

## The Missing Person in a Story about Kashmir: A Reading of Madhuri Vijay's *The Far Field*

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### Abstract

This article examines the trope of the 'missing person' in the literature about Kashmir and argues, by taking Madhuri Vijay's *The Far Field* (2019) as an example, how the trope allows the examination of a multilayered history of violence. The article problematises the idea of visibility and invisibility of the missing/abducted/hidden/underground people during conflict and suggests that these figures can be read as metaphors for personal and collective trauma and loss. By triangulating three coordinates in Kashmiri context – violence, trauma, and invisibility – the essay argues that a missing person can be emblematic of memories of trauma, negation of humanity, violation of body, and public complicity in institutional violence. By foregrounding Shalini's journey to recover the missing people, the novel underpins the "rot remains" of a society afflicted with violence and state apathy. Within the framework of trauma theory in the postcolonial context, the essay shows how the focus of Vijay's narrative of Kashmiri people's trauma is shifted from speech to body. The emphasis on the body contributes to a compelling narration of trauma by conflating land and people.

**Keywords** JKLF, Kashmir literature, trauma theory, history of violence, corporeal violence, Madhuri Vijay

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## Introduction

Violence, trauma, and loss are the keywords that haunt contemporary stories about Kashmir. Owing to endless conflict between two contesting nations since the partition of the Indian subcontinent, the lives of Kashmiri people have been entangled in a problematic relation with state, non-state agencies, militancy, and international politics. Against this background, the missing persons or the disappeared bodies have evolved as a prominent trope in literary narratives about Kashmir. Novels such as *The Half-Mother* (2014) and *The Far Field* (2019) revolve primarily around the issue of forceful disappearance of Kashmiri (Muslim) men. Addressing the suffering of the Kashmiris, various literary critics and scholars have contributed to the corpus of literature on Kashmir to formulate a new poetics of resistance (Rizwan 2013; Kaul 2011, 2012). In doing so, scholars have considered the representation of pervasive militarisation in Kashmir since the 1990s and the trauma of half-mothers and half-widows in literature as they interrogate human rights violations and other forms of violence experienced by ordinary Kashmiris. For instance, S. Hanif's and M. L. Ahmed's recent article "Half Widows and Half Mothers': Traumatic Voices of women from the literary narratives of Jammu and Kashmir" examines the representation of traumatised "half-mother" and "half-widows" in Shahnaz Bashir's *The Half Mother*. Ather Zia's recent work, *Resisting Disappearance* (2019), is an interesting addition to the scholarly corpus of literature on the plight of mothers and "half-widows" following the disappearance of their sons or husbands. The focus on women in Zia's book allows "a gendered understanding ... wherein women employ repertoire of available cultural tropes to make visible the state-enforced 'disappearance' of their sons and husbands" (Soibam 2021). Such a focus also brings forth questions regarding the "disappeared" and the need of understanding trauma through the disappeared bodies, that we attempt to explore in this essay. This analysis of *The Far Field* highlights the importance of keeping missing person at the center of the narrative to understand the nuanced nature of Kashmiri trauma.

Scholars such as Shoshana Felman (1992) and Cathy Caruth (1996) consider trauma as an extreme experience that fragments consciousness and prevents representation through language. In this regard, the article argues that the trope of the missing person in literature can emerge as a unique way of narrating trauma by posing the missing person as an artifact and repository of trauma and conflicted memories of violence. The article explores how the trope of the missing person allows the examination of a multilayered history of violence and draws attention to personal and collective trauma in the context of Kashmir. While there is a general tendency to universalise trauma experience (Craps 2013), trauma is context-specific. Trauma associated with Kashmiri missing men calls for a specific emphasis on the political and social factors that have led to a certain

kind of personal and communal trauma of the Kashmiri people. The article argues that *The Far Field* reveals the reality of Kashmiri trauma in different categories of the missing person, such as the abducted missing person, the “underground” missing person, and the “recovered” missing person. The figure of the missing person is a narrative strategy to foreground Kashmiri people’s trauma that remains ignored mainly under the weight of grand narratives of nationalism and counter-insurgency.

Madhuri Vijay’s debut novel *The Far Field* won the JCB Prize for literature in 2019. Set in Bangalore and Kashmir, the novel tells the story of a 30-year-old woman named Shalini, who remembers her childhood in Bangalore and her mother’s strange relationship with a salesman from Kashmir named Bashir Ahmed. Shalini wanted to find out the nature of Bashir Ahmed’s relationship with her mother and how the sudden disappearance of Bashir Ahmed from their lives a decade ago could have something to do with her mother’s death.

### **Genesis of Violence and Trauma in Kashmir**

The novel is set in Kashmir, with problems of militancy and militarisation at the backdrop. Ever since India’s independence in 1947, there has been conflict regarding the status of the then independent princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. After the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, the reigning monarch of Jammu and Kashmir Hari Singh was unable to decide whether to join the independent dominion of India or the dominion of Pakistan. On 26 October 1947, following Pakistani invasion of Jammu and Kashmir, Hari Singh agreed to accede Kashmir to India. However, this decision did not go well with the people of Gilgit and Baltistan (with Muslim majority) who began a mutiny against the Hindu Maharaja. In January 1948, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru took the matter of dispute over Kashmir to the United Nations, but the issue remained unresolved (see Jamwal; Husain 199-200). Kashmir, through a tenuous political relationship between India and Pakistan, was divided into Indian administered portions such as Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh, and the Pakistani administered regions such as Azad Kashmir, and Gilgit and Baltistan, maintained by a ceasefire line since 1948, later called the line of control. The disputed status of Jammu and Kashmir resulted in a number of unsuccessful political efforts for independence with India and Pakistan fighting several wars. Subsequently militancy and insurgency groups erupted in the 1980s to liberate Kashmir from the Indian State. Following this the Indian government has maintained a strong military presence in the region to curb insurgency-related issues and resistant movements, popularly known as Tehreek. In July 1990, the Parliament of India passed the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) that permitted the Indian Armed forces to use their powers in whatever way necessary to maintain law and order in the troubled areas of Kashmir. Apart from beating, firing, and searching

people, the army personnel could also arrest any person without a warrant on the basis of suspicion. Critics are of the opinion that AFSPA has led Kashmir to witness high levels of human rights abuses with extrajudicial killings, encounters, rape, torture, and forced disappearances (Amnesty International 1999; Human Rights Watch 2006). In the 1990s, a pro-government militant organisation known as the Ikhwan/Ikhwān force, popularly known as “naabedh,” also joined the Indian Army that engaged in many violent activities. Amidst these events, the Kashmiris (including Kashmiri Pundits) are at the receiving end of and victims to serious crimes such as rape, murder, and ethnic cleansing, and the mysterious enforced disappearances of Kashmiris. According to a report published by the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) official website, “Unofficial estimates put the number of disappeared persons between 1989 and 2006 at anywhere between 8000 to 10000.”

There are controversies regarding the authenticity of these reports – like whether violence is present or not, whether the allegations regarding perpetration of violence are actual or “fake or motivated”, and whether the numbers and data found in records are authentic or manipulated. In this context of skepticism, the figure of the missing persons in trauma novels unsettles narratives that draw attention away from the pain and trauma of the people and divert them towards narratives of nationalism, nation-building, democracy, or counterinsurgency. It allows the examination of a multilayered history of violence and draws attention to the humanity and life histories of the missing person in the context of the history of violence in Kashmir.

Using the framework of a quest narrative, *The Far Field* deals with Shalini’s traumatic memory of her past and her experiences in Kashmir after her mother’s death. Shalini appears to have suffered from trauma as she tries to come to terms with multiple feelings of loss and guilt. She narrates her life marked by the absences and disappearances of people from memory. First of all, she has an absent father to deal with whose absence is overshadowed by the odd presence of an erratic mother who is mercurial and difficult to please. Second, the sudden disappearance of Bashir Ahmed from their lives, a man who was like a father figure to her, followed by her mother’s suicide, leaves a lasting impact on Shalini. She wants to know if her mother’s suicide has anything to do with Bashir Ahmed. Her desire for answers takes her to Kashmir. After she lands in Kashmir, she finds another category of disappearance, one that has neither a closure of death nor a voluntary “goodbye”.

A primary characteristic of disappearances in Kashmir is the simultaneous inclination to wipe away the memory of the disappeared and to eliminate any trace of their existence. According to the APDP report,

although India signed the International Convention for Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances in 2007, it has failed to ratify the

Convention. Only a fraction of the cases of disappearances have been investigated. Even though the number of disappearances has reduced in the recent past, the struggle for justice in existing cases continues. (APDP)

According to Zia,

The government stages the disappearances to threaten the “potentially guilty” into submission, spreading intimidation and fear by building invisibility and deniability into this technique of punishment. A single disappeared body becomes a symbol of the panopticon – that is, a spectral threat of similar annihilation aimed at regulating the political behavior of Kashmiris. (Zia 10)

While it is difficult to accord the disappeared persons the finality of death, it is also difficult to reconcile with their “invisibility,” and their mysterious absence. The family of the missing person remain unclear about the fate of the disappeared – whether he is imprisoned or dead. Thus, begins an arduous journey for the family members to search for the disappeared caught between faint hopes of return and the uncertainty of death. The ghost-like presence/ visibility of the disappeared remains intact in the memories of the mourners resulting in trauma. The fact that their disappearance is not realistically recognised in official narratives and records, along with the aura of silence and denial that permeates the issue, adds to the trauma of those left behind – the survivors, the mourners, and “the half widows.” Vijay’s novel refers to ghosts of family members and friends who occupy a liminal space of visibility and invisibility in the memories of the survivors. Their trauma begins to evolve as distinct from Shalini’s trauma when Shalini learns about the bigger and historical nature of the Kashmiri people’s trauma after she visits her host in Kashmir, Zoya’s office. Zoya’s colleague Zarina introduces Shalini to the problem of state-sponsored disappearance in Kashmir and the endless quest of relatives to find them. Zoya hosts such relatives in her house, and their organisation tries to help people find the missing people (Vijay 2019, 113).

It seems impossible to execute a reading of such collective trauma using only Self/Individual and psychology-centered theories of trauma like the one proposed by Cathy Caruth (1996) that understands trauma as the result of a single catastrophic event that comes to haunt the survivor repeatedly. Trauma in the context of Kashmir emanates from a persistent history of violence that grand narratives do not acknowledge. Vijay draws the attention of the reader into a trauma that goes unnoticed by bringing to the fore three categories of the missing person: the abducted missing person and the mourner; the missing person in Hiding; and the recovered missing person.

### **Abduction and the Missing Person**

Vijay begins by introducing the first category of the missing person in Kashmir – the state-sanctioned abductions – through Ishfaaq’s story. In Ahmed’s town of

Kishtwar, a couple named Abdul Latif and Zoya host Shalini. Shalini later discovers that the army abducted their son Ishfaaq eight years ago, and he never returned. This episode highlights the trauma of two categories of people – the abducted and the mourner. It also reveals a close-knit relationship between trauma of the abducted missing person and trauma of the mourner. The physical and mental trauma of the abducted person becomes inaccessible due to invisibility/absence of the abducted body. It is through the inner world of the mourner – their mind and memory – that one can imagine of possibilities of abducted body. The lack of closure and the ambiguity around the invisible abducted body create a unique kind of trauma for the mourners, and the kind of relationship the mourner develops with the disappeared illuminates that trauma. The figure of the missing person, a constant presence in the memory of the survivors/mourners, transcribes a politics of resistance by the mourners.

Citing Helmut Lethen, Ulli Linke (2009) writes about the persistence of a “phenomenology of coldness” implying that people have no other choice but to maintain “emotional distance” from the object that caused trauma or to negate the pain by training oneself to maintain the “fortified, reserved self” to overcome pain and trauma. Zoya initially maintains distance from Shalini and lives a life of denial, hoping that her son Ishfaaq, whom the army has captured, is still alive. She avoids coming to terms with her loss and accepting Ishfaaq’s disappearance. This is reflected in her habit of organising a function every year on the day Ishfaaq went missing. She becomes sad, distant, and reserved if someone tries to break her bubble of belief. In the face of the mourner’s dual helplessness of neither being able to let go of the disappeared, nor having any access to the opaque world of the disappeared, they often choose to keep them alive in their memory and through certain rituals. Claude Levi-Strauss (1963), commenting on the efficacy of healing rituals, stated in his essay, “The Effectiveness of Symbols,” that the shamanistic recitation has the power to “create a narrative that links multiple levels of reality together” (Cole 2004, 88) and promotes healing by creating a “new reality that recontextualises a painful situation” (Cole 2004, 88). Zoya’s ritualistic annual party allows the family to recontextualise the disappearance, and the activity is supposedly both mourning and healing exercise. The ritual of feasting and cooking Ishfaaq’s favorite food seems like an exercise in feeding the ghostlike presence of the missing body, paving a path for its return to the family. While there is an inherent sense of isolation that the mourner experience (as has been pointed out by Dori Laub [1992a]) as expressed in each member’s distinct desire for different types of closure for Ishfaaq’s disappearance, a type of individual coping mechanism to trauma engineered by each of the mourners, the annual party still remains a family affair. The negotiation of fear and hopeful possibilities of survival for the missing person, the pull of thought to imagine him dead or alive, leads to deep psychological depression and helplessness in the

family members. They articulate their inexpressible trauma through non-narrative and group exercises such as rituals. The rituals are specific “places of memory” (Young 2000) that keep the hope for the disappeared alive.

It is interesting that Zoya eventually opens up about her loss in front of Shalini, perhaps because Shalini’s struggle with her loss opened up possibilities of solidarity between them. Zoya’s trauma as a parent pairs with Shalini’s childhood trauma of witnessing her parents’ problematic relationship, her mother’s clandestine and complicated relationship with Bashir Ahmed, and her mother sinking into depression. Just like her mother’s depression was inaccessible, her trauma was incomprehensible to her. The fragmentary narration of her story from memory suggests the “formal limits of representation of trauma” (Rothberg 2000, 7). van der Kolk (2005) has highlighted the impact of childhood trauma in familial and social surroundings during adulthood. Shalini’s failure to connect meaningfully with anyone, including her biological father and boyfriend/s in Bangalore reflects that. Zoya and Shalini seem to fulfill each other’s yearnings— Shalini’s yearning for a parent figure and Zoya’s yearning for a child. In their quest to battle their unresolved trauma, Shalini and Zoya develop a “savior complex” or “the white knight syndrome” that drives them to rescue other people from their problems. While Zoya’s savior complex is more determined by a sense of commonness between her condition and the condition of those she wants to save, Shalini’s savior complex emanates from a place of privilege and her subconscious desire to be liked and trusted. Trauma associated with the disappeared and their mourners is central to Kashmir. However, it is denied to them, both by its erasure from narratives and the difficulty posed by people in bearing witness to such trauma. Therefore, no matter how much Shalini tries to understand and internalise the complexities of trauma in Kashmir, she cannot fully help them; instead, her presence emerges as a threat to the local people, adding to their traumas. Vijay’s text allows us to establish the inaccessibility of traumatic experience of a specific geographical context to anyone other than the embodied self and the problem of failing to bear witness to trauma.

Vijay’s text highlights the complex landscape of Kashmir, where people have normalised violence, abduction, and disappearances as everyday occurrences and silenced society from bearing witness to the abuse. When Zoya opens up in front of Shalini about her loss, she pinpoints the place from where her son was abducted. No person, however, testifies to the abduction, as if the land is the only silent witness to the violence, and people have learned to be complicit in the act by behaving as mere bystanders. Zoya’s demeanor reflects a deep-seated rage at her victimisation and a sense of distrust in people. In the absence of the missing person’s body, the mourners’ behavior and their ruptured narrative foreground psychological trauma, and they take the form of questioning

the absence of the missing person. In her conversation with Shalini, Zoya points out that the numbers of the disappeared are growing every day. However, despite the silent protests, the queries, and requests of the parents and half-widows, the disappeared men do not return, and their mourner's petitions go ignored. Amidst such a landscape, Zoya and the NGO she works with aim to "help people file habeas corpus, police reports, petitions" (Vijay 2019, 114). They collect cases, record testimony, and try to get the disappeared people back. Shalini becomes Zoya's ally in this endeavor and even helps Zoya in her office. Similar to Shalini's pursuit, the search of the mourners involves the quest for "possibilities" and justice that further involves the search for an authentic witness without whom they probably cannot even think of filing a First Information Report (FIR). In this regard, the discovery or the recovery of the once disappeared alone would pose as the most authentic witness to their crimes. Such recoveries, however, sound impossible because the "abducted missing persons" hardly return, and even if they do, they go into hiding to save their lives.

### **The Missing Person in Hiding**

The second category of missing person introduced in the novel is the "missing person in hiding." Shalini finds out that Bashir Ahmed, whom she believed was dead according to the information she gathered from Bashir Ahmed's family and others, was not dead but hiding in a secret room in his house. The disappearance, in this case, is more voluntary as it is imposed on the Self to escape or run away from danger or pain. Bashir Ahmed's character represents those men in Kashmir who disappear or go into hiding to escape another kind of disappearance that resembles abduction and torture by the army. Bashir Ahmed's daughter-in-law Amina narrates to Shalini that on the grounds of Bashir Ahmed's involvement with some militant group, Bashir Ahmed was captured and tortured by the army. The army broke his legs, and Amina thinks it is no less than a miracle that he somehow managed to survive and escape. Following this violence, Bashir Ahmed's wife hides him in a secret room, fearing that the soldiers might come looking for him again.

Vijay's inclusion of the missing person in the narrative allows much scope to know what happens to the missing person after their abduction or detention. According to reports, the disappeared hardly return and there is hardly any successful recovery of the disappeared. The return of Bashir Ahmed from the jaws of death may be compared to a dead man's return from underworld to tell other people on earth about what happens in the other realm. Vijay's introduction of the actual missing person to the readers may be compared to Shalini's father's introduction of Bashir Ahmed as "a real Kashmiri person" – "our newest friend, all the way from Kashmir" (Vijay 2019, 256) – to his friends at a party to give a *first-hand* account of happenings in Kashmir. Shalini's father's



opinions about Kashmiri Muslims highlight an average Indian's perspective on Kashmir and Kashmiris (especially Kashmiri Muslims) as "exotic," problematic, and an "other". He says, "I think that for more than forty years, India has taken care of Kashmir. ... If someone takes you into his home and gives you a bed and put food in your mouth without asking any questions, don't you think you owe him something in return? (Vijay 2019, 261)" The comment reinforces the idea of the "ungrateful Kashmiri," "the traitor" who harbors feelings of hatred for his country and countrymen and demands liberation from India. This assumption about Kashmiris, as scholars such as Kumar (2010), Choudhury, and Moser-Puangsuwan (2007), and Pal (2019) establish, is particularly used for Kashmiri Muslims. The religious identity of a majority Kashmiris as Muslims seems to be reason enough to qualify them as militants, Islamist, anti-national or pro-Pakistan. Moreover, the trope of the "ungrateful Kashmiri" is meant to highlight most Kashmiri people's emotional and cultural connections with Pakistan that appear as a sign of disrespect towards India's hospitality towards them. The hypervisibility of "dangerous" Kashmiri Muslims in Kashmir is countered by rendering them invisible through the "habitual performance" (Aggarwal 2004, 17) of abducting/killing them. Such unmediated power becomes even more problematic since most victims are "ordinary civilians having no connections with armed opposition groups operative in Jammu and Kashmir" (Amnesty International 1999, 10) and are abducted only on the grounds of suspicion. Under these circumstances, many Kashmiri men are forced to hide and become like Bashir Ahmed, a "missing person in hiding."

Bashir Ahmed retorts at the party saying, "you are not the only one who believes as you do. There are many others who think the same way, who think that people should be happy with whatever they get, even if it isn't what you want" (Vijay 2019, 262). This statement brings to the fore the nuanced nature of the Kashmir issue directly from a Kashmiri that subverts people's general and simplistic understanding of Kashmiris as "ungrateful", "dangerous", and "violent terrorists." In the same way, Shalini's access to an actual missing person allows the direct testimony of violence and trauma through the figure of the missing person.

### **Narrating Trauma and Violence in Kashmir through the Missing Person**

Vijay dramatises a return/discovery of a disappeared man amidst the more extensive landscape of a place of no return that, in the creative exercise of writing Kashmir, poses as a unique way of narrating its trauma. Since one of the most challenging tasks is to represent or express trauma via language, how do we talk about Kashmiri Muslim's trauma through literature? In this regard, Vijay, allowing the readers access to an *actual missing person*, who was once captured and tortured by the army, is strategic in that she allows the missing person some

agency to speak for himself. Thus, the trope is both an actual figure and a figurative, a symbol of violence and trauma.

A point of contention may be regarding how much agency one can give to the missing person, given that Bashir Ahmed does not speak much about his abuse and victimisation post-recovery, and there is a sense of acceptance of his fate in his tone. Trauma overpowers the victim with a host of emotions – fear, shame, and hopelessness – rendering the experience unrepresentable by language and making the victim’s memory of violence a very private affair. Pierre Jenet (Anthony and Stein 2009) coined the term “Traumatic memory” to refer to trauma that haunts the survivor. It is different from ordinary memory because it is a solitary activity, and the survivor does not share that memory with anyone. Ora Avni (1995) points out that speech acts depend on a “pre-existing convention shared by the community of listeners” (212). Speech governs specific rules regarding what is speakable and what is not, and sometimes that “pre-existing condition” does not apply to what the survivor has to tell. When Shalini asks Bashir Ahmed about his abduction and the torture that handicapped him, Bashir Ahmed ignores her question by saying that his broken legs hurt only “Sometimes. When it’s cold... It all happened so long ago ... I’ve almost forgotten ...” (Vijay 2019, 346). The fact that members of his village and community (like Mohammad Din and the militants he had helped) were partly responsible for his plight makes it difficult for Bashir Ahmed and others like him to speak against his perpetrators. Bashir Ahmed tells Shalini that after he was insulted at the party in Bangalore, Ahmed felt offended by the lack of acceptance and sensitivity of Indians towards Kashmiris. As a result, he supported militancy for a while and sheltered the militants in his house. However, when he learned from a young militant regarding their plans of killing Hindu men from a nearby Hindu village, Ahmed tried to stop him. Unfortunately, Ahmed’s interference backfired, and he was framed as the militant leader who gave the orders to kill the Hindu men.

Vijay’s novel resists homogenisation of Kashmiri Muslims as either terrorist (jihads) or as only innocent rebels against the state. Vijay’s narrative is nuanced as it not only provides a critique of state-sponsored violence but also carefully suggests that militant violence can neither be condoned nor romanticised. In the character of Bashir Ahmed and the militants he was helping, Vijay dramatises the real resentment of Kashmiris against Indian rule and their violent protest for independence. The insurgents killed a few Hindus from the nearby village, giving rise to resentment among the Hindus and inviting more Army surveillance to Ahmed’s village. The Kashmiri insurgent movement is mired in controversies regarding their involvement in various inhuman atrocities on people and their involvement with and support from Pakistani backed militant forces. Reports show how various insurgent groups created chaos in Kashmir by

engaging in violent and destructive acts such as torturing and killing government officials, security officials (like members of the CRPF, BSF, and others operating in Kashmir), and innocent common people. Nyla Ali Khan (2010) documents how on “31 July 1988, bomb explosions occurred outside Srinagar’s central telegraph office and at the Srinagar club, an establishment for the political and business elite of the state” (100). Militant organisations operating in Kashmir particularly targeted civil servants and political leaders associated with the National Conference party or any other party that the militants abhorred. In 1989, militants in Srinagar killed a block president of the National Conference, Mohammed Yusuf Halwai (Puri 2008, 146). Balraj Puri (2008) adds that “on 4 November (1989), Neel Kanth Ganjoo, the retired sessions judge who had sentenced the JKLF founder, Maqbool Bhatt, to death was killed” (147). In the same year, an independent ex-MLA, Mir Mustafa, was also killed (India TV Nov., 2020). Several high-profile assassinations – like that of Mirwaiz Farooq in 1990 and Qazi Nisar Ahmed in 1994 also took place that evoked serious public reactions (India TV Nov., 2020).

Several media persons (for example, Subhan Vakil, editor of *Al Safa*, and journalist Parvez Mohammad Sultan) associated with government-owned TV channels and the information department was killed. They also targeted civilians who supported the Indian government or acted as government informers. They raped women and imposed social restrictions and dress codes on them. They also kidnapped civilians to extort funds and sometimes used kidnapping as a political weapon to pressurise the government to bend to their will. As suggested in the novel, they explicitly conducted violent attacks on the members of the Hindu community and other non-Muslim communities. As many as 200000 Kashmiri Pandits had to flee from the Kashmir Valley to avoid the violence wrecked by Islamic militant groups, among which are “nominally secular” and pro-independence groups such as Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) and “the radical Islamic and pro-Pakistani groups Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HUM), Hizbollah, Harkat-ul-Ansal, and Ikhwanul Muslimeen” (Ganguly 1996, 76; Khan 2010, 100).

Ahmed’s victimisation points towards a complex and elusive reality of Kashmir where non-political and innocent bystanders are the worst sufferers. In narratives of Indian nationalism, Kashmiri Muslims are homogenised as people with pro-Pakistani secessionist tendencies, and provisions such as AFSPA suggest killing Kashmiri Muslims with impunity. In this way, “the Kashmiri Muslims were either being repressed by the Indian Army or used as pawns by the pro-Pakistani militants, and ordinary Kashmiris found themselves, 'caught between the guns of the terrorist and guns of the government’” (Pal 2021, 9). Such complexities render the victim silent. Ultimately, Shalini’s (or a social

activist's) effort to break the silence does not meet with much success because of the survivor's silence and Shalini's obsession with her own personal history.

Under these circumstances, Vijay shifts the focus from the language of speech to the language of the body. She focuses on "what the body remembers" about Bashir Ahmed's trauma and oppression rather than the quality of Bashir Ahmed's voice. Scholars such as Grosz (1994) and Merleau Ponty (1962) have highlighted the body as the locus of experience. Merleau Ponty (1962) points out that knowledge, experience, and perception are all corporeal for human beings, and therefore, the body cannot be ignored. It cannot be viewed only as an "uninteresting prerequisite of human action" (Shilling 1993, 19). The body, as Mary Douglas (1970) highlights, is symbolic and can be viewed "metaphorically as a text that can be 'read' as a symbol or signifier of the social world that it inhabits" (Reischer and Koo 2004, 300). In *The Far Field*, the missing person's body is significant as a symbol of violence and injustice. Vijay staggers the readers with images of the ruined and violated body of Bashir Ahmed as if the burden of communication of trauma and violence is shifted to the body when words do not suffice. Hyden and Peolsson (2002) point out that Western cultures usually value spoken and written expressions over non-verbal ones; however, in most post-colonial contexts, where silencing of the marginalised is mostly the norm, we have to look for signs/memory of trauma on the body. This focus would especially be proper in the context of Kashmir since the government, since the late 1980s, has imposed strict regulations prohibiting the exercise of freedom of speech and any form of a public congregation in Kashmir (Bhan 2013). In her work, "The body's story: A case report of hypnosis and physiological narration of trauma," Patensco (2005) suggests the possibility of a "bodily narrative" of trauma as it may as well be registered on the body as in mind. It is interesting to note how Vijay juxtaposes the image of a lively Bashir Ahmed amidst the vibrant landscape of Bangalore with the mute and broken Bashir Ahmed in Kashmir.

Vijay shifts the readers' gaze from the testimonial voice to the "motor imprints of trauma" (van der Kolk 1994). She focuses on Bashir Ahmed's blank gaze, his facial expression, the grimace on his face, his sunken eyes, the dry note on his voice, and his broken legs that accentuates his oral testimony, thereby "shedding a broader light on the survivor's self-identity" (Federman, Band-Winterstein and ZanaStereinfeld 2016, 2). The focus on the body demands the "affective" attention of the readers as the emotional narrative lies in the body (Bamberg 2011) and thereby contributes to a more coherent and compelling narrative of trauma.

## Conclusion

In the landscape of fiction, Bashir Ahmed's figure emerges as an artifact, a ruin of historical violence bringing in realism and subverting the disbelief that fiction

usually produces. The “ruination” of Bashir Ahmed’s body is an analogy to the “ruination” of Kashmir, and although muted like the landscape itself, the ruined and now discovered body exudes pangs of injustice, pain, and trauma. The ruined body of Bashir Ahmed symbolises the life that is sucked of its zest and vitality; the “rot remains” of violence. LaCapra (2001) and Michael S. Roth (2012) constantly highlight how trauma transcends boundaries (LaCapra 2001, 96) and have even come to fall outside the discipline of psychology and psychoanalysis. Bashir Ahmed’s ruined body can epitomise the most profound perception of trauma, as it exists outside the human mind, in a complicated history to be put into words and believed. The military oppression of Bashir Ahmed’s body becomes an analogy to their disciplining of Kashmir. The disappeared body begins to emerge as political bodies regulated by the soldiers based on the imposition of silence. However, in the novel’s context, silence emerges as a firm stance of resistance rather than appearing as a weak or binary opposition to voice.

Vijay focuses on the power of silence and the recitation of violence through other forms, such as the body, indicating an alternative way of articulating trauma and violence. By highlighting the corporeality of the Kashmiri body and its struggle for survival in Kashmir, Vijay suggests a narrative of trauma that transgresses the Eurocentric model of speech/silence binary. In literature, the trope of the Missing Person evokes recognition and response from the readers so that they become what Dominick LaCapra (1999) calls “secondary witnesses” to the trauma of the Kashmiris. The missing person produces what Foucault calls “counter memories” and a “contestatory narrative” (Bhabha 1990) that keeps the official narratives of the government open to interrogation. Such a narrative appeals to and engages the reader’s sense of ethics and justice. Amidst all the contestations regarding the need and presence/absence of violence in Kashmir, the missing person unsettles everything. He is an outcry against the indifference or willful ignoring of violence and trauma by the state and its citizens. As Vijay juxtaposes Shalini’s findings in Kashmir with the perceived notion about Kashmir outside Kashmir, *The Far Field*, through its use of the missing person, renders an intricate understanding of Kashmiri trauma that is otherwise unavailable to most outsiders.

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