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Autumnal explorations of alterity: conjuring ghosts of Kashmir's forgotten and disappeared in 'Harud'

A film review of *Harud (Autumn)* (Urdu 2010)

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HARUD (2010)

Director: Aamir Bashir

Screenplay: Aamir Bashir, Mahmood Farooqui, Shanker Raman

Cast: Mohammad Amir (Reza) Naji, Shahnawaz Bhat, Shamim Basharat, Salma Ashai

'*Harud*/'*Autumn* (2010) explodes onto the screen with a montage of grainy documentary footage, capturing turbulent times in the volatile Kashmir region. Street protests, violent demonstrations, burning buses, stand-offs between stone-pelting protesters and police epitomise the flashpoint that this Himalayan state has come to represent. Kashmir, the beleaguered paradise serves as a motif for director Aamir Bashir's masterful weaving of a languorous yet intense narrative, in the form of a darkly disconcerting submersion into the smothered lives of ordinary Kashmiri civilians. Following the film's tumultuous exposition, the viewer is transported into hiemal silence, a realm of hermetic ethereality.

This abrupt descent into silence commences with Rafiq (Shahnawaz Bhat), a young Kashmiri Muslim seated in a crowded bus, alongside his father. The bus containing Kashmiri civilians is stopped at an Indian army checkpoint. The passengers are asked to disembark and subjected to rigorous, methodical frisking. This scene is striking in its circumvention of conventional cinematic time-

the entire 'stop and search' regime is painstakingly captured from a distance, in real time. Aamir Bashir reveals that the verisimilitude in this scene is complete and without artifice. What we witness is a bona-fide security check conducted on a daily basis by the Indian armed forces. As the scene progresses, we see a 4 year old child included in the pat down, undistinguished from the process extended to adults. The clinical detachment of regimented procedure exhibited by 'searcher' counterpoised with resigned acceptance of the 'searched' leads to an unsettling displacement of viewer equilibrium. We realise that the people undergoing frisking exist in a system where 'normative' standards do not necessarily apply and civil liberties are unguaranteed. Therefore, *Harud* examines these Kashmiri civilians' lived experience, outside the beguiling lens of popular myth or the mendacious miasma of political discourse. For the remainder of the film, we are lens-locked into Rafiq's story, vicariously following his quotidian existence. The monotony of his life is amplified by the camera's relentless pursuit of his most trivial actions, again in real-time - waking, sleeping, staring into space and particularly his aimless perambulations around the fortified city of Srinagar. Rafiq inhabits a realm of reticence, drifting through life like a somnambulist, his inscrutable physiognomy occasionally betrayed by lugubrious eyes that

conceal a cauldron of emotions. Rafiq's torpor is a façade for the turmoil-ridden actuality that haunts the film's substratum. The ghosts of a multitude of other stories and realities, disavowed, effaced and rendered ethereal by the misleading myths and vested interests that enshroud Kashmir, also haunt this film's narrative. The film performs a Manichean melding of pristine Himalayan splendour-quintessential of the Kashmiri landscape and a cloying atmosphere of trepidation and uncertainty, so synonymic with this valley of fear.

Shanker Raman's masterful cinematography constantly frames Rafiq and his fellow Kashmiri's cloistered and threadbare lives. Time seems to have frozen in this place, and the viewer is impelled to experience the onscreen characters' ennui, in a state of almost suspended temporality. The gravitas of Bashir's film resides in its understatement. The maelstrom of politico-religious discourse surrounding Kashmir is restrained in the film and is seldom allowed an overt opportunity to burst its banks. There are sporadic visual references, such as graffiti on a wall with the word '*Azaadi*' (freedom). However, the ethos of this film lies in unarticulated, dormant discourses, fettered within the film's subtext and directly informed by the predicament of Kashmiri people at the grassroots level.

Harud's narrative engages with the theme of ordinary Muslim Kashmiri civilians' struggle

to retrieve their own identity, languishing between bigger dialectical forces – India and Pakistan, both operating to fulfil their own ulterior motives. A far cry from commercial films set in Kashmir that tend to propagate reductionist narratives of good versus evil, patriot against militant-extremist, *Harud* attempts to liberate the voices of the aforementioned Kashmiri citizens caught in the crossfire of conflict, living in the shadow of the gun. In this regard, the film's aesthetic carefully captures the omnipresence of Indian security forces in Srinagar, perceived by locals as an encroachment and impingement on even the concept of an amicable everyday existence.

The lack of agency in Kashmiri civil society is at the forefront of *Harud's* narrative. This is represented with subtlety, through effective framing and composition of the minutiae of everyday life in Kashmir and exemplified by a wonderful shot of Rafiq peering helplessly at a soldier from behind a barbed wire fence. *Harud* is a film that vindicates Jacques Derrida's notion of cinema as the art of ghosts, a battle of phantoms. For Derrida, a ghost is something from the past that has never found realisation in the present. This thesis could be transposed to *Harud* in its exposition of the ghosts of Kashmir – the human casualties of conflict. In particular, the film evokes the phantasms of Kashmir's 'disappeared', thousands of young Kashmiri men whisked away by the Indian army from

their homes, in front of their families, and never seen again.

These ghosts are abstract apparitions, manifesting themselves in the hidden stories of common people forgotten in the face of an ineluctable conflict. They are conjured at every turn, through the film's diegetic elements, in photographs of disappeared individuals, radio broadcasts and the *mise en abyme* of film clips, and archive footage depicting the conflict. Rafiq himself is haunted by the ghost of his brother Tauqir, a tourist photographer before he was 'disappeared' by Indian security forces. Tauqir appears to Rafiq throughout the film as a silent revenant staring mutely back at Rafiq. Apart from these visitations, Rafiq's only tangible connection to his brother is Tauqir's old camera, which Rafiq starts using to filter his vision of an uncertain world. Through the suspension of articulation, the Kashmiri Muslims depicted in the film seem to have become pale shadows, like Rafiq, living spectres existing cheek to jowl with the ghosts of their departed.

The reality of the Kashmiri lived experience, like the aforementioned ghosts emerge intermittently from ostensibly banal conversations and interactions in the narrative. An interesting example is when Rafiq, his friends Ishaq and Aslam are lounging on the grass engaging in idle banter. Ishaq strikes up a melancholy ditty replete with telling lyrics:

O, world of regret

How can one ever find happiness here

Look at all those...

Who have ended up in their graves...

Commending his vocal abilities, Aslam suggests Ishaq tries his luck on the TV Show '*Who Wants to be a Superstar*', assuring him that the whole of Kashmir would send SMS votes in support of their local lad – as and when Kashmir receives a mobile-phone service (the film is set in 2003 when Kashmir was on the cusp of becoming connected via mobile phones). Singer Ishaq retorts '*Kashmiris have never voted in an election, so why would they vote for me*'. There is a double narrative running through this scene. On the surface, we are clued in to the fact that Kashmir has thus far been disconnected from the rest of India by the lack of a mobile phone service - although the narrative subsequently reveals that the Indian government is due to introduce SIM cards in Kashmir within the next few days. However, this perceptibly commonplace conversation about a TV talent show and mobile phones contains deeper connotations. Ishaq's assertion about Kashmiris not being able to vote and the fact that mobile phones came to Kashmir 7 years after they were introduced in the rest of India underscores the historical disenfranchisement and disjuncture from normative modes experienced by modern Kashmiri civil society. Therefore, this disconnect has contributed to the community's

suspension in a regressive state of limbo. The film's ironical interplay portrays pre-mobile phone Kashmir's disenchantment and estrangement in the world's largest democracy, and as such contains powerful ramifications.

Harud's recurring employment of embedded and semi-restricted narrative information provides insight into Kashmir's state of arrested development. This is exemplified in a scene where a serpentine queue of young Kashmiri men are waiting to receive their mobile phone SIM cards, with a TV news reporter from Delhi asking them how it feels to be 'connected with the rest of India'. The facile, almost farcical nature of the reporter's superficial and specious 'coverage' is a microcosm of media misrepresentation sometimes employed by nation states to legitimise hegemonic structures. The reporter, in her piece to camera, commends the Indian government's largesse, its 'bold step' in bringing connectivity to Kashmir. This sequence throws light on the mannered, staged and escapist endeavour, to present Kashmir as 'normal', integrated, and inscribed within a homogeneous grand national metanarrative. The duplicity displayed in the reporter's cavalier coverage presents a trenchant indictment of the stark reality of alterity in the Kashmir region

Once again, the device of liberating disconcerting pieces of information from ostensibly mundane interactions is invoked in a

set-piece involving a football match. Rafiq gets into a fracas with a member of the opposing team. He is dragged away from the melee by his friends who admonish him for his belligerence, revealing that his opponent is the local militant commander's cousin. Therefore, at every turn in Kashmiri life, there seems to be a subversion of 'normality', with common citizens constantly sandwiched between military and militants, and where a daily existence bereft of complex underpinnings seems a distant utopian dream.

Expositions of the socio-political reality in Kashmiri society also emerge in moments of levity, for example, when the three friends indulge in 'armchair' politics, adopting the World Cup football qualifiers as a metaphor to delineate global configurations of power. Conglobating football and world dominance, Ishaq, the budding singer mulls over his hypothesis that if Kashmir were to play the World Cup qualifiers, they would have to play against Pakistan – but he reckons Pakistan is too busy with cricket, so Kashmir might have to play Afghanistan – but he thinks that country cannot even put together a team. Ishaq ultimately declares that China would be Kashmir's biggest challenger. Aslam reminds Ishaq that '*China could kick us (Kashmir) like a football*'. Ishaq expresses his confidence that America would not permit any Chinese dominance over Kashmir, inviting Aslam's

riposte - *'Why would the Americans be interested, we have no oil!'*

Another remarkable feature of *Harud* is its propensity to invoke inter-textual dialogue. The themes that emerge from this film almost demand the viewing of parallel cinematic texts such as Oscar nominated documentary filmmaker Ashvin Kumar's incisive *'Inshallah Kashmir'* (2012) exploring the historical sense of autonomy in the region and the passionate pride of the Kashmiris in their traditions and culture. This documentary based on interviews with Kashmiri locals provides a factual historical context to the events depicted in *Harud*. It provides a critical insight into circumstances leading to the appropriation of the Kashmiri political sphere by the Indian centre and the occupation of its civil space by Indian security forces. *Harud's* invocation of intertextuality is analogous to a Bakhtinian dialogic between literary texts, where there is a continual conversation or communication between narratives and authors of different books. In addition to *'Inshallah Kashmir'*, *Harud's* credentials as a dialogic filmic text links it to a third film – filmmaker Onir's *'I Am'* (2010), in which one of the storylines is about the return of an exiled Hindu Kashmiri Pandit woman to her home and a chequered reunion with the Muslim Kashmiri family she grew up with. The tensions, conflicts and realities that emerge from that film almost function as a continuum of the discourses evoked in *Harud*.

During my conversation with *Harud's* director Aamir Bashir, he remarked that his film came under fire from mixed sections of Indian society, either for not presenting a more radical representation of atrocities inflicted by security forces on innocent civilians, or for not adequately addressing the plight of the exiled minority Hindu Kashmiri Pandit community. Following violent attacks on their community, Kashmiri Pandits fled the Kashmir valley in the 1990s, in what was the largest mass exodus in Indian history after the monumental 1947 partition. When queried about addressing the displacement of the Pandits from their homes in Kashmir, Bashir replied, 'I have represented them by their absence'. One of the lines spoken in the film echoes Bashir's sentiment '*A whole generation of (Kashmiris) have grown up for whom the only reference to Kashmiri Pandits is abandoned houses*'. These elements of subtle understatement make *Harud* a powerfully compelling film, one that opts not to lapse into explicit propaganda, political diatribe or even innuendo. Instead, it substitutes a painstakingly slow rhythm and meter, parturient silence and overall bleakness to foreground the plight of a beleaguered people living in the shadow of violence.

This situation of lives fraught with uncertainty emphasises the aforementioned suspension in a state of limbo – a liminal space where the Kashmiris are trapped in a perpetual 'rites of passage', condemned to never emerge

into a state of 'becoming'. The film's ponderous pace is brutally shattered by sudden explosions of violence. The narrative though never resorts to graphic representations. The violence that punctuates plot points in the films, are reminiscent of *'The Battle of Algiers's (1966)* seething undercurrent, a raging tide boiling below the surface waiting to spill over at any instant. In one such instance, Rafiq and his friends are having a meal, seated at a roadside shack, when a bomb explodes, decimating the ramshackle hut and injuring Aslam.

Such random manifestations of violence are encountered on a daily basis not only by Rafiq's friends but also his family. Veteran Iranian actor Reza Naji, playing Rafiq's father Yusuf, is an embodiment of the silence that engulfs the valley. He is a traffic policeman who goes about his daily routine like his son Rafiq, in stolid silence. Yusuf's life is irrevocably shattered when he witnesses a dying young suicide bomber at close quarters, the youth's blood spattering his hands and policeman's uniform. This experience renders him shell-shocked and traumatised for the rest of the film, unable to cope with the horror he has witnessed. By contrast, Rafiq's mother Fatima (Shamim Basharat) remains a tower of fortitude, bearing the travails of this tempestuous existence with *sang-froid*, balancing familial duties with her tireless crusade, to seek answers for the disappearance of her older son, Tauqir.

The apparition of Rafiq's brother, thus far portrayed as an individual metonym is transformed into the collective spectre of thousands of young Kashmiri men 'disappeared' by the Indian state apparatus – the police and army. We see an actual rally by the APDP (Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons) comprised mainly of mothers, including Rafiq's, holding placards with photographs of their missing sons taken from their homes and families, never to be seen again. This cinematic revelation of a macabre Indian reality is a definitive component of *Harud*. It exposes the repression and imposition of force in a democratic nation, on members of Kashmiri civil society, uncovering the disturbing skeleton in secular India's closet – the disappeared Kashmiris. *Harud's* portrayal includes the Indian state amongst the ranks of nations such as Chile, Argentina and Spain with the dubious record of unaccounted, disappeared citizens.

Breaking its measured pace, the film hurtles to a climax that reverberates long after its completion. Tragedy unfolds in a tense gripping denouement, as viewer expectations are subverted. The wailing lamentations finally shatter the film's fragile silence, as if a figurative threnody of grief is the only articulation afforded to a weary Kashmiri people.

Ultimately, *Harud* is a very important film – a film that asks fundamental, self-critical

questions, about justice, liberty and human rights. These questions are like the ghosts in the film, standing, staring, silent, accusing and beseeching - for the voices of the Kashmiri

people to be heard, voices that seem to have been forgotten in the babel of India's democracy... 🇮🇳
