

The 'Idea of Kashmir' in Public Imaginary: Review of Selected Texts from c.1586-1947

Dr. Rasak Annayat¹
rasikannayat@gmail.com

Assistant Professor (Contract) Department of Humanities ,Social Science and Management, NIT Srinagar

Abstract

The valley of Kashmir, located in the lap of western Himalaya enjoys significant ethnic, cultural and religious diversity, infinitude. The region has historically been an important centre for diverse ideologies including Hinduism and Buddhism. Kashmir's beautiful landscape, rendered thus through the construction projects, was then commemorated in poetic assemblies organized during the visits of various emperors and representative, in which Iranian, Mughal and Kashmiri poets competed with each other. Kashmir was a paradise on earth, even perhaps an imperial paradise, but what rendered it such was its sacred landscape, made so by its natural attributes and pilgrimage spots, and by the traversals of its holy figures and its mystics. The creative imagination of the Kashmiri writers who write mainly in English was able to capture the different facets and perceptions of people about the idea of Kashmir. All these expressions and personal narratives have been visualised, processed through the literary imagination, and re-crafted as collective expressions. Right from the Mughal conquest of Kashmir when Abul Fazl , Faizi ,Urfi and Naziri eulogised Akbars conquest of the land to the description by the Orientalists like Bernier who travelled in various regions of India, to Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh*, to modern fictional writers, there is an identifiable strain running through these accounts which projects the geography of the place as its most prominent feature. This obsession with the land and its peculiar features is not without repercussions for how history of its people was approached. This paper focus more on the main idea which is that; how Kashmir was imagined in a particular way from medieval times because it suited those who were interested more in its geography than its people. The study tried to trace the origin of idea of Kashmir in medieval texts and then show its recurrence in modern narratives, fictional and non-fictional alike. The Orientalist's fantasy of imagining an exotic land had, therefore, a precursor in the oriental mind itself whereby travelers from the Indian plains and central Asia and Persia presented Kashmir as a land of dreams, a replica of heavenly paradise on earth thereby contributing to its formation as a territory of desire.

Key words: Imaginary, Cultural, Kashmir, Fictional, Orientalist, Himalayan

Introduction

From the earliest times, Kashmir as a distinct geo-cultural unit has served as a converging point of some dynamic religious and cultural cross currents. A blending of the best in Hindu, Buddhist and Central Asian centric Muslim thought giving rise to the valley's syncretic landscape, a great attraction both for insiders and foreigners. Kashmir Valley has rightly been called as the

“Paradise on Earth” and “Switzerland of Asia”. Bernier, the first European traveler to enter Kashmir, wrote in 1665 that “In truth, the kingdom surpasses in beauty all that my warmest imagination had anticipated” Kashmir is the core of mighty Himalayas receiving in abundance its grace in the form of captivating scenic beauty, lush green pastures and lofty glistening snow covered mountain peaks which capture the changing hues of the brilliant sun, in many ways, the enchanting rivers and rivulets and the great lakes of mythological fame. In spite of its rough mountain ridden geological character, the valley has ever remained as a busy spot for religious, philosophical, ideological and cultural intercourse. This together not only inculcated among its people an immense urge and craving for scholastic activities, but during the long course of its chequered history, it helped in building a unique and collective cultural personality of Kashmir. Kashmir has a significant place in the mythology and history of all religions. Kashmir's existence is characterised by its insular Himalayan geography, harsh winter climate and isolation in economic and political terms.

The study has traced the origin of idea of Kashmir in medieval texts and then show its recurrence in modern narratives, fictional and non-fictional alike. In the recent past, cultural studies as an independent branch of social science has assumed exemplary significance for understanding in totality the history of humans, particularly, commoners habituating within the specific geo-climatic borders. The predominant emphasis on the given subject equally by historians, anthropologists, sociologists, linguists and psychologists for understanding multiple facets of human society has not only widened its scope in terms of scholastic deliberations, but, it has of course, widened its ambit as an independent subject for providing penetrating clues to understand in depth the otherwise unnoticed shades of human concerns. It is with this objective in sight, that the scholar has chosen the subject for this work and an attempt has been made to identify the roots of idea of Kashmir and how the distinct writers in the periods of history left indelible imprints on collective psyche of the people of the valley and how this influence stands exhibited at different layers of intellectual and literary discourses as well.

The researcher has critically examine the historical and literary texts from 16th to 20th centuries and how they contributed to the construction of an idea of Kashmir as an exotic land, a paradise on earth, a territory of desire. The idea of Kashmir as a sacred space took on renewed meaning with the incorporation of Kashmir into the Mughal Empire in 1585-86. During the Mughal Period , Kashmiri's indigenous Sanskrit and Persian traditions converged with the Mughal with imperial tradition to re assert the idea of Kashmir as a paradise on earth. This idea was expressed, as earlier, through narratives and building activities and was tied to the massive political transition of Kashmir from an independent kingdom to a constituent part of a sub continental Empire. It was a significant means of validating the Mughal conquest of Kashmir when Mughal forces were facing rebellions across the region and of fortifying Mughal presence once relative peace has been restored.

All these expressions, personal narratives have been unearthed, processed through the literary imagination, and re-crafted as collective expressions. The narratives are mainly structured round and alternate between the present, 'now', and the past, 'then'. The narratives do remember the

Kashmir of the past in which the stream of life flowed smoothly, when militancy did not exist, and when life flowed along an even tenor.

Abul Fazl's *Ain -Akbari* best encapsulates the ways in which Kashmir's indigenous narrative traditions, and through it Kashmir, was seamlessly appropriated into Mughal imperial imagination. *Ain -Akbari* draws a direction line of descent from the Kalhana's *Rajtarangini* and its continuations, at the same time establishing Akbar as the rightful culmination of kingship in Kashmir.

Kashmir's beautiful landscape, rendered thus through the construction projects, was then commemorated in poetic assemblies organized during the visits of the emperors and royal governors, in which Iranian, Mughal and Kashmiri poets competed with each other. Kashmir was a paradise on earth, even perhaps an imperial paradise, but what rendered it such was its sacred landscape, made so by its natural attributes and pilgrimage spots, and by the traversals of its holy figures and its mystics. So powerful was this idea of Kashmir as an auspicious landscape that it allowed Kashmir to retain its individuality and autonomy even in the face of its incorporation into the mighty Mughal Empire.

Objectives

1. The main objective of the study were to trace the origin of the idea of Kashmir as reflected in medieval textual sources.
2. It has focused on the genesis of the idea of Kashmir as reflected in the modern literary genre, both fictional and non-fictional.
3. The study has also tried to answer the question that how Kashmir was imagined in a very particular way from medieval up to the contemporary times by different genres of literature.
4. The study further seeks to investigate and explore the agents and forces responsible for articulating the above mentioned idea of Kashmir.
5. The study in question seeks to examine as why at different periods of Kashmir history, socio-religious institutions failed to portray the real picture of Kashmir.

Research Methodology

The topic under study is of extreme importance as far as the development of the literary works including the historical texts and fictional and non-fictional literature of the 16th to 20th century south Asia is concerned. The idea of Kashmir as an exotic land, a paradise on earth and a territory of desire as perceived in the contemporary genre of literature need to be examined in depth. I believe it can be better approached from a multi-disciplinary approach. As a student of social science examining the links between the generation of literature at the courtly culture of medieval empires and its historicity is of utmost importance. Thus a methodology based on the comparative analysis of the primary and secondary source material shall form the core of method to approach the problem. Following are some of the prime aims and objectives of the study:

1. In order to achieve this aim the first step was to procure the primary sources i.e. the literary texts, other primary sources, like their published interviews were studied.

2. The next logical step was to procure the secondary source i.e. Persian texts, critical articles, reviews, and other published material.
3. The third important step was to integrate and compare the opinions expressed in the secondary sources with the original analysis of these medieval and modern historical and literary texts. the
4. Being benefitted from insights of other sources, every care has been taken to adhere to the fundamental canons of historical investigation and objectivity.
5. Since, there is no full length study of the idea of Kashmir in Public Imaginations, the proposed work on completion could be a contribution to study various aspects of Kashmir and could give some direction to other scholars interested in this field.

Relevance of this study for Society

The creative imagination of the writers who write mainly on Kashmir, is able to capture the different facets and perceptions of people about the idea the Kashmir. All these expressions, personal narratives have been unearthed, processed through the literary imagination, and re-crafted as collective expressions. Right from the Mughal conquest of Kashmir when Abul Fazl, Faizi, Urfi and Naziri eulogised Akbar's conquest of the land to the description by the Orientalists like Bernier who travelled in various regions of India, to Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh*, to modern fictional writers, there is an identifiable strain running through these accounts which projects the geography of the place as its most prominent feature. This study will help the people across the globe to the construction an idea of Kashmir as an exotic land, a paradise on earth and a territory of desire. The study revealed the real picture of the Kashmir being called as the a territory of desire, a paradise on earth and a exotic land. The work revealed a comprehensive outlook how the land of Kashmir was imagined in a particular sense from medieval to the contemporary times. Kashmir holds a special place in our imaginations, whether as a paradise on earth or a deadly conflict zone, or a range of ideas in between. The research seeks to understand why and how we came to attribute the characteristic to Kashmir as an exotic land, a paradise on earth and a territory of desire emerged. The researcher expects to come up with an idea that will contribute to a comprehensive construction about the 'Idea of Kashmir'. Nonetheless, the survive I believe will not address all the issues pertaining to the portrayal of the idea of Kashmir. Much needs still to be done. I will also propose to involve the policy making institutes so that a comprehensive agenda could be formulated in order to have certain legalities formed on the 'idea of Kashmir'

Major Research works reviewed

In this research work the selected fictional and non fictional texts have been taken to study how the 'idea of Kashmir' has been portrayed. No serious research work, as far as the present investigator's knowledge is concerned, is done on the 'idea of Kashmir' selected for the study in this regard. The literature review of the 'idea of Kashmir' shows that very few researchers have tried to focus on the idea. The major research work on the above mentioned idea is as follows.

1. Frederic Drew (1875). *Jammu and Kashmir Territories---A Geographical Account*, London Edward Stanford. The book is representation of the geographical facts which are concerned

about the valley. Actually the authors had lived in valley for so many years, he tried to portray those impression which he was able to capture during that tenure, in order to make others acquaint in such a way that their minds have a clear and distinct image of Kashmir.

2. Walter R. Lawrence, (1895). *The Valley of Kashmir*, London, Henry Frowde. The book is a travel book which accounts the summary of Lawrence's visit to Kashmir. He travelled to almost every corner of the Valley and developed a close affinity with the people who figure prominently in the work. The book describes the geography, culture in brief and the hardships faced by the Kashmiri people under the rule of Dogras.

3. Khan, Mohammad Ishaq (1978). *History of Srinagar (1846-1947): A Study of Socio-Cultural Change*, Srinagar: Aamir Publications. Ishaq Khan identifies himself as a researcher and a traveller in the Sufi Path who has always preferred to live in relative seclusion. This is his most widely read book which has been described as a “pioneering” “authoritative”, and “seminal” work on the social dimension of Islam in Kashmir and “an important book to depict the cultural changes in Kashmir Valley.

4. Khan, Mohammad Ishaq (1994). *Kashmir's Transition to Islam: The Role of Muslim Rishis: New Delhi*: Manhoar Press. The book breaks fresh ground in historical research. Based on a critical and empathic understanding of Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian and Kashmiri sources, it provides a critique of Orientalist scholarship against the background of an historical enquiry conducted into the processes of Islamisation and its dynamics in relation to the role of Muslim Rishis (Kashmiri Sufis).

5. Zutschi, Chitralkha (2004). *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity, and the Making of Kashmir*. New York: Oxford University Press. The book insist on defining Kashmiri culture, history and identity in terms of a historical concept of Kashmiri, or a uniquely Kashmiri cultural identity. This book, in contrast, questions. The notion of any transcendent cultural uniqueness and Kashmiri by returning Kashmir to the mainstream of South Asian historiography. It examines the hundred-year impact of indirect colonial rule on Kashmir's Class formation.

6. Wani, Muhammad Ashraf (2004). *Islam in Kashmir : fourteenth to sixteenth century*. Srinagar : Oriental Pub. House. The book deals with radical change in Sufism and how that change affect the common psyche of the people and how its development is a fascinating chapter in the religious history of Islam.

7. Malik, G. R. (2007). *Kashmiri Culture and Literature*, Srinagar: University of Kashmir. The book deals with different areas of the culture and literature of Kashmir – though apparently heterogeneous yet intimate diverse range of subjects of Kashmiri culture and Kashmiri literature that forms the continuity in the contents and the rationale of presenting them in one volume.

8. Kair, Ananya Jahanara (2009). *Territory of Desire: Representing the Valley of Kashmir*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press. Taking a unique multidisciplinary approach, Territory of Desire asks how, and why, Kashmir came to be so intensely desired within Indian, Pakistani,

and Kashmiri nationalistic imaginations. Analyzing the conversion of natural beauty into collective desire-through photography, literature, cinema, art, and souvenir production.

9. Zutshi, Chitralkha (2019). *Kashmir*. New York: Oxford University Press. Zutshi presents a range of ways in which Kashmir has been imagined by its Inhabitants and outsiders over the centuries- a sacred space, homeland ,nation, secular symbol, and a zone of conflict. Kashmir thus emerges in this account as a geographic entity as well as composite of multiple ideas and shifting boundaries that were produced in specific historical and political context.

Conclusion

The specific travel has not been dealt with a scholarly fashion so for which the present work aims to do. It aims to highlight the dominant trend in writings on Kashmir from medieval times to the modern times cutting across the genres of fiction and non-fiction. The study can be a harbinger of change in the mind and mentality across the scholarly network round the globe. The 'idea of Kashmir' underwent certain negative perceptions in different periods of our past, although it also witnessed many ardent positive supporters. This will help in creating a fresh perspective on Kashmir history, which is of immense importance in contemporary world and will dispel many confusions about the Kashmir its history and its appropriation by dominant discourses. I also propose to involve the policy making institutes so that a comprehensive agenda could be formulated in order to have certain legalities formed on the 'idea of Kashmir'.

This research will acquaint people globally about the true picture of Kashmir and how the construction of an 'idea of Kashmir' as an exotic land, a paradise on earth and a territory of desire emerged. This will help in creating a fresh perspective on Kashmir history.

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