

## **Kashmiri Folklore and Culture: A Postcolonial Study of Kashmiri Folk Life and the British Antiquary**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Kashmir had always been the land of desire. It attracted the rishies, saints and teachers. This is the land of Rishi Abhinavgupt, a learned seer of 11<sup>th</sup> Century; it is the land of Kalhana, Bhat Lollata and Lal Ded. It is the land of rich folk culture, literature and rituals. The vast beautiful valley inspired many narratives in the past. It offered a fertile ground for the play of creative minds. However, much of the antiquity is neglected due to the conflicts in the past many decades. The formal study of Kashmir folktales was first done by the British missionaries. The clever English race wanted to seep deep into its roots so as to know the strengths and weaknesses of its colonies. They had come with a long lasting plan and they employed all the strategies to control their subjects through and through. Study of culture, folk life, manuscripts, classics, morality of the natives etc. was also the main area of their concern besides ruling over them. It was a phenomenon that was exercised throughout India. The testimony of it was the regular publication of *The Indian Antiquary*, *Indian Notes and Queries*, *The Christian College Magazine*, *The Indian Evangelical Review*, *Westminster Review*, *Folk Lore Journal & Indian Fairy Tales* etc. It had both positive and negative outcomes. The positive aspect of it was that at least the oral literature was explored, recorded and documented by them because by the later 19<sup>th</sup> Century the Indians had started neglecting the documentation of their own history, culture and traditional knowledge. It was due to constant invasion, attacks and mass destruction of temples

of knowledge. The rich treasure in all forms remained confined to a few families only. So, at least now we have it in recorded form and the credit goes to the British. The negative aspects of it are that their study and documentation is highly colored with their ideology of white man's burden. It is biased, prejudiced and highly unfair. The missionaries made a deliberate attempt to project the natives as superstitious, illiterate and uncultured. The present paper in an attempt to study Kashmir folktales as collected by Rev. J. Hinton Knowles, a Missionary to the Kashmir's through the lens of post-colonial theory.

**KEY WORDS:** Post-colonial, Rishi, Kashmiri Folk life, Antiquary, Naag Worship.

## INTRODUCTION

“A cruel fate forced me from home,  
Far in a foreign land to roam;  
There I became most wise and great,  
And raised to second in the State.”

(Knowles, 270)

Folk literature also called folklore or oral tradition is that the lore (traditional knowledge and beliefs) of cultures having no written communication. It is transmitted by word of mouth and consists, as does written literature, of both prose and verse narratives, poems and songs, myths, dramas, rituals, proverbs, riddles, and therefore the like. Nearly all known peoples, now or within the past, have produced it. The diversity of India's culture ensures a wide but complex range of literature which is based on the traditional language and customs from different regions, religious and social groups, and tribes. Most of the Folk tales are created, spread, and retained in the vernacular languages as Folktales exercise a powerful influence over the popular imagination, with folk heroes often being deified in villages. ( Oza, 2020)

Perhaps it is a prophecy for the Kashmiries. They got displaced from their homeland but still they fought back and succeeded in coming to prominence: wherever they went. They didn't let the up rootedness; cast a shadow on their success. As is evident, the character, culture and customs of any community are ingrained in their folktales. So, is it with the Kashmiri folktales

which were collected by a Knowles. Rev. J. Hinton Knowles was a famous author and a British missionary to Kashmir. He was born in 1856 and died in 1943. He was appointed as Missionary to Kashmir in 1880. He was a well read person and he came up with two seminal works viz. A Dictionary of Kashmir Proverbs and Sayings (1888) and Folktales of Kashmir, published in 1888 in London. The other famous British Missionaries who worked in Kashmir were Cecil Earle Tyndale-Biscoe (his school is still popular in Kashmir) and Sir Walter Roper Lawrence. Lawrence wrote a book, The Valley of Kashmir in 1895. He was an officer of the Indian Civil Services.

Knowles was a staunch imperialist, though he acknowledges the presence of element of wisdom in these stories but he rejects to acknowledge that, “the Jataka form of a tale was older in point of time than the European version.” (Knowles, viii) He is convinced that the fountain of knowledge first sprung in Europe only. He is very much sure about, “logical argument,” and “abstract reasoning,” and considers folk tales as tool to educate, “the minds of illiterate hearers.” (Knowles, viii) He is also staunchly against making a comparison of Rasalu of Punjab (a folk hero of Punjab) with that of King Arthur. He says, ‘A writer started us by duly appropriating Raja Rasalu who has been called as the King Arthur of the Punjab, as a solar myth.’ (Knowles, x) Although Knowles had done great efforts in collecting and attributing the folk tales after the day’s hard work but the deconstruction of his language shows that he, as well as the European race, was doing a great favor to the natives of their colonies by ruling over them. He says, “I sincerely hope it will prove a real contribution towards that increasing stock of folklore which is doing so much to clear away the clouds that envelop much of the practices, ideas and beliefs which make up the daily life of the natives of our great dependencies, control their feelings, and underlie many of their actions.” (Knowles, xii) Thus it is clear from the above statement the Knowles was actually trying to study the native of their great dependency so that by analyzing that they could control and rule over them.

In the book, *Folk Tales of Kashmir*, Knowles has collected sixty-eight tales. He has also provided variants of some of the popular tales like, The Tales of Princess, Saiyid and Said, The Four Princes, **Karm Ya Dharm** (Since he was unable to replace the words with equivalent English words, he kept the pair as it is.) **The Philosopher’s Stone, The Wicked Queens** etc.

The tales comprises plethora of fantastic tales that includes wide variety and class of people, pets, beasts, birds, saints, kings, Prince, Princess, clowns, snakes, philosophers, goldsmiths, *jinn*s, merchants, robbers etc. In the very first tale, The Seven Legged Beast, he tells us about the story of a prince who fights with jinn. It so happened that a king was killed by a seven legged beast. The queen implores upon her son to take revenge of his father's death. God's angles help the Prince to search for that beast. The caution for killing the beast was that its blood should not drop on land lest with every drop, new jinns will emerge. The Prince is successful in killing it. He puts his head secretly inside the palace. Once the queen goes to that room in the palace and the cunning jinns head produces the voice of her husband and instigates her against the Prince. She believes the voice and puts her son to various tests like, 'get the milk of a tigress,' (Knowles, 3) then, bring, 'a princess from certain castle,' (4). The tigress and her two cubs help him in performing the daring tasks. Finally, the confusion is cleared and they get rid of the beast. Knowles claims that many variants of this tale are available in Punjab and other regions also. The story reminds of extant epic, Beowulf.

Similarly, the folktale, *The Cat who Became a Queen*, has many variants from Uttar Pradesh and middle parts of India. In this tale, a king desired to have a child but despite having many wives he couldn't produce one. One day he threatened the queens that if they didn't give him good news, he will kill them. The queens out of fear devised a plan. They brought a kitten and hid it in one of the Queens' chamber. They forbid the king to see the baby as the "Brahmans have declared that the child must not be seen by her father until she is married." (Knowles, 9) Time passed by and the so called daughter grew up into a cat now the King wanted to marry her off to a Prince and see her face. The queens think that now they'll be caught so they take the Prince into confidence. The prince promises them that he will keep it a secret. So, the cat is clandestinely married to the prince. The people around the King try to keep him away from his so called imaginary daughter. One day the King becomes desperate and moves on to the Prince's country. Hearing the news the cat starts crying that now her life will be over. She weeps bitterly. She prays to Goddess Parvati that why she should be killed despite no fault of hers. The wailings of the Cat melts Goddess Parvati's heart and she compels Lord Shiva to turn the Cat into a girl. Lord Shiva finally agrees to transform the cat into a girl. He gives magical oil to Parvati and instructs her to apply it on cat's fur. Parvati does so but the cat requests her to leave some spot

untouched, “lest her husband should suspect and deny her.” (Knowles, II) So finally the Cat turns into a beautiful Princess and meets the King. The Prince is also happy to know that his patience has borne fruits and after this everybody lives happily ever after.

The key take away from this folktale is that religion, fertility, fantasy, connivance, patience and faith are all an integral part of our narratives. But ancient folktales have shown women in poor light. In Kashmiri folktales also many such instances are there like in the folktale. ‘The Black and White Beard, ‘two men of differing age meet each other. One fellow is very young but his hair and beard has turned grey while the one who is quite aged had black beard and hair, ‘as black as charcoal,’ (Knowles, 145). On enquiring it was found that the elder one’s house is a paradise because of his wife obeys his order blindly. To prove his point, he takes him home and gives his wife a hanky full of sand and orders her to make bread out of it. She takes it to the kitchen and tries every possible means to make bread out of it. Next day, she humbly apologizes to her husband. To this the old man boasts off to the young man, “Notice how meek my wife is!”(Knowles, 146) The old man puts his wife to some more tests to prove his point further. And finally the young man agrees, “I see the secret of your black beard-the dye of home-joy, home-peace, and home-contentment, a wonderful triple mixture, warranted to keep a man young forever.”(Knowles, 147) These stories were basically meant to keep women under control. Later on the young man with white beard takes the old one with black beard to his own house. The moment he enters his house his wife loathes, “Where have you been wasting your time, while I toil here in this dingy hole?” On asking for food she places, “left over meal from her and the children’s meal-cold, grizzly craps, fit only for the growling pariahs,” ( Knowles, 147) Finally when her anger reaches its peak she throws a big earthenware pot containing some rice. The poor man saves his life somehow and thus proves, “this is the cause of my broken spirit, and scraggy, premature grey beard.” (Knowles, 147) Moral instructions for a duty bound wife are many but it is difficult to find such instructions for a duty bound husband in the folktales.

If one looks at the commentary of the colonial masters closely one could see the crushing agenda of the colonial masters. In one of the write ups on Kashmiries, “Brahmans and Sadhus,” C. E. Tyndale Biscoe calls the traditional Pheran dress as Kit, he also mocks at the Kashmiri gentleman’s effort to fit into Western Pant- Shirt dress. “Instead of a pheron, he (the Kashmiri

Babu) wears a coat and a waistcoat he puts on a cotton shirt, which is worn outside as is the fashion in the West. Although he adopts Western shirt, he very seldom runs to a collar or a tie; if he has to a collar he generally to sent it to a wash.” (Biscoe, 106) On the one hand he bitterly criticizes the Kashmiri traditional dress pheron and on the other he mocks the Indian Babu when he tries to fit into Western gear from head to toe. He says, “This kit strikes one as a great mix-up pf the East and West, yet it is infinitely preferable to the unsightly and unmanly garb of Pheron.” (Biscoe, 106)Scientifically, it is considered as the most suitable and comfortable dress for the harsh winters of Kashmir. In fact the loose warm cloth of tweed not only keeps the person warm but also the loose arms of the dress allows the wearer to slide his arms inside the pheran to keep it warm in chilling winters. The comfort of the dress can gauged from the fact that one can withdraw ones hands inside or outside as and when required and one can carry a Kangri (the traditional small fire pot filled with hot coals) inside the dress.



(Image source: Swikriti’s Blog-A Kashmiri Man wearing a Pheran and carrying a Kangri)

Tyndale was averse to the idea of allowing the natives to open Brahmins School. If we deconstruct his language we’ll see the imperial ambitions seeped in through and through. Tyndale writes, “A certain yellow robed and much travelled Sadhu visited Kashmir with his chelas. He had travelled in Europe & America and was highly educated.”(111) When the news of his arrival spread many Brahmins gathered to meet him. “the Brahman Community were anxious to obtain his aid in establishing a Brahman school, .... During the proceedings the President made some false statements concerning the Mission School, which the Sadhu accepted as true, therefore spoke against the Mission School.”(Biscoe, 111) In those days also, along with

giving modern education, the sole purpose of the missionaries was to convert the natives into Christianity. Another colonial master, James Milne is also highly prejudiced in his description of a Kashmiri. In his article, The Gowned Kashmiri, he observes, "The Kashmiri may be the humblest creature in station and possessions, a desert in flesh, for want of nourishing food, shivering in the cold weather, because he is ill-clad. Even when he squats on his brazier of charcoal, with the folds of his gown gathered about it and his legs still cold." (Miles, 29) It is strange to note that a place where variety of fruits are grown and where (in those days) every household used to tend sheep, goats and cows: when people were self reliant, he calls these people malnourished. Indian people never believed in leading a luxuries and lazy life hence they never ran after gathering comfort for themselves but the westerns have interpreted this basic lifestyle as something impoverishing.

Indian writers especially the natives of Kashmir have thankfully given a counter narrative of the British however under the influence of western education they have not been quite vocal about it. A close study of the various folk forms provides the counter narrative. The close analysis of folklore and different other forms provides the opportunity to establish a counter narrative. The origin and nature of folklore establishes the fact that the Kashmiri folklore carries a rich legacy. Many critics have found out common denominators in Kashmiri folktales, like S.N.Dhar claims that most of the Kashmiri folktales are taken from, "Somdeva's classic, Katha-Sarita-Sagar," (Suresh K. Sharma & Bakshi, S.R., 319) It is true that the common feature in folktales is that they are full of fantastical characters like the super-hero, man-eating demons, talking birds, flying animals, mystics and sorcerers. Nature and natural settings are an integral part of folk life of Kashmir. One of the peasant girls says,

"Proud of thyself art thou, O saffron flower!  
Far lovelier than thee am I, O saffron flower!"

(Sharma & Bakshi, 333)

Shawl-wool shall I spin with my own hands,  
And shall get it dyed in saffron color.

(334)

“At Pampore are the saffron fields,  
Bare-footed I shall steal saffron;  
My Pir lives at Vijibrar,  
Why should I run there?” (334)

Maple tree is also a frequently used symbol in Kashmiri folksongs, here the beloved is praising the majestic beauty of the Chinar tree.

“To me, O chinar leaf, my love has sent thee,  
My all, O Cupid, shall I sacrifice for thee,  
Thou art, O chinar leaf, prince of beauty,  
My all, O Cupid shall I sacrifice for thee.”(333)

The folk songs of Kashmir are representatives of Kashmiri life. They are rich in terms of beauty, melody and natural diversity. Saffron, Maple tree, pastoral love, the golden valley, the shawl makers, the paddy fieldworkers, marriage songs and songs of mourning are an encompassing feature of Kashmiri folk songs. If we observe the happy songs of the valley closely: the claims of the Western writers prove utterly false. Can the utterly malnourished people create such happy songs? If the people of the valley can afford to dye the shawl wools in saffron, it is hard to believe that they are called, “ill-clad,” and always cold.

The wisdom that is ingrained in Kashmiri wise sayings is also worth studying. Due to its geographical location, its topography, over the centuries it has borne many onslaughts and it has made the life in Kashmir tough. Still, the happy valley has a rich treasure in terms of knowledge and wisdom. Prof Noor Mohamad Baba says, “This uniqueness of Kashmiri culture as reflected in the day to day idiom of common man, folklore evolved through centuries of living together in interface with natural surroundings, language and literature. (Sheeraza, 9) Some of the proverbs are a testimony to this statement,



“alan nundi daadi lagan vaangunan ti saag” ( Kalla, K.L., 133)

It means, “In the yearning for the bottle gourds, the brinjals are automatically watered.” That is when one benefits one person many others are also benefitted, automatically.

“aki kanu’ bozun te be yi kanu traavun”  
(132)

In translation it means to listen through one ear and cast aside through the other. That means pay no heed to useless gossips.

“anyan manz kaa’ny suandar”

It means, “In the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed are the kings.”(Kalla, 135)

“Asluk rutsar darshun mojood” ( 136)

A kind of wish that is said when friends depart. It means, if life permits, God willing, we will meet again.

The universal nature of these wise sayings is self evident and can't be questioned. It is astonishing to see that a common thread of ancient rites and rituals runs from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. One such folk ritual is the worship of Naagas. The canonical work of Pandit Kalhan's *Rajtaringini*, states that when the Naag worshippers had become Buddhists, the *Naga* Gods got angry with the people and cursed the place with harsh winters. Historian and beureaucrat Parvez Dewan claims that, “The Naagas are a recurrent theme in the history of Kashmir. They were among the earliest settlers, were Shaivites and later on some of them became Buddhists also. Their descendants founded the Karkota dynasty around 627 A.D.” ( Dewan, 17) The famous Wullar Lake, is considered to be the abode of Sadangula, a Naga King. H.H.Wilson in his paper on *Snake Worship in Kashmir*, asserts the fact that, “snake deities make in traditionary history of Kashmir.” He also mentions Abul Fazl's *Ain-i- Akbari* that claims that at, “seven hundred places there are carved figures of snakes ,” (Sharma & Bakshi, 186) in

Kashmir. Nilmat Puraan, another canonical Sanskrit text on Kashmir informs us that, “its oldest inhabitants were Nagas,” and it was followed by Daitayas, Pisachas and then finally the Manus or Aryans settled here.

Alexander Cunningham has also collected information about the origin of holy springs in Kashmir. “The Behat takes its rise in the small pool of Vira Nag, which Jehangir walled round; but its true source miles further to the south-west, ..Its most distant source is in the lake of Sessa Nag, ..the Veshau, or Veshavi, rises in the holy fount of Kosa Nag; and the Shupyen river in the lake of Nandan Sar.”(Cunningham, Alexander, 112) James Fergusson, in his book *Tree and Serpent Worship*, studies in detail the phenomena of snake worship in India. He also compares this tradition with the similar traditions in the entire world. Regarding snake worship in Kashmir, he tells us in detail that how the Kingdom of Kashmir was not involved in the War during Mahabharata. Lord Krishna had forbidden the participation of Kashmir. The narrative is told through the grandson of Arjuna, Janmejaya. A sage tells about the future of Kashmir that it will be drowned by water and after many years a *devi*, known as Kashmiri appears. As life reappears in Kashmir the snakes are devoured by Garuda, hence fearing for their life they make Nila, a snake as their king. Lord Vishnu comes to the rescue of the snakes and gives them the blessing that after four yugas (ages) the neighbors of snakes shall be humans and if they worship the Naags, by offering them flowers, incense and good food. In return they shall be, “blessed with cattle, corn and wealth.”(Fergusson, 230)



Image Source: Wikimedia Commons, Image of Verinag, the abode of Serpent King Nila)

The lakes, springs and fountains were supposed to be inhabited by the Nagas. Dr Sunil Chandra Ray further elaborates in his book, *Early History & Culture of Kashmir*, “the names of the place like Verinag, Anantnag, Sernag show traces of ancient Nag beliefs.”(Vitasta)



(Image Source: Chander M Bhat, Shehjar, Takshak Nag in Pandrethan, Kashmir)

One of the extant Nag festivals of Kashmir is Takshaka and Taksakavatra festival celebrated in Jaishtha (June) month falling on 12<sup>th</sup> day of Krishna Paksha. The Takshak spring is in Zevan (old name Jayavan), it is near Pandrethan in Kashmir. It is said that Lord Takshak had first gifted saffron from this spring to Hakim Wagh Bhat. The villagers always offer cow's milk to this spring for getting blessings for a good harvest. This spring is mentioned in Mahabharata, Kalhana's *Rajtarangini* and Abul Fazal's *Ain-i-Akbari*. Famous Sanskrit scholar, Bilhana has also praised it as the abode of Lord of Snakes, Takshaka.) Kashmiri pundits believed that one should not even catch the fish of these springs. Not only this, they even forbid children to make a noise around the springs. A famous proverb in Kashmir is,

*“Naga gad ache wuchni halal te khyen haram,”*

its translation is,

“The fish of naags (springs) aren't to be eaten, only looking at them is allowed and eating isn't.”(Drabu, Onaiza)

Naag worshipping was so popular that it gave birth to the legend of, *Himal and Nagary*, it is one of the most popular folktale of Kashmir. It has been told and re-told many a times and it is still being revisited by scholar and story tellers, time and again. According to the folklore Nagray was the King of Snakes. One fine day, he transformed into a beautiful boy and appeared in a Brahmins house. The Brahmin couple felt blessed and brought him up with care. Since he was a

heavenly child, his parents became wealthier by virtue of his presence. One day he told his parents that he wants to take a bath in the holiest spring, his parents told him that such pond lies with the princess Himal and it is strongly guarded, hence commoners are not allowed to enter. The boy said that he has got special powers and hence he won't be caught. So, he used to enter the pond through a small hole by clandestinely transforming into a snake and took bath as a boy, in the pure spring. Princess Himal

grew suspicious of some one's entry into the pond because she could hear someone splashing. Finally one day she found out Nagrai, bathing in the pond and she fell in love at first sight. She sends her maids to know the whereabouts of that boy. Later she entreats her father to marry her off to the Brahmin's boy. The king is adamant because of the status issue. The princess stops eating for days and finally the King has to relent. On the other hand the Brahmin is terrified at the proposal, he goes through mixed feelings. Nagrai assures his father that he will make it a grand affair with the help of his special powers so that he doesn't have to cut a sorry figure. Everything goes well and the couple lives happily but soon the serpent wives of Nagrai come in search of him. They feel jealous of Himal's beauty and want the serpent husband back at any cost.

So after a number of conniving schemes they are successful in snatching away Nagrai from Himal. On the excuse of proving Nagrai's real caste he is taken to a spring for bathing, the serpent wives were already waiting under water and pulled him down the moment he descended in water. So, Himal loses her husband to the former serpent wives. Himal now spends her time in grief and repentance and all she does throughout the day is giving alms to the poor. Some beggar blesses her out of pity and she happens to meet Nagrai again. Nagrai can't take her along with him because his serpent wives won't allow a human wife so he changes Himal into a pebble and hides her in his crown and goes back to the bottom of the spring. The serpent wives smell of human flesh and ask him to take her out. Himal is accepted and allowed to stay but the serpent wives make her do all sorts of household chores throughout the day. They make her life as hard as possible. Once Himal was boiling milk for serpent babies, she keeps it for cooling but because of some mistake the snake babies drink the hot milk and burn themselves. The serpent wives kill Himal on this pretext. When Nagrai comes to know about this he takes the corpse of Himal for burning but out of love he couldn't do so. So he anoints the dead body with some oil and herbs and daily comes to see her under a tree. Once a sage passes by that place and sees the corpse. He

is impressed by the beauty of the dead girl. That sage instills life in the corpse with his powers and takes the girl home, there his son marries Himal. Nagrai searches for Himal all around and finally reaches the sage's house. Nagrai sits near Himal's bed while she is asleep. The sage's son enters his house and sensing danger kills the snake. On finding this Himal shrieks like a mad woman and burns herself on Nagrai's pyre.

### Conclusion:

Kashmiri Folklore and Culture is also being studied in the form of myths and gradually taking shape in the Young Adult Literature also. These contemporary writers use the mythical framework in its complete form with historical settings, mythical characters and themes. It contains a large frame work of epic narrative within itself. The use of archetypes in literature provokes response from the readers, as the audiences share the intentions of the writers (Oza,2012). This sort of writing is said to fall into the category of 'epic fantasy.' It is the sub-genre of popular fantasy fiction. The genre 'epic fantasy' has been popular for over three decades and is considered to be dominant in the market.

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