



Representation, Performativity and desacralization of territoriality: Interrogating Ananya Jahanara Kabir's 'Territory of Desire'

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary times cinematic representation is being used as a powerful tool both to promote one's own interest and discredit the interest of the adversary. Such interplay often becomes useful in conflict zones. This paper particularly studies Kashmir as a territory with multiple imaginations and alternative realities. As a territory, which has been a bone of contention between two nuclear powers for more than seven decades now, the uncertainty in people's minds is beyond imagination. For India, it is an integral part, while as for Pakistan it is the nation's jugular vein. In such theatre, both coercion and persuasion play an important role. Ananya has unraveled hitherto uncharted territory of connecting facts with both theory and fiction while explaining both the territorial imagination and its cinematic representation. This paper will also employ geology as a tool to trace the territorial imagination of Kashmiris at various historical junctures.

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Introduction

The book *“Territory of Desire: Representing the Valley of Kashmir”* offers an insightful analysis of the complex socio-political and cultural dynamics of the Kashmir region, particularly examining how Kashmir has been represented and imagined in literary and visual texts. Kabir’s analysis begins with an exploration of the historical context of Kashmir, tracing its contested past and the conflicts that have shaped its present. Kabir delves into the colonial period and the impacts of British rule on the region, highlighting the British orientalist gaze that exoticized and romanticized Kashmir as a “paradise on earth.” She argues that these representations, perpetuated through travelogues, poetry, and visual imagery, have had far reaching consequences in shaping the understanding of Kashmir as an idyllic and picturesque landscape, detached from its complex political realities.

She examines the contemporary situation in Kashmir, focusing on the period following India’s independence in 1947 and the subsequent partition between India and Pakistan. Kabir analyses the conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir and the subsequent militarization of the region, which has had a profound impact on the lives of Kashmiri people. She highlights the experiences of violence, displacement, and loss faced by Kashmiris, as well as the resilience and resistance that have emerged in response to these challenges. Furthermore, Kabir explores the representation of Kashmir in literature and popular culture, including works by Kashmiri writers and filmmakers. She scrutinizes how these creative expressions serve as a counter-narrative to dominant discourses, challenging the simplified and often distorted portrayals of Kashmir propagated by the media and mainstream literature. Kabir also discusses the role of gender in the construction of Kashmiri identity, analyzing how women’s voices and experiences have been marginalized or silenced in the dominant narratives (Kabir 2009).

Indeed, it is true that the portrayal of Kashmiris in Bollywood movies has been a subject of discussion and criticism. According to Bhat, Shafaat Hussain (2019) 50% Bollywood movies depicted Kashmir and its people in a stereotypical manner, focusing primarily on themes of conflict, terrorism, and military presence (Bhat 2019, 6-16). This portrayal has perpetuated certain stereotypes and biased narratives about Kashmiris. Kashmir is a region with a rich cultural heritage, scenic beauty, and a diverse population. Unfortunately, Bollywood movies have often overlooked these aspects and instead chosen to highlight the political turmoil and violence associated with the region. This narrow portrayal has resulted in a limited understanding of Kashmir and its people among audiences outside the region.



It's important to recognize that Bollywood movies are reflections of the perspectives and narratives chosen by filmmakers, and they may not always accurately represent the reality of a particular place or community. It is crucial to seek diverse and authentic sources of information to develop a more comprehensive understanding of any region or its people. In addition, the films are devoid of any reference to the dynamics of class and history that determine and complicate those Kashmiri contestations (M. Rai 2004; Zutshi 2003).

If we watch movies before some decades Kashmir is shown full of rich and beautiful culture that is shaped by its history, geography, and the diverse ethnic and religious groups that inhabit the region. The culture of Kashmir reflects a blend of influences from Central Asia, Persia, and the Indian subcontinent, resulting in a unique and distinct identity. "For example, in 1960s films such as *Junglee*, *Jaanwar* and *Jab Jab Phool Khile*, the Kashmir Valley was a destination for the experience of new forms of leisure and pleasure, in a manner that elided all references to the political situation. Metropolitan protagonists, both male and female, were shown as travelling to the Valley to play tennis and golf tournaments, on college excursions, or simply to recover from the stress of urban living. In contrast, the Kashmiris they met were depicted in metonymic contiguity with the landscape the camera showcased." Placed against the panorama of the Valley's visual splendour, they emerged as representative of a pastoral idyll outside of capitalism and modernity. Being 'Kashmiri', signaled particularly through Kashmiri dress, became a signifier of modernity's other; that both needed to be jettisoned and retained as a mirror to the postcolonial nation's emergent sense of self.

Moreover, In the changed configuration of the 1990s, however, being 'Kashmiri' means a layering of Muslim identity onto the inherited presentation of an ethnic Kashmiriness, itself fetishised. "The visuality of the Kashmiri as other accrues new signifiers even as new reasons emerge for the narrative movement of non-Kashmiris to Kashmir. Now, what Srinivas (1994) calls 'the law-and-order state' is why people travel to the Valley: as cryptographers (Roja),

police officers (*Mission Kashmir*) or army officers (. . . *Yahaan*)."

In addition, one of the key contributions of "Territory of Desire" is its examination of the power dynamics involved in the production and consumption of representations of Kashmir. Kabir interrogates the politics of representation, highlighting how external narratives and agendas often overshadow the perspectives and aspirations of the Kashmiri people themselves. She calls for a more nuanced and



inclusive understanding of Kashmir, one that recognizes the agency and desires of its inhabitants and moves beyond simplistic binaries and essentialized identities. She provides a thought-provoking analysis of the representation and imagination of Kashmir, shedding light on the historical, political, and cultural forces that have shaped the region's identity (Kabir 2009). By critically engaging with a range of texts and discourses, Kabir offers a multi-dimensional understanding of Kashmir, challenging the dominant narratives and advocating for a more inclusive and empathetic approach to the complexities of this contested territory.

Throughout the book, Kabir explores the diverse ways in which Kashmir has been imagined, represented, and understood by various actors, including scholars, writers, filmmakers, and the media. Kabir recognizes that Kashmir has been subjected to different narratives and interpretations, often influenced by external interests and power dynamics. She argues that these multiple imaginations of Kashmir have played a significant role in shaping perceptions of the region and its people, both within and outside Kashmir itself. She investigates how Kashmir has been portrayed as a picturesque paradise, a land of beauty, tranquility, and spirituality. This representation, rooted in colonial and orientalist discourses, has been perpetuated through various mediums, such as travelogues, literature, and visual art. Kabir deconstructs these representations and highlights how they have contributed to the marginalization and erasure of the complex socio-political realities of Kashmir.

At the same time, Kabir explores counter-narratives and alternative imaginations of Kashmir that challenge these dominant representations. She examines the works of Kashmiri writers, poets, and filmmakers who provide nuanced and authentic depictions of the region, drawing on their lived experiences and giving voice to the aspirations and struggles of the Kashmiri people. Through these alternative imaginations, Kabir emphasizes the agency and creativity of the Kashmiri population in shaping their own narratives.

Furthermore, she delves into the political dimensions of the multiple imaginations of Kashmir. She analyzes how different actors, including India, Pakistan, and various Kashmiri separatist movements, have utilized specific narratives to advance their political agendas. These narratives often oversimplify the complexities of the region, reducing it to binary categories such as "Indian" or "Pakistani" or ignoring the aspirations of the Kashmiri people for self-determination. By examining these political imaginations, she exposes the power dynamics at play and calls for a more inclusive and empathetic understanding of Kashmir. Overall, Kabir's analysis in "Territory of Desire" underscores the plurality of imaginations surrounding Kashmir. By exploring the diverse representations and narratives,



she highlights the need to move beyond simplistic and essentialized views of the region and engage with the complexities and aspirations of its people. This multifaceted examination contributes to a richer understanding of Kashmir as a territory with multiple and contested imaginations.

Geology, as a scientific discipline, involves studying the Earth's physical structure, composition, and processes, including the formation of landscapes and landforms. The geology is used as a tool to trace the territorial imagination of Kashmiris at various historical junctures. By examining the geological features of a region, one can gain insights into its historical evolution and the ways in which it has been perceived and imagined by its inhabitants. Kabir recognizes that geology has played a significant role in shaping the territorial imagination of Kashmiris. The unique geological formations of Kashmir, such as its majestic mountains, fertile valleys, and serene lakes, have contributed to the region's perceived beauty and attractiveness. These natural features have not only influenced the way outsiders perceive Kashmir but also shaped the cultural, social, and economic practices of the Kashmiri people themselves.

Furthermore, Kabir explores how the territorial imagination of Kashmiris has been intertwined with the geological characteristics of the region. She examines how the geology of Kashmir has influenced the development of its infrastructure, including road networks, settlements, and agricultural practices. The physical landscape, shaped by geological processes over millions of years, has provided both opportunities and challenges for the people inhabiting the region. Understanding the geological aspects of Kashmir allows readers for a deeper appreciation of the historical and cultural contexts in which the territorial imagination of Kashmiris has evolved. Moreover, the geological features of Kashmir have been instrumentalized for political and identity-based purposes. The contested nature of the region has resulted in different actors invoking the geography and geology of Kashmir to stake claims to its territory. Historical and political narratives have often drawn on the symbolism of Kashmir's landscapes and landforms to legitimize their perspectives and assert their authority. By examining these dynamics, Kabir highlights the complex interplay between geology, territory, and the imaginations of Kashmiris. By utilizing geology as a tool to trace the territorial imagination of Kashmiris, Kabir underscores the importance of understanding the physical and geological dimensions of a region in comprehending its cultural, social, and political complexities.



Territorial Imagination of Kashmir with Kashmiris at various Stages in History

The origin of the valley of Kashmir has been shrouded in mythology. Almost all historians acknowledge that at some point in history, Kashmir was a massive lake. Chitrlekha Zutshi mentions that “In the beginning there was a lake called ‘Satisar’. PMK Bamzai also states that the legends about the origin of the Valley are unanimous in referring to its having been a vast inland lake formed of the waters from the melting ice and snow on the high mountain peaks surrounding it. Kumkum Roy is of the opinion that the creation of land from water is linked to a conflict between divine and demonic forces: the puranic trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva on the one hand, and a demon named Jalodhbhava (literally, he who emerges from the water) on the other”. Such a scheme according to Roy has been attributed to the instigation of Prajapati Kashyapa (after whom the realm is named) and leads to the emergence of the mandala of Kashmir.

Bamzai quotes Kalhana, who according to him begins his chronicle with an account of King Gonanda I, “whose initial year of reign he places in 653 Kali, the traditional date of the coronation of King Yudhisthira, the Pandava leader. One also finds the mention of Kashmir valley in Nilmat Purana. It states, the holy region of Kasmira is possessed of all the sacred places. There are sacred lakes of the Nagas and the holy mountains; there are holy rivers, and the holy lakes; there are highly sacred temples and also the hermitages attached to them. In the center flows, making as it were the parting of the hair, the Vitasta- the highest goddess visibly born of the Himalaya. -Nilamata Purana. The most famous king of Kashmir undoubtedly has been Lalitaditya. C.G Bruce states that near around 700 A.D, we find a good king arising from Kashmir itself. His name was Lalitaditya. He did much to restore agricultural prosperity by his goodness to the farming classes, by making canals and bridges. (Prem Nath Bazaz regards Lalitaditya as comparatively a good monarch. Bazaz puts the date of his coronation at 697 A.D, which lasted till 738 A.D. 41 Kashmiris hold Lalitaditya in high esteem. Bazaz quotes Alberuni, who has written a day was celebrated in the Valley to commemorate the deeds of the hero; for he had raised the country through his adventures, exploits and conquests, to a pitch of glory never reached before.

Shonaleekha Kaul mentions that in the Rajatarangini, there is an identifiable sense of chronicling a distinct spatial unit or region (deta, mandala) with which the author identifies himself and his protagonists. After the advent of Islam in valley, the valley initially saw political upheaval. Sikander was an ambitious ruler, who sensed an opportunity in the neighboring territory of Ladakh, which had already seceded from Tibet and acquired a geographical identity distinct from Tibet. Thus, Ladakh was secured as a part of Kashmiri Kingdom. Mughals had also sought to bring Kashmir under their rule.



Babur failed to do so, so did Humayun. However, In 1586, Akbar successfully managed to bring Kashmir under his control, thereby starting a reign of outsider's rule in the valley. The Afghans rule made Kashmir subservient to Kandhar, under Durrani rule. The Afghan rule in valley has been regarded as most oppressive. Sir Walter Lawrence in his book, The valley of Kashmir has in detail expounded the conditions.

During Afghan Sikh war, the Sikhs emerged victorious and established their domination over northern Indian including Jammu and Kashmir. Sikhs ultimately were routed by Britain in famous battle of Amristar, and hence the British's defacto rule was established. Brittan made Ghulab Singh the ruler, whose Dogra dynasty lasted more than a century. This period was also marked by what has been known as the great game between Great Britain and Imperial Russia. Kashmir served as a buffer between two empires, and therefore managed to secure an identity of its own. There had been growing resentment against Dogra rule from time to time. This led to the growth of indigenous Kashmiri nationalist thought and movement, which was initially started by educated Hindus and subsequently Muslims. The partition of the subcontinent put Kashmir at crossroads between India and Pakistan, and the tussle has existed till date.

Conclusion

The conclusion regarding the portrayal of Kashmiri Muslims in Bollywood's may vary depending on the specific analysis or critique being discussed. Some critics argue that Bollywood has often depicted Kashmiri Muslims in a stereotypical manner, perpetuating certain narratives that may not accurately represent their diversity, aspirations, and lived experiences. However, it's worth noting that not all Bollywood films fall into the same category, and there have been instances where filmmakers have attempted to provide nuanced portrayals of Kashmiri Muslims, shedding light on their cultural richness, aspirations, and struggles beyond the lens of conflict. There have been films that aim to humanize characters and explore the intricacies of their lives, showcasing their hopes, dreams, and everyday experiences. By studying the geological features of Kashmir and analyzing their influence on the perceptions and aspirations of its inhabitants, Kabir provides valuable insights into the ways in which landscapes and territories are imagined, constructed, and contested by different actors throughout history. It's crucial to promote narratives that capture the complexity and diversity of Kashmiri Muslim identities, while also addressing the historical and political context in a responsible and sensitive manner.



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