window. Again there was silence for some time followed by, "Sir, what is your name?" My name is Akhtar Mohi-ud-Din. I am a writer of stories.

Mohi-ud-Din 2010: 172

By installing the persona of the writer in the story who is able to look beneath the surface reality, Mohi-ud-Din is making a comment on the means and ways of resistance in this society. Amidst the suppression of freedom of expression and the collaboration between the media and the oppressive regimes, there are writers in this society who can speak through 'sealed lips' and become a licence of the people's consciousness that 'only freedom guarantees freedom'. Thus, we see that Akhtar Mohi-ud-Din not only speaks through the use of words but also through the silences that make them capable of meaning. Thus while the lips are sealed, silences resound meaningfully.