

Desecration of the Earthly Paradise: An Ecocritical Reading of Mirza Waheed's Novel *The Book of Gold Leaves*

*Muhammad Shoaib**

ABSTRACT: *Kashmir, with its unique blend of picturesque landscape, perennial fresh water streams and lakes, lush-green vegetation, snow-capped peaks, variety of birds, rare animals and various seasons with changing hues, is one of the most environmentally vibrant areas in South Asia. Traditionally known as the paradise on the earth, the valley is currently sandwiched between the geopolitical ambitions of India and Pakistan, and host to the worst political crisis in the region. It is plagued with militarism, violence, encounters, curfews, atrocities, and controversies. This research paper on Kashmiri novelist Mirza Waheed's work The Book of Gold Leaves (TBGL) (2014) links the ecological crisis in the valley to the unending cycle of violence and terror. Violence has created an environment of fear in the valley which overshadows the beauty of the land. Tourism to Kashmir has dwindled almost to non-existence. Landscape, forests, water bodies, birds and animals face an existential threat at the hands of the ecocidal forces which are proactive in the valley. Historically, there has been a dearth of authentic voices from the Indian part of Kashmir to record the conflict, fear and ecological crisis emanating from the presence of the Indian military, armed resistance and negligence. But the current writers from Kashmir are bent on emphasizing the gravity of the ecological situation. Keeping in view all this and partially drawing on ecocritical and ecofeminist strands of ecology, this paper explores the strategic use of ecological trope on the part of Mirza Waheed to highlight the plight of Kashmir along with its flora and fauna.*

Keywords: violence, Kashmir, ecology, landscape

* Email: mshoaibenglish@gmail.com

Introduction

Kashmir is a high altitude valley existing in the greater Himalayas in South Asia. With its matchless natural beauty, abundant water resources and strategic location, it has gained central importance to India and Pakistan's ambitions of power and dominance in the region. In the words of Angana Chatterjee, controlling Kashmir "is about India's coming of age as a power, its ability to disburse violence, to manipulate and dominate. Kashmir is about nostalgia, about resources, and buffer zones. The possession of Kashmir by India renders an imaginary past real, emblematic of India's triumphal unification as a nation-state" (Chatterjee n.p.). Currently, there are some fine literary voices from the Indian side of Kashmir who have depicted, along with the human tragedy taking place, the ecological crisis desecrating the paradise on the earth. Agha Shahid Ali, Shahnaz Bashir, Basharat Peer, Nayeema Mahjoor and Mirza Waheed are some of the sensitive writers who have tried to show to the world the real nature of Kashmir issue with a special focus on the political, social, economic, cultural and environmental aspects.

The traditional literary narratives about Kashmir have come from the authors who support Indian standpoint on Kashmir or from the European writers who are not fully aware of the nature of the conflict in the valley with its political, economic and cultural connotations. Tydale Biscoe's *Light and Shade* (1922) and Justine Hardy's *In the Valley of Mist* (2009) are among some Western attempts to bring Kashmir and its problems to the world's notice. Vikram Chandra's *Srinagar Conspiracy* (2000), M J Akbar's *Beyond the Vale* (2011) and Prem Shankar Jha's *Kashmir 1947* (1996) look at the Kashmir issue from the Indian point of view. But all of them are either the outsider's account of Kashmir or the historical accounts which are restrained and India-friendly, or a perfunctory recounting of the situation.

Currently, there are quite a few literary voices from Kashmir that highlight the victimization of human beings as well as nature at the hands of the ecocidal forces. Kashmiri writers, "irrespective of their language of expression, visual artists and even political ideologues regularly turn to their relationship to the landscape to assert the primacy and authenticity of their claims as 'indigenes' who have been erased from representations of Kashmir" (Kabir 202). The English era of the Kashmiri literature begins with the poet Agha Shahid Ali who is the

pioneer of ghazal tradition in English, a form used with excellence in Persian and Urdu. Ali's poetry captures the beauty as well as the tragedy of Kashmir and tries to awaken the world to the problem of Kashmir. More recent works from Kashmir include Basharat Peer's memoir *Curfewed Night* (2008), and Mirza Waheed's novels *The Collaborator* (2011) and *The Book of Gold Leaves* (2014). These works open the world's eyes not only to the picturesque beauty of Kashmir but also to the fact that violence and war are taking a heavy toll on human lives as well as on ecological balance. They bring out the collective as well as individual aspect of the Kashmir conflict. Shahnaz Bashir, in his works *The Half Mother* (2014) and *Scattered Souls* (2016), focuses on individual tragedies resulting from Indian atrocities in Kashmir. This new mobilization regarding environmental issues on the part of the Kashmiri writers is termed as 'new pastoral' (Kabir 200).

Mirza Waheed was born and brought up in Kashmir before he moved to London in 2001 to work for the BBC Urdu Service. Srinagar, where Waheed spent his childhood, informs his "literary choices and sensibility, in both tangible and subliminal ways" (Interview by Riyaz Wani n.p.). His first novel *The Collaborator* (2012), a gripping account of the dilemma of a Kashmiri young man working for the Indian army, was nominated for the Guardian First Book Award. Waheed's "achingly lyrical evocation of a violated paradise is backed by the factual account of the carnage perpetrated by all the parties: the Indian army, the politicians from both the sides, the militant groups" (Bharat n.p.) He writes about politicians living in refurbished torture chambers, idyllic villages rigged with land mines, and ancient Sufi shrines decimated in bomb blasts. *The Collaborator* depicts the scene of the landscape being desecrated through tortures and killings. *TBGL* is again set in Kashmir and tells the story of a romance between a Sunni girl and a Shia boy in the backdrop of the ongoing struggle for freedom from the Indian rule. The protagonist Faiz is a papier-mâché artist who has artistic targets to achieve. But the Indian violence in shape of occupation of educational institutions, abductions and killings change his perspective on things and force him to cross the LoC to join a training centre in the Pakistani-held Kashmir.

Literature Review

Oxford English Dictionary defines 'ecology' as "the branch of biology that deals with the relationships between living organisms and their environment" (557). It is a cross-disciplinary field that encompasses botany, zoology, geography, and Earth science. Among other things,

ecology studies the interdependence of organisms within an ecosystem. In recent times, literature has been considered to be tool of awareness about, among other things, the importance of physical environment and its protection. The traditional pastoral representation of nature in literature reduces it to setting and background without any attention to the crisis of nature. But the technological and industrial growth and the ensuing global environmental crisis have forced the scholars to foreground the human relationship with the physical environment. According to Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt (2010), the world is “locked in a dance of cultural, economic, and ecological interdependence. This interdependence calls for a multiplicity of voices to address the problems that our world faces today” (3). But the representation of the environmental crisis in literary and critical discourse is not a smooth sailing as such scholars and critics are considered hostile to the scientific and industrial progress.

Ecocriticism is a relatively new concept in humanities and environmental sciences. It is the systematic study of the relationship between human beings and the natural environment, and how this relationship has been weakened due to industrial and technological progress. Joseph W. Meeker, in *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1972), introduced the term literary ecology as “the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works” (17). Some ecocritics ascribe the creation of the word “ecocriticism” to William Rueckert, who in a 1978 essay titled “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” wrote that ecocriticism entails “application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (107).

But it was the publication of Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), and Cheryll Glotfelty’s and Harold Fromm’s collection, *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) that “solidified ecocriticism and gave scholars a foundation. A community was created around one major focus: literature and the environment” (Campbell 13). These works have initiated a revolution in the literary studies as literature has become a major tool of spreading awareness about the importance of environment and other non-human forms of life. The back-to-nature call does not merely aim at giving nature a background position as in the Romantic literature. It is a movement away from the anthropocentric view of the universe with man being the centre and the whole nature being at his disposal to exploit. In short, in Glotfelty’s

words, ecocriticism is the study of literature from an ecologically-conscious perspective:

All ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature (Glotfelty 1996 xix).

The term 'ecofeminism' was introduced by Francoise d'Eaubonne in *Feminism or Death* (1974). This theory asserts that the exploitation of the environment and the exploitation of the women must be seen in conjunction as both environment and woman are victims at the hands of the patriarchal structure. In one of the first ecofeminist books, *New Woman/New Earth* (1975), Ruether, states:

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this [modern industrial] society (204).

Ecofeminism combines environmentalists' focus on the reconstruction of nature with the feminist emphasis on gender equality with the need to study both in conjunction. The ecofeminist writers fight against the androcentric approach to life. They assert the centrality of woman and nature in the production of all life. Like Marxism and traditional feminism, ecofeminism adopt a deconstructive approach to study history and power relations.

Research Methodology

The premise of this research paper is to explore the dynamics of ecological crisis in Indian Kashmir as represented in the Kashmiri writer Mirza Waheed's novel *The Book of Gold Leaves*. The study is qualitative and inductive in nature, and the research design adopted for this purpose is hermeneutic and interpretive. Textual analysis will be employed as a research method.

Data Analysis

Mirza Waheed's novel *TBGL* shows the effects of war, violence and poor urban planning on the physical environment (soil, water and air) and the living environment (plants, birds and animals) of Kashmir. The

biodiversity of Kashmir is the source of livelihood for the local people and a source of pleasure for the tourists. However, the natural resources of the state are subject to vandalism owing to various factors stemming mostly from anthropogenic activities. The ecology of the land and the water has been severely disturbed and damaged. Armed conflict, deforestation, hunting of birds and animals, pollution and reduction of water bodies, and construction of roads through forests stripped the land of its natural cover resulting in susceptible soil erosion and extinction of biodiversity. The whole narrative of Waheed's TBGL is embedded in the landscape and atmosphere of Srinagar and its surroundings. The social and political situation directly affects the environment. There is a comparative study of the ecological situation before and after the violence started. The present paper is an attempt to trace the presentation of ecology and ecological concerns in TBGL. Almost all the characters lament the change that is taking place in the natural and urban environment of the city and its surroundings.

Kashmir is a place of pure natural beauty and peace, and it has been a heaven of the tourists. Waheed gives a beautiful picture of the biodiversity of the place: various species of birds and animals, dense greenery and abundant water resources. He stimulates our various senses through nature-pictures. But he does not give us merely a romantic picture of ecological components. Rather like a true artist, he is aware of the changes taking place in the valley. The serene atmosphere around Roohi's house is destroyed with the rising wave of conflict between the Indian soldiers and freedom fighters. The edenic landscape of Kashmir is the direct target of the conflict in the valley and on the line of control between the Indian and Pakistani sides of Kashmir. Both the rural and the urban geography of the land are marked by the traces of violence and mutilation. Waheed's first novel *The Collaborator* gives a graphic description of the desecration of nature when an encounter erupts between the Indian and Pakistani soldiers.

The Pakistanis were pounding a mountain pass some distance away, the Indians were replying in kind. There would be blood, and sulphur, on the trees. Dark plumes of smoke would emerge from the green canopies. Pines, those majestic umbrella pines, would be broken, their spectacular dark green spreads turning to umbrellas of crumbling flame, smoke and ash. (115)

This description shows how both Pakistan and India are complicit in upsetting the ecological balance of the area. The discourse of power is inscribed on both the physical and the living environment of Kashmir.

The novel also signposts the idea that fresh water bodies are integral to maintaining environmental balance. Kashmir lying in the greater Himalayas region is enriched by “a vast array of freshwater bodies such as lakes, ponds, wetlands, springs, streams and rivers. These varied freshwater ecosystems are of great aesthetic, cultural, socioeconomic and ecological value besides playing an important role in the conservation of genetic resources of both plants and animals” (Jeelani 261). Lakes are an important part of the natural beauty of Kashmir. The gem-clear water of the lake near Sri Nagar is termed as the “nectar of Paradise” (128) by Mir Zafar Ali. But the ecological balance of Kashmir has been severely disturbed due to the decreasing size of the fresh water lakes and the quality of water in them. Lack of maintenance, neglect and pollution have contaminated and desecrated the edenic lakes of Kashmir. The aquatic life has also been disturbed or diminished to the point of extinction due to the shrinking water bodies and the increasing quantity of pollutants in the water. The condition of Dal Lake is one of the criteria of checking the environmental deterioration in Kashmir. The lake has been seriously affected due to the attenuated supply of ice cold water from mountains and lack of maintenance adding to the pollution. In her article entitled “War in Kashmir and its Effect on the Environment” (1998), Jennifer Crook reveals:

Major lakes and rivers in Kashmir harbor serious diseases due to lack of maintenance, neglect and pollution. Dal Lake...housing hundreds of floating house boats and home for vast reserves of aquatic life is rapidly shrinking in size. Compared to 15 years ago, the changes which have taken place in the Dal Lake are shocking and drastic in proportion.... a new vegetation in the form of a mysterious red weed seen on the periphery of the lake is an indicator of serious degree of pollution. (n.pag.)

Mismanagement on the part of the authorities and gross carelessness on the part of the public have contaminated the water that was a “fresh-water pond, a reservoir created by the abundance of the lake, which fed the Nallah Mar canal that traipsed through the city. In fact, this is what remains of the canal, a strangulated cripple of that waterway, a sickly reminder of what will, over a generation or two, become a legend, a story the young may or may not believe” (83). Faiz and Roohi are used as the mouthpieces of the author as they often feel sorry for the pathetic decline in the quality of water in Dal Lake. Roohi feels heart-rent at the

pollution and desecration brought to the lake by the dwellers and the tourists alike. She thinks it “a gift preyed upon by all, violated over the years by ruler and ruled alike. Still, it is tranquil, like an ageing seer, trying every spring to purify itself of the poison that men have hidden in its green folds” (140).

Poor sewage and drainage system has further devastated the water-based ecological system of Kashmir as most of the canals are polluted and, thus, unable to sustain any marine life. The authorities have no concerns about the gravity of the situation. As a result, sewage is shamelessly drained into river and the fresh water canals or the raw sewage can be seen in the city centers of the valley. In *TBGL*, Professor Koul is the representative of old values which are dying fast in the violence-ridden valley. His brutal murder stands for the death of the serene times of the past.

Koul feels wounded every time he sees the large foetid drain in place of the Golden Canal The hospital, the medical school, the sub-divisional police headquarters, and other institutions of excellence have all built man-size underground sewage pipes that pour their toxic effusions into the canal all day. If you take a boat trip on it, your boat might wobble over a carcass or you may find yourself rowing through sheets of shit.... (186-87)

Waheed brings into a sharp focus the powerful of the city who lavish money on golf courses and other luxuries, but when an activist poet, Ayesha Azad, requests them to have the canal decontaminated, they complain about the lack of funds. Although there are many lakes, streams, rivers and mountains around Srinagar, the city lacks even a single clean drinking water supply for its domestic use. A large number of illnesses are related to polluted water supplies, resulting in frequent outbreaks of ineffective hepatitis, gastroenteritis, typhoid and cholera etc. Mubashir Jeelani, an environmental sciences professor from Srinagar, recommends that “floating gardens should be removed and further encroachments should be banned. Disposal of domestic wastes from adjoining houses, hotels and houseboat should be regularised. Dredging of the lake be done regularly to maintain the natural depth of the lake” (Jeelani 266).

The Jhelum River is presented as the life-line of Kashmir. Faiz and Roohi have a Wordsworthian attachment with the river. As a child, Faiz used to lance “through the quick brown waters of the Jhelum to be among the first to emerge at the opposite bank” (5). The river provides

refuge from the toughness of the life around as “tall trees grow on either side of the river and the world outside is not visible except for the blue sky that has no moon but a multitude of stars” (7). They are often lured by the “murmurs of the river in the dark” (61). It was at the river that Roohi first saw Faiz swimming. Roohi assures Faiz that the river and the landscape are their best friends. She is especially proactive about planning a future with Faiz.

I will take you to all our lakes and rivers. I will float on the Jhelum with you by my side, and we will see what lies beyond the shrine. We will go as far as the river courses, through the heart of our country. I am sure, no, I know, that the river, and the fields and the forests, will give us shelter, create havens for our children and us in the years to come.... (139)

After they are married, they go in the company of nature as Faiz is a militant and, for fear of being arrested by the Indian troops, cannot live in the city. There, Roohi enjoys the “clear air and light of the meadow, so unlike the city, so free of dust and the world’s ways” (288).

Despite all the beauty of the river and its significance to the lives of the people, the city is playing villain to it. The river’s kindness has been paid with utter cruelty. Refuse from hospitals and mosques and dismembered body parts from some detention cell have are regular parts of the river. It is no more an ideal place to swim for the young ones.

This river made the city, and the city has tried to unmake it over the centuries. While it brings the heavenly waters of the emerald Verinag spring from the hem of the Pir Panjal Mountains, the city thwarts its dreams, pouring refuse, bad wishes and dark stories into it. Of late, it has also started carrying the dead, many tales of cruelty drowning in its onward rush, and with them, the dark deeds of the oppressor, too. (23)

The river also symbolizes the smooth flow of life. It is a thread which holds the whole city together with its cultural and religious diversity. Now, this cultural harmony is threatened by the presence of violence in the valley. As the smooth flow of the river has been disturbed by filth and over-consumption, there are some other symbolic smooth flows in the novel that have been disturbed. The smooth flow of education is disturbed when an Indian army camp under Sumit Kumar is opened in a girls’ high school. Further, the smooth of the love between Faiz and Roohi is disturbed by abductions and killings in the valley at the hands

of the Indian forces. In the same way, the smooth flow of spirituality symbolized by the Khanqah is hindered as Roohi's father is killed there.

Natural setting of Kashmir is also threatened by the forces of modernization and urbanization which would eventually destroy the green fields and the environment of the place. Land transformation is one of the most important factors causing environmental changes in Kashmir. Encroachments and illegal housing schemes are also causing setback to the eroding natural beauty of Kashmir. In their article "Impact of Urban Land Transformation on Water Bodies in Srinagar City, India" (2011), Fazal and Amir point out:

As land cover, settlement represents the most profound alteration of the natural environment by people, through the imposition of structures, buildings, paved surfaces, and compacted bare soils on the ground surface. Settlements also create demands that lead to other land-cover changes, such as the removal of vegetation and soil to extract sand, gravel, brick clays, and rock; the replacement of vegetation by planted cover in gardens, parks, sports grounds; the alienation of ground for landfill and waste treatment; wetlands and open space conversion for settlements and the use of land for transportation routes. (qtd in Fazal 1)

In *TBGL*, Farhat walks on the road which was once a canal flowing out of the Dal Lake. The canal was a good source of cool breeze, flowers, fish, firewood and water for irrigation. Faiz remembers his family's joyful picnics to the lake.

In those days abundant with water, boats and watermelons, fish and lotuses on the boat, the lake and the city were one.... They would anchor at the Dembh waterway, soon start nibbling at their picnic, then drift on through the willow-covered blue-green liquid pathways to the lake and on to the Mughal gardens in the palm of the Zubarwan hills. It all ended the moment a loony minister, Sheikh Samandar, decided a road was development and water was not. (65)

As the water bodies continue to be dried up and replaced by roads and other development schemes, the boatmen whose livelihood depended on the existence of water are facing hard times. They have to think about alternative sources of sustenance to which they are not used to. As the lake is drying fast, the boatmen take to "plucking lotus stems from the belly of the lake.... They will make wreaths of the stems, each tied with

a fresh hay ribbon, and ferry them in the morning to Hazratbal” (140-41).

Birds are an important component of the ecosystem of Kashmir. The diverse avifauna comprises more than 100 species. In the words of Anita Desai's protagonist in the novel *The Village by the Sea* (1982), the birds are “the last free creatures on Earth. Everything else has been captured and tamed and enslaved—tigers behind the bars of the zoos, lions are stared at by crowds in safari parks...” (Desai 255). Narrating the traditional beauty of Kashmir, Waheed brings into focus the life of birds in the conflict-ridden area. There are some spaces where they can move and rest without being disturbed: shrines, temples, mosques and water bodies like river and lakes.

The crows, the night-vigil keepers of the Great Sufi's seat, have surrounded the shrine. It is what they do at dusk, when they know the humans have left and it is theirs again. They are everywhere, on the road, in the balconies, on the timber verandas that have for ages been the seats of both venerable saints and venal caretakers...the few devotees that remain in the courtyard watch this magic gathering in absolute silence” (11).

Some birds like swallows follow the flow of the Jhelum with some of them having made their nests in the woodwork of the old bridges of the river. The birds seem to have special affiliation with the sacred places because these places are either neglected spaces or they defy, to some extent, the advancement of ecocidal values. Even in the environment of fear, birds “maintain a stark vigil” (88) over the shrine. The birds like sparrows, mynah birds, pigeons and white-chested kingfishers are abundantly found at the Hindu temple. The birds have been doing this “for hundreds of years, the courtyard always brimming with food, the birds never disappointed” (82). Many rare species of birds travel from Siberia to Kashmir during the winter months. But the birds come under serious threat after the wave of violence is unleashed in the valley. The use of explosives in war and other overexploitation of the natural resources are threatening the existence of many species of birds.

Kashmiri officials of Wild Life Department at Hokrsar assert that comfortable climatic conditions, better protection and the easy availability of food in the region are the prime reasons behind the massive migration of these birds.... However, a very high concentration of military presence armed with sophisticated weaponry has adversely affected the climate due

to felling of trees, easy bird-hunting for food resulting in ecological collapse and imbalance. (Tareen n.pag.)

TBGL highlights a marked change in the behaviour of the birds due to the poisoning of the air caused by the use of explosives. The birds “stopped the racket they’d started soon after the rocket blew a cloud of concrete dust into the air. They have not stayed to compete with the ratta-tat of the machine gun” (85). Now instead of birds, rockets fly in the air and bring destruction to the area.

Wildlife maintains ecological balance and shapes forest ecosystems which are keys to maintaining human and other forms of life. All living organisms in their natural habitat form a vital and inseparable part of human existence maintaining the natural cycles. The rare species of animals found in Kashmir have suffered the threat of extinction as a result of the militarization of the area. Apart from the violence, the greed of the soldiers and the local people is also a factor in the decreasing number of animals in the valley.

The massive deployment of Indian armies on the borders of Kashmir in 1947, resulted in large scale poaching as the troops living in the border areas indulged in killing rare species like the Ibex, Blue Sheep, Urial, the big horned sheep, Antelope and Snow Leopard. At first, the soldiers were killing the animals for food needs but when the poorly paid soldiers realized how valuable the animal furs and skins were, in the international markets, they started to slaughter the Kashmiri animals with much greater zeal. (Crook n.p.)

During her swimming in the Jhelum at night, Roohi sadly looks at the marshy area where “deer thrived undisturbed on the chain of islands that could take them all the way to the high meadows of Nargismarg” (203). But war, hunting and urbanization have left these rare animals on the brink of extinction. Sajad Malik, a Kashmiri cartoonist and graphic novelist, has Hangul as a central character in his novel *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* (2015). The novel foregrounds the issue of the extinction of rare animals especially Hangul deer as violence keeps on escalating in the valley. He draws an analogy between Kashmiris as endangered species and the Tibetan antelope, locally also known as Hangul.

Waheed makes an abundant use of nature imagery to explore the emotional world of the protagonist. The lost ecological balance of Kashmir is also presented through artistic constructs. In a meta-artistic way, the role of art in highlighting the plight of animals and landscape is

established. The protagonist of the novel *TBGL*, evokes the flora and fauna of Kashmir in his paintings of “deer, lions, cypresses, tall rose bushes, chinar leaves, Mughal princes on hunting trips with their high elephants...” (3). He also draws the shape of a lake he has seen in his dream. This is an attempt to reframe the biodiversity of Kashmir in the Kashmiri landscape. The panel of the artist is used as a space to imagine and capture those species which have totally disappeared or are on the verge of extinction.

The matchless beauty of Kashmir has attracted a lot of tourists from all over the world. But the lack of tourist ethics has tarnished the landscape. Roohi remembers that the “Manasbal Lake, that little marvel, which had not yet been trampled over by tourist hordes, had made her sing aloud” (66). Gul, the protagonist in the short story “Oil and Roses” by another contemporary Kashmiri writer Shahnaz Bashir, laments the same lack of tourist ethics. He is irritated by “the discovery of discarded translucent bottles and empty chips packets.... He hates the trespassers who ignore the fenced partitions in the garden to pluck flowers, despite the bright blue tin signages that scream: CUT A FLOWER AND YOU CUT A SMILE” (Bashir 101).

There is an ecofeminist touch in Waheed's presentation of the environmental crisis in Kashmir along with the sufferings of the women. There is an objectification of the natural environment as well as women. Both nature and women are witness to the ruthless execution of all forms of life. Agha Shahid Ali, a renowned Kashmiri poet paints the same picture of vulnerability of nature and women in the face of uncontrolled violence. “Each fall they gather chinar leaves, singing what the hills have reechoed for four hundred years, the songs of Habba Khatun, the peasant girl who became the queen” (Ali 2). Roohi's act of swimming in the river at night stands for women's affiliation with the nature. The sight of his godmother Fatimah's death in a clash between the Indian soldiers and militants sends Faiz into a state of shock, and he is compelled to leave his house and his beloved Roohi and cross the border to Pakistan. Faiz tells Engineer in the training camp that it does not “take an MA, BE, PhD to understand the meaning of countless soldiers” (216) in their gardens. Madam Shanta Koul, the principal of the girls' high school in Srinagar is also like a mother figure for the whole area. The relationship between Major Sumit Kumar and Shanta Koul shows the Indian army's suppression of women. Shanta cannot get her school freed by the military men who are from that part of India which she does not consider her own. The most painful depiction of the

oppression and exploitation of female is provided by Shahnaz Bashir in his short story cycle *Scattered Souls* (2016). Sakina is raped by unknown men. She cannot come out of the emotional shock of the tragic incident.

The novelist also peeps into the mind of the Indian military officers to expose their feelings about their role in the destruction of the environment of Kashmir. Major Sumit Kumar's voice is used to deconstruct the Indian claims about their just war in Kashmir. The lonely room of the girls' high school in Sri Nagar is used as a site where an encounter between the Indian consciousness and the Kashmiri reality takes place. The officer comes face to face with the world where, though he is a victor, he must cope with the terrible madness of the war perpetrated by his own country.

It is a hot afternoon, so hot that Kumar wonders if the creeping destruction of this once glorious city has anything to do with the unusual change in its climate. Whatever happened to the cool, soulful Kashmir weather that had brought the Mughals here and made them declare the Valley an earthly Paradise...he wonders if this is what one fundamentally lives for while on earth: build and plunder, desecrate and repair. (150-51)

Sumit Kumar thinks about the mentality and mechanism of power that causes destruction in order to get itself acknowledged. Moreover, his wish to get out of the valley as soon as possible points to the fact that the conscientious Indian officers and soldiers realize that they are not fighting a just war.

Waheed presents spirituality and ecology as concomitant to each other. The very setting of the novel reinforces this close link. The absence of a spiritual relationship with nature has aggravated the environmental crisis of Kashmir. The shrine near Roohi's house is on the bank of the Jhelum. The spiritual rituals derive their inspiration from the natural settings. However, the region is going through the worst phase of its ecological crisis. The reasons range from the spread of violence to the detachment of spirituality from nature. The social practices have changed due to changes in attitudes towards environment, which had been deeply rooted in the spiritual practices of the community. Faiz and Roohi symbolize the Kashmiri standpoint about the traditional relationship between nature and spirituality. Waheed paints the landscape of Kashmir in a captivating way through the eyes of Roohi and Faiz. Both have a deep love for and a mystical relationship

with the edenic beauty of their homeland. Their love gets a lot of inspiration from the natural setting of their area. They plan a future about spending a lot of time enjoying the soothing and romantic scenery in the valley. Roohi "has imagined lying under the ageless chinars in the Nishat Garden, always stopping short of etching 'Roohi +' into the supple bark of the maples, and sighed at numerous sunsets by the Shalimar" (66). They plan to visit Pari Mahal, a place which seems undisturbed by the worldly life. They also plan to drink water of Chashm-e-Shahi, the water that has the qualities of an elixir.

There is still love left in this land, so what if this lake is blighted and the Jhelum stifled? One day they will heal. One day I will plant so many willows around the Dal's magic rings that no one cut through to its heart with their dirty hands. You must think I consider the lake my own... and the river and mountains, too. Well, aren't they yours as well, Faiza? (140)

The murder of Roohi's father in the shrine premises symbolizes the severing of the Kashmir people's ties with spiritualism in the wake of unabated violence. The novel brings home the idea that the age old tradition of spirituality within the Kashmiri community is panacea for the current ecological crisis in the region. Despite the war, the Kashmiris have to re-discover the same soul-healing link with nature and find spiritual pleasure in it.

Conclusion

This article has taken an environmentalist approach to the study of Mirza Waheed's novel *TBGL*, a representative novel from the conflict zone of Kashmir. It has attempted to articulate the fictional representation of the escalating ecological crisis in Kashmir caused by the state of violence and lawlessness plaguing the area for the last three decades. It is proved that "the remorseless militarization of the region, ecological and economic plunder, negation of legal procedures, lack of infrastructure" (Khan 7-8) have resulted in the constant erasure of the traditional Kashmir from the public memory. The militarization of Kashmir has taken a heavy toll on human life as well as nature: landscape, river, lakes, birds and animals. The paradise on earth is passing through a critical ecological phase facing barrenness and the stripping of its natural beauty. On broader level, this is not the story of Kashmir alone but all the areas of the world where war, violence and poor planning are destroying the ecological balance necessary for maintaining healthy life. Waheed appears to make an appeal to the

Indian army, the militants and the common people of Kashmir to open their eyes and save the beauty and biodiversity of Kashmir for which it is known. There is an emphasis on the need to safeguard the heavenly environment of Kashmir for the future generations.

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Mirza Waheed, an India author, has penned an enthralling tale of forbidden love in a state which is disrupted by war, blood and politics in his book, *The Book of Gold Leaves* where the author weaves a painful yet enlightening love story where two young souls meet and fall for the very first time in a war-torn Kashmir. But the politics and the blood-thirsty agenda of then Kashmir threatens to strip away the happiness of these two souls "We accept the love we think we deserve." ---Stephen Chbosky. Mirza Waheed, an India author, has penned an enthralling tale of forbidden love in a state which is Read more. About the Author. Mirza Waheed was born and brought up in Kashmir. His debut novel *The Collaborator* was shortlisted for the Guardian First Book Award and the Shakti Bhat Prize, and longlisted for the Desmond Elliott Prize. It was also book of the year for the Telegraph, New Statesman, Financial Times, Business Standard and Telegraph India. Waheed has written for the BBC, the Guardian, Granta, Al Jazeera English and The New York Times. Read more.

Mirza Waheed. In an ancient house in the city of Srinagar, Faiz paints exquisite papier-mâché pencil boxes for tourists. Evening is beginning to slip into night when he sets off for the shrine. There he finds the woman with the long black hair. Roohi is prostrate before her God. She begs for the boy of her dreams to come and take her away. Roohi wants a love story. An age-old tale of love, war, temptation, duty and choice, *The Book of Gold Leaves* is a heartbreaking tale of a what might have been, what could have been, if only. Year: 2016. Publisher: Penguin. Waheed, Mirza. (2014). *The Book of Gold Leaves*. Viking: Penguin Books India Ltd. Witte, Juli. "Review: *The Book of Gold Leaves* by Mirza Waheed". *Universe in Words*. 06 July. "Review: *The Book of Gold Leaves* by Mirza Waheed". *Financial Times*. 24 October, 2015, available at www.ft.com/content.