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FROM AN (IM) MOBILE LAND: INSCRIBING THE (POSTCOLONIAL) OTHER IN MALIK SAJAD'S MUNNU- A BOY FROM KASHMIR

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Abstract- Kashmir has often figured in the popular imagination either as a fantastical setting or as a breeding ground of terrorism. Notably, the native Kashmiri "body" is insubordination or absent from most of these popular representations. It's against this material effacement of Kashmiri body in mainstream visual representations that this paper reads Malik Sajad's autobiographical graphic narrative *Munnu – A Boy from Kashmir* (2015) as making a discursive intervention. Sajad's graphic tale of an ordinary boy from Kashmir growing up to become a cartoonist, in the adverse political climate of the 90's in the region, offers a counter-discourse by inscribing the body into the landscape, thereby infusing representation with materiality. However, this reclaiming as proposed by Kabir (2009), is far from celebratory as the Kashmiri body in the landscape is one in pain, scarred by violence. By embodying the author's personal and the collective trauma of surviving in a "conflict zone" on to a visual medium, Sajad pushes against the discourse of the unspeakable and the unimaginable by taking what Chute (2016) refers to as the "risk of representation."

Keywords: graphic narrative, Kashmir, (postcolonial) other

I. INTRODUCTION:

Kashmir is a flashpoint in the history of postcolonial Indian State[1]. As noted by Kazi (2010),it is "one of the most heavily militarized regions in the world" (cited in Hogan, 2016,p.1). Kashmir is a long-term conflict zone where the region and its people have been subjected to decades of psychic and physical violence over territorial disputes between India and Pakistan, clashes between the army and militants and the resultant political quagmire. The spiraling tensions in the wake of 1989 insurgency and the capricious political climate through the 90s is best summed-up by Kabir (2009),

Everyday reality was radically altered through "crackdowns", "bunkers", "militants", "surrendered militants" and a whole gamut of military and paramilitary regimens…Disappeared youth, raped women, intracommunal breakdown, interrupted childhoods, traumatized soldiers and above all the thickness of rumor turned the region into the veritable "space of death". (p.9)

Examining Kashmir through the frame of postcolonialism very soon reveals the cracks in the framework. Hogan (2016) delineates how the unique case of Kashmir problematizes the postcolonial paradigm and the concomitant theories of nationalism, identity and resistance. For one, Kashmir does not comfortably fit into the bracket of postcolonial state because of its historically contested nature. While Indian official line has described Kashmir as "as the core of our nationhood", Pakistan called it its "unfinished business" and amidst these claims and counterclaims Kashmiri's own demand for "azadi" has been largely rendered mute. The religious and ethnic tensions within the region have also added to the murkiness of the issue.

This then begs the question—Can Kashmir be framed as colonial state? Again, not in the typical sense of the term. It's unlike colonies under European colonialism that were primarily sources of raw materials, manpower and revenue. In the case of Kashmir this is hardly so; the Indian state in fact spends a portion of its GDP in deploying military troops in Kashmir while also extending other economic aids (Hogan, 2016). Further the ethnic and linguistic differences also is notable:

The Kashmiri populace has been terrorized through decades by both the military (who are largely immune from prosecution and therefore have little reason to not act cruelly on the basis of anger and fear) and the militants, who are of course not subject to ordinary laws. Vast majority of Indian military and a large percentage of the militants are not Kashmiri. In consequence they often treat Kashmiri people as enemies, though both the soldiers and militants are putatively fighting on behalf of the Kashmiri people. (Hogan, 2016, Intro p. 1)

[1]The political and social imperatives that defined Kashmir got transformed (some prefer to use the term, defused) on 5 August 2019, when the special status under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution got revoked. This article excludes the current milieu in its analysis and hence should be read in accordance with this.

Thus, alienated from one's own land, Kashmiris occupy an '"othered" space within the postcolonial nation that has inherited the burden of colonial discourse"(Kabir, 2009, p.15). Kabir aptly describes the Valley as the "(postcolonial) other"(p.15).

Kashmir and the Question of Representation

This paradoxical "othering" of Kashmir also perhaps best explains the scant literary attention that Kashmir and its enduring crisis have received over the years and its palpable absence in the discussions on postcolonial discourse and writings. Despite being a rich source of literature in the past, contemporary Kashmir has received serious literary treatment only through a handful of Anglophone writers like Salman Rushdie, and the poet Agha Shahid Ali and a few others in recent times. The incongruity of the above stated scenario becomes more evident when one looks at profusion of non-fictional writings on Kashmir, which largely focuses on the region as a subject of bilateral state conflict or as a potential breeding ground for terrorism. Memoirs like the *Curfewed Night* (2010) is a corrective to this.

Having said that Kashmir and its pristine landscape have always gripped the popular Indian imagination, largely nurtured through Bollywood cinema. Kabir (2009) proposes that the modes of representation of Kashmir both by its people and Indians mark it as a "territory of desire" (Intro p.1). While it was the Mughal emperor Jahangir who first ascribed the epithet of "paradise" to Kashmir, later reiterated by Amir Khusro, the Persian poet; Bollywood converted this "description into a discourse" (p.18). She argues that modern representation of Kashmir has largely been mediated through camera and this has contributed to the "persistence of landscape" (p. 17) in engendering the desire for Kashmir. Think about movies like *Kashmir Ki Kali* (1964) whose narrative unfolds against the scenic landscapes and pristine lakes of Kashmir. Here the Valley forms a backdrop to the romance blossoming between the hero and heroine who belong to mainstream India.

Kashmir has also figured in national discourse as a site to underscore the patriotism of the Indian army and people. Movies like *Roja* (1992)*, Mission Kashmir* (2000)*, Yahaan* (2005)*, Keerti Chakra* (2006) etc. are popular examples. Such representation invariably dramatizes the conflict between the army and the militants against the background of Valley, positing the Valley as a space infested with terrorists, posing a serious threat to national security. These narratives give cultural legitimacy to militarization in Kashmir. In all these representations the native Kashmiri is pushed to the background or the margins of the narrative.

In keeping with the colonial practice, these representations are characterized by what Taussig (1987) calls"epistemic murk" (as cited in Kabir, 2009, p.20).As Kabir (2009) goes on to state, "This image foregrounds the Valley's landscape, and occasionally, the ruin in the landscape; it prefers to eliminate Kashmiri people, monuments in use and homes." (p.17) Kashmir thus operates in the Indian imagination through the framework of fantasy where the [Kashmiri] body is in complete subordination or discursively elided.

It's against this material effacement of Kashmiri body in mainstream visual representation that I read Sajad's (2015) autobiographical graphic narrative *Munnu- A Boy from Kashmir* as making a discursive intervention. Sajad's (2015) graphic tale of an ordinary boy from Kashmir growing up to become a cartoonist in the adverse political climate of the 90's in the region offers a counter-discourse by returning the body to the landscape thereby infusing representation with materiality.

However, Kabir (2009) reminds that "For Kashmiri cultural producer, such reclaiming implies a need not to celebrate the paradise on earth, but to commemorate the landscape's staining by Kashmiri blood …This Kashmiri body in the landscape is now a body in pain, body that bears scars of multiple registers of violence— physical, epistemic, psychosomatic, nostalgic. The body that intrudes into and distorts the collective Indian fantasy of the pastoral Valley of Kashmir…" (p.21)

Graphic Narrative as a Form of Document

Graphic narrative is a sequential form of expression in the medium of comics. Words and images drawn by hand are framed within panels and grids, separated by gutters in this hybrid narrative form to tell a story. Regarded as 'comics' that treat serious/ adult subjects/themes, graphic narratives caught the attention of international litterateur with Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986), Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (1997) and Marjane Satraapi's *Persepolis* (2000). Joe Sacco with his reportage on the Israel-Palestine conflict in the graphic medium pioneered what came to be known as "comic journalism". Very soon graphic artists and cartoonists across the world saw the potential of this cross-discursive form for "life writing" to capture the complex register of traumatic experiences of living and growing up in conflict zone. The first graphic novel from India, Orijit Sen's *River of Stories*(1994) narrativizes the socio-political strife that ensued following the construction project of Narmada Dam and the resultant displacement of tribal community from the region. Two graphic novels have come from India based on the conflict in Kashmir- *Kashmir Pending*

(2007) and the text under discussion *Munnu – A Boy from Kashmir* (2015). (Of the two the first is no longer in print and the second, published in London is available in India.)

From its very onset with Spiegelman's *Maus*, graphic narratives have assumed the character of non-fiction. This is peculiar since drawing (by hand) has always been regarded as less transparent and hence less authentic a medium to record truths when compared to writing. Given that histories of war and trauma constantly invoke "inventive textual practice" (Chute, 2010, p.26) to afford ethical expression of such complex narratives, one is led to assume that there are certain features innate to the medium of comics, which enable a storyteller to articulate harrowing experience more effectively. This forms the basis of the large part of study undertaken by Chute (2016) in her seminal work on "documentary comics" from which this paper draws its theoretical tenets.

Chute's (2016) study proposes that the formal dimensions of comics— collection of frames and panels, explain its inherent propensity to document. To quote,

Documentation is about the presentation of evidence. In its succession of replete frames, comics call attention to itself, specifically, as evidence. Comics makes the reader access the unfolding evidence in the movement of its basic grammar, by aggregating and accumulating frames of information. (p.2)

However, in so doing they function differently and perhaps more intricately from other documents of evidence like say a film or a photograph, a difference centered mostly on the question of reference. The divide between an image drawn by hand as opposed to that captured by lens is rooted in the notion of "objectivity" which implies absence of any personal constraints. Graphic narratives that engage in documenting history nullify this debate as it is evidently a "staged" image as opposed to "taken" one (Chute, 2016, p.21). Moreover, it's not "duplicative" either as it does not seek to present a mirror image of reality or merely represent but constitute in itself as "material objects" (Chute, 2016, p.21). But the most crucial difference lies in its temporal dimension. Distinguishing from photography, Berger (2005) writes of drawing "…as forcing us to stop and enter its time. A photograph is static, as it has stopped time. A drawing or painting is static because it encompasses time" (as cited inChute, 2016, p. 21). The frame-gutter structure of comics, which implies time, offers tremendous possibility for the author to experiment with narrative time by expanding or collapsing it within a single page. According to Gunning (2014), the power of comics medium lies in its this ability to capture stillness and movement through narrative motion thus demanding a more nuanced reading of such narratives (as cited in Chute, 2016, p.22). It allows the reader the freedom to control the pace of reading by focusing a little longer on certain frames or to move back and forth between and across frames thereby opening up the interpretative possibilities of the text without offering a semantic closure.

Narratives of war and trauma are often about retracing the history and memory and standing witness to it. Hence most of these narratives are also about the *self* that brings to table questions about the ethics of testimonyand constitution of self. One the central queries that lie at the ethical core of documentary comics is – "…what does it mean for an author to literally reappear—in the form of a legible, drawn body on the page – at the site of inscriptional effacement?" (Chute, 2010, p.3). Graphic narratives through material retracing of the history is engaged in the act of ethical repetition and counter-inscription. These narratives "that bear witness to author's traumas or to those of others materially retrace *inscriptional effacement*; they repeat and reconstruct in order to counteract" (Chute, 2016, p.4). Graphic narratives thus "intervene against the culture of invisibility by taking the *risk of representation*."(Chute, 2016, p.5) Documentary comics work against the discourse of unspeakable, unrepresentable, and the unimaginable that is often emphasized in trauma theory. They moreover challenge the valorization of absence and aporia, commonplace in the wake of deconstruction, by asserting the value of *presence*. By establishing itself "suggestively as a rich location for the work of documentation, always calling attention to the relationship of part to the whole, to the self-conscious build-up of information that may or may not coalesce into meaning"(Chute, 2016, p.17) they not only risk representation but "refigure representation" by moving from "representation to presentation" and shifting from "image as representation to image as process"(Chute, 2016, p.17).

As a documentary addressing history, witness and testimony, graphic narratives have effectively blurred the boundaries of received categories of narrative and challenged regular classifications of genres as say fiction and non-fiction. Graphics narrative in documenting history also draws attention to its crafting thereby suggesting, "accuracy is not opposed to creative invention" (Chute, 2016, p.2). Ever conscious of its mediation, it rejects the "aesthetics of transparency" (Chute, 2016, p.2) and focus on what Grierson (1933) has called "creative treatment of actuality" (as cited in Chute, 2016, p.18).

***Munnu – A Boy from Kashmir:*Inscribing the (Postcolonial) Other**

Munnu – A Boy from Kashmir (2015) is the first book-length graphic narrative by Kashmiri cartoonist Malik Sajad who published his first cartoon at the mere age of 14. Born two year prior to the 1989

insurgency, Sajad literally lived through the decade of crisis, being not just a witness to it but even then, responding to the situation critically through his cartoons and art that was published in the local daily. The narrative is a recounting, using word and image, of the years growing up as a small boy, in the town of Batamaloo in Kashmir against the backdrop of insurgency, taking the reader through his adolescence and evolution as a cartoonist. The illustrations are made in black and white with images in the style of German woodcutting (popular during the European expressionism) with sharp angular strokes. The result is a collection of frames that aberrantly jar with the vibrant scenic Kashmir of the popular imagination.

Sajad's graphic narrative is a critical and affective response to the ethical question posed by Chute (2010) about inscribing the self at the site of scriptural effacement. The front cover (Sajad, 2015, Figure 1) of the book shows the bust of Hangul deer (knowledge of the animal and the rationale for the analogy comes to the reader halfway into the narrative) with diamond cut wide-open staring eyes and the title beneath reading "Munnu—A Boy from Kashmir''. The phrase "A Boy from Kashmir" juxtaposed beneath the bust of the Hangul deer deliberately positions the Kashmiri as the "other" to the outside world. The inscription is deeply imbued with irony, because the Kashmiris in the narrative are transmogrified as Hangul deer – a representation that is set against the human form attributed to the men of Indian army and people outside of Kashmir. This inscription of Kashmiri boy as an animal pronounces the systematic dehumanization of Kashmiris; it points to their state of being endangered and thus in need of urgent attention; it shows the alienation and estrangement of a land and its people from the "family" of nation; it situates the Kashmiri populace as a persecuted lot like the Hangul deer, which despite being "honored" as the national state animal is hunted down by the state. This mode of replacing human with animal face is not entirely unique to Sajad; an informed reader would be quick to recall Spiegelman's (1980) graphic narrative on the Holocaust, *Maus*, where the Jews are depicted as rats, Germans as cats and Poles as pigs. By placing his text against this narrative tradition of mass persecutions, Sajad sets Kashmiris as a persecuted class of people.

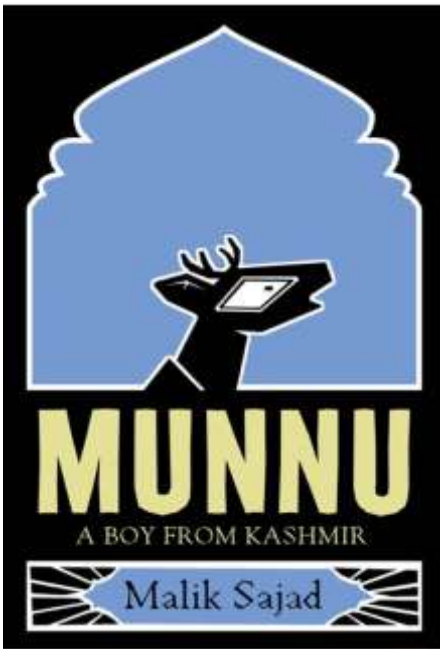

Figure 1

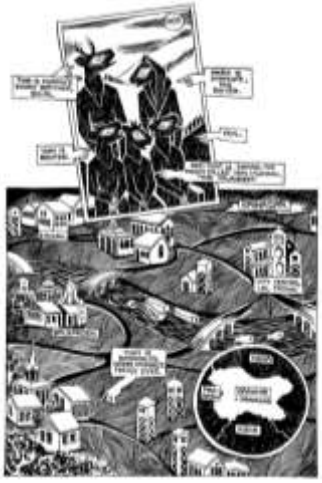

Figure 2

Figure 3

The narrative begins with the first chapter titled the "Family Photo" (Figure 2, p.2). The chapter opens with Munnu's photograph with his siblings, which introduces the reader to his family. What is notable here is, the author has stacked three framed images—a family photograph, a larger local map of Srinagar and an inset image of head of the map of India – all arrangedin manner that sets off tensions within text. The downward movement of frames from family to the map of Srinagar to that of India invites the reader to turn the regular gaze and look from inside out rather than the other way round, which is often the way we "look" at Kashmir– as a terrain on the map of India sans people. The jutting photograph partially lying against the landscape and mostly outside map foregrounds the bodies of the native Kashmiris, trying to materially inscribe into the space from which they have been systemically erased or is facing erasure. The photograph with the year marked, 1993 is almost outside the map of Srinagar while the official map of India showing the region of Kashmir is placed within. The narrative seems to ask - who occupies what? — the native Kashmiri is hanging almost precariously out of the map of Srinagar whereas Indian (map) occupies it from within. This is further emphasized in the nature and position of the photograph – while the photo carries the background of the Valley, the photograph itself is placed against the white background raising doubts as to where exactly is the Valley of the natives? Or rather how real is it? The illusion comes through very soon when readers' eyes move to the next page (Figure 3, p.3) where we are shown the actual act of taking photographs in the studio where the Valley forms a mere constructed backdrop amidst the prosaic studio. Sajad by "staging" the introduction in this fashion harks at the tenuous position of the Kashmiri in relation to his land and the nation.

The photograph triggers a memory and the scene soon shifts to story behind the picture (Figure 3, p.3). For Munnu's family taking photograph is a yearly ritual that has assumed the sign of luxury in the wake of insurgency as there are mothers around, who have not been as lucky as Munnu's to hold onto their dear ones. The photograph becomes at once a poignant, yet haunting sign imbued with rich significance- it invokes a childhood memory but that it was the one taken in 1993 triggers a host of indelible others that reminds the author of having living through and survived violence and death to tell his story. The photograph turns into a morbid sign when a few pages later (Figure 4, p.5) one finds young Munnu trying to imitate his artist father by carving chinnar leaves in embroidery design blocks. Unfortunately, the high expense of the blocks, no longer easy to come by, forces Munnu to turn to "sketching the photos of unrecognizable, disfigured people from the newspapers" (p.5). The graphic retracing by the adult narrator Sajad of his younger self unwittingly "tracing" the photographs of disfigured dead bodies of Kashmiris and later switching to draw the image of AK- 47 on the bags of his friends so as to become popular in school sets a disturbing play of erasure and re-inscription of the body in the frame. But as Kabir (2009) says it's a body that bears the weight of physical (in the case of the dead bodies) and psychic (disrupted innocence of the Munnu and the children) violence. Between the lines of nameless graves that heads the page (Figure 4, p.5) and Munnu's act of meticulously retracing the image of dead bodies from the newspaper, is the family of Munnu sandwiched, implying the reality of death that hauntingly loomed over the family of every Kashmiri during those years. According to anthropologist Michael Taussig (2011) the act of witness gains power as we witness the shock of shocking things passing from horror to banality; to witness is to arrest this transformation, even momentarily in drawing (as cited in, Chute, 2016, p.30). In trying to show the

everydayness of horror, where Munnu makes an easy shift from drawing chinnar leaves to dead bodies to AK 47, Sajad tries to transform the banality itself back into something horrific.

Figure 4

Figure 5

Even though the narrative of Munnu is triggered by trauma, it is not determined by it. Munnu's story comprises all the ingredients of a typical coming of age story- vicissitudes of love, ambition, success and failures, religious and social pressures that enter and pass the life of any ordinary individual. Sajad does not isolate events of trauma but bears testimony through word and image to the lived experience of the everyday, which is often shaped by crisis but not necessarily fully dictated by it. We see the author cum narrator Sajad who is a witness, looking into his own past revisiting and retracing them. But rather than merely recollecting, the author sets up two versions of self—one, the child self and the other, adult self. The narrative expresses the perspective of the child-self, which is interrupted by the voice of the narrator who is the voice of the adult self. This allows the author to frame events collectively in a different light than the child narrator does and simultaneously enable a dialogue between different versions of self. This mode of highly self-reflexive representation presents the tension between the narrating "Sajad" who draws the stories and the "Munnu'', the child, subject to them.

Figure 6

For instance, in Figure 6 (p.12), the page comprises three panels. The first two show young Munnu trying to convince his father to get him to draw in woodblock, failing which he consoles himself by saying that crackdowns will soon be imposed and that will take his father away from dawn till dusk giving him ample time to indulge in drawing on woodblocks. The third square panel shows Munnu naively explaining to himself the nature of the routine crackdowns set against reality of one. Such a positioning of naivety against the gruesome reality of violence in Kashmir brings out the horror of the situation when one realizes what Munnu in ignorance had nearly wished for his father.

Sajad's witness account is as much concerned about the materializing history as it's about the *nature* of that materialization. One of the key struggles in the narrative unfolds within the narrator- between the cartoonist Sajad and the witness Sajad. While the former is driven by passion to draw and ambition to establish himself as a cartoonist, the latter is concerned with speaking truth. Though both these selves are not entirely opposed to the interest of the other, they often collide with each other. In staging the conflict between the two selves, narrator Sajad brings to play the questions about "truth" and "representation" especially in the context of Kashmir. The narrator who is also a cartoonist is only too aware of the role of mediation and pressure on an artist to play it to the audience. After Munnu establishes himself as an artist and makes a name for himself he is visited by another Kashmiri living in Delhi who introduces Munnu to works of graphic novelists – Joe Sacco and Sara Jevo. Munnu is asked to create one on Kashmir as none have been written on it so far. However, Munnu finds them too miserable and refuses to represent Kashmiris as victims. When his visitor prods him further saying: "I want the world to know about Kashmir" (p. 221). Munnu asks him a counter-question – "You mean the British people don't know that their government sold each Kashmiri for 2.5 rupees?" (p.221). As much as Munnu wants the world to know about Kashmir he does not want to erase its role in "creating" Kashmir. But this fervor for truth soon finds its match when later Munnu decides to write a graphic novella on Kashmir titled "Endangered Species"(p.333). However, his publisher asks him to change the title to "Kashmir Intifada" adding, "If you want the world to know about Kashmir then use the popular terminology" (p.334). We soon find Munnu giving into the pressure, changing the title, with the narrator's voice admitting: "It was the only way to tell the story, or the book would have rotted on the drawing table" (p.335). Such confessions on the part of the author/narrator does the function of more than just being authenticating devices. They set up questions around the way narratives on Kashmir are "framed" for the consumption of an international/ national audience who exist vicariously on the suffering of the "other". Munnu sets out to contribute to the burgeoning field of graphic novels about "conflict zones" to tell the world about Kashmir. Yet it is not without internal struggle with the way the "world" needs Kashmir and Kashmiris to be represented.

The chapter titled "Footnotes'' stands out from the rest of the narrative both thematically and formally. The ironic title suggests how the history of Kashmiri has always been reduced to the bottom of the nation's history and imagination. The chapter is a conscious corrective to this where Sajad examines history from the perspective of the Kashmiris showing how they have been a persecuted race right from the early times. Under the Mughals, Afghans, Sikhs, British and later Dogra who literally bought Kashmir from the British. Kashmir and its people have been historically subject to invasion, plunder and reduced to mere pawns in the barter between various national and international parties. Unlike the woodcutting style Sajad uses for the larger part of the narrative, this chapter begins with the long single frames done in a more aesthetically pleasing style of Kashmiri miniature art and slowly moves to the woodcutting pattern to address contemporary aberrant reality of Kashmir. This formal shift in style of representation also traces the transformation of this "paradise" on earth to "hell" through the plot of history.

According to Chute (2016), "Witness is about the attestation of truth, even if that truth… is elusive or 'unclaimed'" (Chute, 2016, p.29). The self-journey of Munnu as an artist is mapped through his desire to find the "truth" about or (should one say?) "problem" of Kashmir. But even when Sajad comes to have a deeper understanding about what plagues Kashmir he is confronted by a more troubling question- Who wants the truth about Kashmir? The narrative of Munnu and Kashmir come to a close on a poignantly meditative note where, a soaring cartoonist on an artistic mission to "seek revenge" (p. 346) (through his art) against the injustice done towards Kashmir, is suddenly plunged into an existential crisis. In the last chapter titled "Solar-Powered Light" the reader finds Munnu's distant body walking in the darkness (after a regular blackout) with a solar powered light gifted by UN "to save the world from global warming." (p.342) All frames in this chapter are imbued in darkness save the silhouette of Munnu and the light that flashes from his torch and the streetlamp. The frames showing Munnu, trying to find his way through darkness with the help of torchlight also marks his rite of passage of the boy from blind optimism regarding his art and artistic mission to a more critical and nuanced approach to it. While the rest of the world may be oblivious to the plight of Kashmir, the artist has to hold on to his truth and find a way to speak out, lest it stands the risk of disappearing into the dark tunnels of history.

Malik Sajad's autobiographical narrative is a discursive response to the culture of invisibility advanced by fear and practices of censorship that surround the Kashmiri conflict and its social reality. By embodying the author's personal and the collective trauma of surviving in a "conflict zone" on to a visual medium Sajad pushes against the discourse of unspeakable and the unimaginable by taking what Chute refers to as the *risk of representation*. Presenting Kashmiris in a defamiliarized form Malik Sajad forces the reader's attention on them and their everyday realities. Sajad thus evolves a new "idiom of witness" (Chute 2016. p.40) that breaks into the popular representations of Kashmir and refigures them in the narrative matrix of the graphic medium and the map of the postcolonial.

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