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## The Shield of Achilles and the Kashmir Conflict: Panorama of a territory through a poem

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### **Abstract**

This paper attempts to read the past exclusively in terms of the present and takes an interdisciplinary approach by fitting W. H Auden's poem, 'The Shield of Achilles' into the ongoing subjugation and dominance of Kashmir by Indian despotism which uses the most inhuman and forcible means at hand. This occupation

has not only created a humanitarian crisis in Kashmir by subjugating the people and trampling their dignity but also kept the global peace in general and the subcontinental stability in particular under threat due to the involvement of three nuclear powers, India, Pakistan and China. Hence, presenting the poem in the status quo of Kashmir is quiet apt so far it helps illuminate the growing political uncertainties, horrible oppression, heinous acts of violence, mass murdering and other grave acts of human rights violation in Kashmir, under the Indian regime. The reader is taken for an expedition to the occupied Kashmir while the poem acts as a boat and print media its rudder.

**Keywords:** Interdisciplinary studies, Presentism, Modern poetry, Media, Presently colonised territory, Indian-occupation of Kashmir

## Introduction

Every good piece of art transcends the limitations of its period. It is timeless. It has a universal appeal and is well applicable decades and centuries after it is produced. There could be no point in reading literature if it did not address our concerns today. W.H. Auden wrote the poem *The Shield of Achilles* in early 1950s to show and reflect the hidden face of modern period characterized by the meaninglessness of modern life and the atmosphere of wars and genocides and the oppressive social relations wrapped under the blankets of totalitarianisms and self-centred political setups.

Wystan Hugh Auden is considered one of the eminent Anglo-American poets of the 20th century who reserves himself a position among the likes of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. He was born in England but moved to America before the outbreak of Second World War. His writings demonstrate a sustained engagement with the times he lived in. He has been rightly regarded as one of the greatest writers of modern period whose work has had a considerable impact on generations after generations of poets on either side of Atlantic. Auden has written around 400 poems,

including 2 of book length, and more than 400 articles and reviews on literature, politics, history, religion, music and many other subjects, his central themes being love, politics, citizenship, religion and morals, and the relationship between unique human beings and the anonymous, impersonal world of nature. (Snodgrass, Auden Introduction 5). Unlike many other modern poets, Auden's reputation in the literary world did not collapse appreciably after his death. As scholar Bernard Bergonzi reminded people:

*At a time of world economic depression there was something reassuring in Auden's calm demonstration, mediated as much by style as by content, that reality was intelligible, and could be studied like a map or a catalogue, or seen in temporal terms as an inexorable historical process. . . . It was the last time that any British poet was to have such a global influence on poetry in English. (qtd. in Sharpe 117).*

The 'Shield of Achilles' is one of the remarkable poems of Auden. It gives a pathetic picture of modern world with its futility and aimlessness caught up in a never quenching thirst of power and the lust for dominance and mass murdering. Written in 1952 and published in 1955, it was included in his volume of poetry of the same name. The contents of the poem have been derived from an ancient epic poem *Iliad* by Homer, concerning an important part of the Trojan War. In *The Shield of Achilles*, Auden attempts a juxtaposition of the classical imagery of Hephaestus's creation of the shield with brutal modern imagery employed to exemplify the contrast between the glorious past and trifling present. The myth of antiquity is contrasted with the bitter reality of present. The modernity is set against the classical world. The shield reflects the virtual selves of humans and shows images of their condition in the modern world. From a thematic perspective, the poem is quite similar to Eliot's '*Wasteland*' as it also depicts the world devoid of humanity and ethics.

'*The Shield of Achilles*' draws on the Greek legend of the shield of Achilles which was given to the Greek warrior by his mother, Thetis. She had employed Hephaestus, the lame blacksmith of the

gods, to make the shield for her son to fight in the war of *Trojan*. Thetis had expected that the artist would carve beautiful scenes of orchards, well-governed cities with marble statues and untamed seas. But to her surprise, she finds images which depict the artificial and desolate life of the modern world. It is a classic example of an 'ekphrasis' that is, a dramatic and a vivid description of a visual art. The Homeric myth is moulded and shaped into an allegory of the contemporary era. Readers are driven from myth to reality so that an obvious contradiction and parallel is drawn between what was and what is. It reflects a vast barren and desolate plain. There is nothing to eat, no green meadows, no sign of neighbourhood and no place of rest. This is the picture of the modern wasteland. The land is full of people who are but dumb-driven cattle, unable to think for themselves and governed by others. Those who govern this wasteland and its people have no personal contact with the people. Soldiers are persuaded and ordered to kill and go to the war by giving numbers to them and citing nonsensical reasons via the mass media. The poet accuses the dictators and fascists of the modern world for the hard-handed fits of warfare and careless slaughter of the masses and in turn criticises the disconsolateness of the modern age.

Although Auden might have had the aftermath of the two world wars in mind when he wrote the poem, it can still be found appealing and applying to the contemporary devastations caused in the world's most militarised zones like *Kashmir*. As the French literary critic and theorist, Roland Barthes (1915–1980) in his ground breaking essay:

*The Death of the Author' stresses on the absence of any relation between a text and its author and claims, "The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as past... there is no other time than that of enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now... To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing . . . (1968).*

This essay reads the poem "here and now" and contextualises it within the lived realities of the people of Kashmir.

## Viewing Kashmir through the Poem

The poem is a reflection of the modern world order that is chaotic, unpredictable and paving way for the growing entropy. Auden has magnificently succeeded in portraying the contemporary era as it is. The speaker of the poem happens to be the poet himself who shows a mirror to modern people and intends for them to feel concerned about what they are like and where they are heading to. The world that *Thetis* lives in happens to be the antithesis of the tyrannical, emotionless and conscienceless modern world that Auden describes. Robert Pack analysis this in his article ‘The Idea in the Mirror: Reflections on the Consciousness of Consciousness,’ wherein he states that Auden uses the Homeric, mythical vision of life to provide a sharp contrast with the mundane, scientific reality that modern people live in, one in which the individual cannot appeal to personal or social meaning. (p. 61).

Kashmir is no exception to what the poem describes. Ever since the hastened accession of Jammu & Kashmir to India, massacres, rapes and sexual abuses, tortures, arrests, enforced abductions, police brutalities, political repression and many other human rights violations by Indian forces are quiet common. The poem can well be interpreted in the context of the current Kashmir situation. *Thetis*, the mother of Achilles in the poem, is any ordinary person looking at Kashmir from outside or inside. She can be a native Kashmiri or a tourist from any part of world who is dismayed by looking at Kashmir as she had expected “vines and olive trees”, “marble well-governed cities”, “men and women in a dance”, but finds disappointment, horror, desolateness and no sign of lush green meadows. Kashmir is no more the ‘heaven on earth’. It has witnessed gruesome violations and agonizing incidents in the hands of Indian troops down the line since 1947. The injustice suffered and atrocities caused are beyond an outsider’s imagination. Indian despotic rule has turned Kashmir into a hell like situation. Impunity for human rights violations and lack of access to justice are key human rights challenges in Kashmir. Once the best tourist destination in the world, Kashmir demography as well as

topography have largely been disturbed due to armed forces developments and restrictions put in. The claustrophobia of confinement has not only prevailed over the minds of the residents but has also badly affected the outsiders, who would otherwise wish to spend their holidays in Kashmir, too. For example, recently US government advised its citizens to avoid travel to Kashmir citing the unrest and “violence” as reasons. “Sporadic violence occurs particularly along the Line of Control separating India and Pakistan, and in tourist destinations in the Kashmir Valley: Srinagar, Gulmarg, and Pahalgam,” the Department of State advisory added. (Scroll staff, 2019). Tourism, being a key sector of the economy of Kashmir, provides jobs to hundreds of thousands besides adding to the income of the state. Aijaz Nazir, quoting a local tourism official, reports that in 2016 alone, the tourism industry suffered a loss of \$46m. (Nazir, 2017). What one can instead see in Kashmir are the men in uniform, an “unintelligible multitude”, in Auden’s vocabulary, a “million eyes” and a “million boots in line”. They are “without expression” unable to think on their own and following some authority which they do not know. India has employed more than 0.7 million troops in its occupied Kashmir which are brain washed to kill and to suppress the voice of masses and have been given a free hand to carry grave human rights violations from physical violence to mental tortures. These army men follow not their own reason and conscience in dealing with the protesters and rebels of Kashmir but are programmed to pursue “a sign” by the Indian authorities who order them and make things happen according to their own interests and without paying heed to what the people of Kashmir actually want. Auden condemns such orders and mocks at their followers who are misguided and driven towards futility by the people at the helm of affairs whom the poet refers as “without a face” and who prove “by statistics that some cause was just”. Every year India claims there are around 150 to 200 militants operating in Kashmir. Even if there are 300 of them, does that justify the deployment of not less than 7 lakh troops in Kashmir, who carry very brute violations in the name of counter insurgency operations? As Jammu & Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society

programme coordinator Khurram Parvez also asks. (Ashraf, 2016). In July 2019 alone, around fifty thousand more troops were airlifted to Kashmir by the Indian government so to suppress the possible demonstrations and protests, by Kashmiris, against the unconstitutional abrogation of article 370 and 35a of the constitution of India that granted special status to the occupied state of Jammu & Kashmir and recognised it as a disputed territory between India and Pakistan. Ben Arnoldy reports in Christian Science Monitor (2010):

*The state, with a population of 10 million, already has an estimated 700,000 security forces, giving it an extremely high (7:10) force to population ratio. Gen. David Petraeus's counterinsurgency manual says experts recommend ratios close to 25:1,000, something the US has never met in Afghanistan.*

Auden criticises this army and calls them dumb multitudes of cattle like beings that just carry out what they are asked for and do not refuse or even think against the “voice” “out of air”. And instead they ‘march away enduring a belief’ whose “logic brought them somewhere else, to grief”. As often happens in Kashmir that Indian soldiers commit suicides when they are fed up with their job and feel absolutely helpless. Their faculty of reason is hijacked and the personalities of these army men are manipulated and they are programmed to carry out the said tasks no matter the cost. William Blake was compelled to call them “hapless soldiers” in his poem ‘London’ of the collection Songs of Experience.<sup>1</sup> Their gruesome barbarism and the inhumane actions are always legitimised by Indian government by spreading various propagandistic discourses among public.

“Barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot” brings forth the images of concertina wire that can be found in any town of Kashmir. Forces put restrictions every now and then to an extent that often it happens that an ambulance is not given a smooth passage. According to Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society, around 200 ambulances were damaged by security forces during the 2016 unrest. (JKCCS, 2016). There are also independent accounts alleging ambulances and ambulance drivers were attacked by security forces. The Doctors

Association Kashmir documented several instances of doctors, paramedics and ambulance drivers being obstructed and physically assaulted by security forces. In one incident, security forces allegedly targeted an ambulance driver with a pellet-firing shotgun that injured him seriously while he was ferrying patients to the hospital. (UN report, 2018). The “bored officials” and “sweating sentries” who are asked to block the roads by barricades and wires, harass and jeer the civilians who happen to pass by. During the anti-militancy operations called Cordon and Search Operations, the restrictions imposed and violations of human rights as well as property rights are carried to such an extent that angles fear to tread. Under the umbrella of some special laws like Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), 1990 and Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act (PSA), 1978 given to armed forces, India has actually given a free hand to forces to carry every sort of humanitarian violation, be it sexual abuse, torture, extrajudicial abductions and killings, property damages, open firing on unarmed protesters or unjustified custodial killings. These structured laws have ever since obstructed the normal legal course, impeded accountability, exempted armed forces from responsibility and jeopardized the right to remedy for victims of human rights violations.

The people, both nationally and internationally at the powerful positions and the intellectuals whom Auden calls “crowd of ordinary decent folk,” seldom express their concern and raise their voices against Indian subjugation and oppression in Kashmir while the demanders of right to self-determination and seekers of justice are jailed, maimed, shot or hanged to death. Instead they “watched from without and neither moved nor spoke”, while the people of Kashmir: “Lay in the hands of others; /they were small/ And could not hope for help and no help came”. (Auden, *The Shield*, 1955)

Auden has already warned about the people to come who would be seemingly decent and pretending concern but they would say nothing and do nothing when individuals would be ripped off their dignities and brutal violence and inhuman acts would be eating up their bodies.

A visitor of Kashmir (Thetis) would expect a merry land where “men and women” are “in dance” but there in the burning land would be found wailing mothers for their lost sons, bereaved wives for their missing husbands and grim faces of children who suffer pellet injuries and amputated organs and blinded folks. UN human rights reports an estimated number of 140 civilians killed between mid-July 2016 and end of March alone and in the same period, the erstwhile state government of Jammu and Kashmir estimated a number of 9,042 injured persons. (UN report, 2018: J&K LA). (Not to mention the killings before and after the said period which are said be around 95,000 and the maimed which exceed hundred and fifty thousand.)

There are resonances of “a weed-choked field” in Kashmir. Day in and day out, the people of Kashmir are largely affected by the restrictions imposed and by choking of the voices of commons. From telecom services like phone calls and internet to peaceful demonstrations against Indian government, the right to freedom of expression has become a fantasy now. You cannot raise your voice against government decisions, you do not reserve the right to speak freely in public gatherings or post your views on the social media, neither can you complain against the injustice you suffer under the political regime of India or in the hands of Indian military. Even the journalists of Kashmir are not spared. A majority of them have been turned into stenographers who report only things that suit the government. Only a handful of them do actually criticise government and speak up for the people but only at the cost of risking their lives and their career. Recently a freelance photo journalist from Srinagar, who happens to be the winner of Anja Niedringhaus Courage in Photojournalism award from the International Women's Media Foundation, was booked under a draconian law called Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) in which an individual can be designated a terrorist and sentenced to jail for up to 7 years. Her only crime was that she had shared photographs, which she had taken for a story back in December 2019, on Facebook in which the story of Arifa Jan, whose husband

was allegedly killed by the Indian Army in 2000, is told. The photo caption read, “Arifa Jan suffers frequent panic attacks nearly 2 decades after her husband was gunned down by Indian army in 2000, she can still hear the gunshots and sees her husband’s blood-soaked body when she thinks of him.” (qtd. by Javaid in ThePrint, 2020).

The place is but a barren land bringing forth the images of a deserted wasteland. Every intellectual voice, in any part of India in general and occupied Kashmir in particular, is choked. Those who speak against the policies of current government are labelled ‘anti-nationals’ and ‘Pakistan sympathisers’ by the *Hindutva* regime of India. Eminent scholars and intellectuals who dare to speak against the atrocities in Kashmir fear for their lives for the rest of their lives. In her interview, Arundhati Roy, who happens to be world famous novelist, activist and also India’s most fervent and outspoken critic of growing fascism, says in regard to the India’s clampdown on Kashmir in 2019:

*Every single person who has a voice at all has been arrested. And that, as you say, includes all the former chief ministers, people who have been carrying India’s water for the last 70 years. Everybody is in jail. Anybody who has a voice is in jail. Anybody who dares to speak up is being picked up, anybody on the street, you know, and of course, internationally. The people who are negotiating and speaking whether it’s Imran Khan or Modi or Donald Trump, in a sense, you know, why are they negotiating the fate of seven million people who have been caged? I mean, how would it be if seven million people in New York were caged and everybody was deciding their fate and think, Oh, it’s a good thing for them in the end, you know, they ought to be locked down for 50 days because they don’t know what is good for them? (Roy, 2019).*

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet voiced her concern, in February 2020 in the 43<sup>rd</sup> session of Human Rights Council in Geneva on human rights developments around the world, over the continued curbs and detention of political leaders in Kashmir. “Schools, businesses and livelihoods have been disrupted

by the continued heavy military presence, and no steps have been taken to address excessive use of force and other serious human rights violations by security forces.” (High Commissioner 43<sup>rd</sup>, 2020).

Auden’s Thetis would be disappointed, distressed and depressed if she happened to have a look at Kashmir. Noam Chomsky calls Kashmir the “biggest prison in the world.” In an interview at his office in Tucson with Karthik Ramanathan, Chomsky pointed out that there are quite vivid symptoms of growing fascism in India. (Chomsky, 2020). He called Kashmir situation “shocking” and also called the atrocities of army in the valley of Kashmir to have a “superficial gesture.” Earlier in July 2015, Noam Chomsky opined that Indian troops should move out of Kashmir. “Indian Army should leave Kashmir. Kashmir has had an awful story, especially since 80’s after that fake election and there have been horrible atrocities,” he said.

By the persistent suppression of voices of people and by restrictions posed upon them, by mass killings, tortures, sexual violence, denial of basic human rights and refusal to respect their dignities, the people of Kashmir have grown claustrophobia and other psychological disturbances which range from depression to irreversible frustrations. A survey done by Medecins Sans Frontiers in 2015, claims nearly 1.8 million adults in Kashmir, 45% of the total population, have shown symptoms of mental distress. More than 41% of the total population showed signs of depression, 26% signs of anxiety and 19% showed potential symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. (qtd. by Shah in The Guardian, 2019).

Such a state of affairs has pushed the people of Kashmir towards wall and they have grown a sense of helplessness, self-hatred, pessimistic and nihilistic approach towards life. In this sense Auden says, “...they lost their pride/ And died as men before their bodies died.” (Auden, The shield, 1955)

Such a state is obviously a perfect environment for a young boy of Kashmir to be in Auden’s words, “A ragged urchin, aimless and

alone.” No wonder there are stone pelting incidents in Kashmir and militancy related developments. As Michel Foucault also maintains, “Where there is power [oppression], there is resistance.” (Foucault, The History of Sexuality Vol. I: 94). If the right to freedom of expression of a people is crushed underneath the usurpers feet, there shall be, out of frustration, promising incidents of violence and discordance.

For a common Kashmiri, sexual violation of local women by Indian troops is no big surprise. Army has been doing so since 1990s. One significant case is that of Kunan-Poshpora mass rape, which took place in one of the villages of a northern district of occupied Kashmir namely Kupwara. On the night of 23 February 1991, soldiers from the 4 Rajputana Rifles regiment of the Indian Army gang-raped around 23 women (In fact more than that but most of the victims refused to reveal their violations for various societal taboos). That was neither the first incident nor the last. In February 2018, a documentation before the State Human Rights Commission was filed which documented 143 cases of sexual violations committed between 1989 and 2017 by Indian army in Kashmir. (UN report on Kashmir, 2018. p.35). The government has always been hushing up such cases and turning a blind eye towards them. That is what Auden means when he says, “*That girls are raped... /were axioms to him*”. (Auden, The Shield, 1955). An ordinary Kashmiri is used to it and expects neither help nor any sympathy from people of the world. He is the one who, in Auden’s words, has “*...never heard/ Of any world where promises were kept,/ Or one could weep because another wept.*” (Auden, The Shield, 1955)

## Conclusion

The poem has a contemporary resonance in Kashmir for modern readers. It is a bitter commentary on the present world order where arrogant rulers and their apologists dominate and crush the dignities of individual human beings while others spectate at the scenes and maintain their silence. The world will be destroyed less by those who do evil and more by those who watch evil being done and say

nothing. Using a rhetorical device of contrast in the poem, W.H Auden has brought forth the world that should have been in parallel to the world that, unfortunately, is. The paper succeeds in presenting the poem in the status quo of Kashmir and may also enlighten the scholars and researchers in analysing the literatures of past with respect to the socio-political conditions of the current world order.

## Notes

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