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The Postcolonial Gothic: *Munnu*, Graphic Narrative and the Terrors of the Nation

Pramod K. Nayar
University of Hyderabad

The traditional European Gothic, dating back to the eighteenth century in literature and the arts, with its theme of decadence, violence in families, haunted homes, crypts with unnameable secrets, madness and memory has continued in the modern era with some variations, as documented by commentators (Punter, 1996; Punter and Byron, 2004; Spooner, 2006; Spooner and Emma McEvoy, 2007; Punter, 2012). Postcolonial refigurations of the Gothic have also come in for some attention (Davison, 2003; Wisker, 2007; Mabura, 2008). The aim of this essay is to outline, at least partially,the postcolonial Gothic's principal features through a reading of Malik Sajad's *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* (2015), a graphic narrative on Kashmir.

Sajad locates his work in the tradition of Art Spiegelman's celebrated *Maus* by representing the Kashmiris as deer and the Indians as humans, and this serves as a meta-commentary for the culturally literate reader because the Kashmiris, like the Jews in Spiegelman, are hunted animals. The awed, frightened, tearful visages of the deer is reassigned its symbolic value: from the iconic Hangul deer of the region, it becomes a symbol of the hunted animal. The Kashmiri wears the face of the hunted deer. The graphic medium, needless to say, serves Sajad, an established cartoonist, to develop his themes of terrifying nationalisms, haunting, embedded violence, foreignness, loss, wastage/wasting and cultural crypts through both word and image. If the Gothic is a 'literature of terror', as Punter's famous book on the history of the genre was subtitled, then Sajad's work is filled with just such a terror, and he renders it Gothic with his art and text. The Gothic itself becomes a useful frame in which to read Sajad's work because the Gothic's interest in the role of history, haunting, memories and crypts are metaphors throughout his work. The postcolonial itself, as Punter shows in another work, has been consistently interested in hauntings, the ghostly and the violence of memories (2000).

Nation, Family, Terror

The very first page of the narrative, after the section title ('Family Photo'), locates Munnu within two specific locales and spaces: the family and the nation (p. 2). The page (**Figure 1**) has a photo frame at the top which has his entire family, all labelled with pointing fingers intruding into the frame of the photo. Beneath this photo frame is a half-page image with a topographical view of Srinagar, with various sections (city centre, Lal Chowk, Balgarden and Batamaloo, where Munnu lives) labelled. This in itself is not striking. But Sajad has an inset that shows the land/region of Kashmir. This inset is a circle, located at the bottom right of the Srinagar map. The inset shows Kashmir, Pakistan, China and India. What draws our attention to this inset is that Kashmir is represented as a white land, and all its neighbouring nations are one undifferentiated black mass.

Several features of this opening page need to be examined. First, the family as the immediate and proximate location of the individual is clearly emphasized. The page then moves outwards, from the family to the town: Srinagar. Finally the town is located within a region in the inset: Kashmir. The alignment of spaces of location is obvious enough for us to see how, in this text, family and national histories, like their spaces, are shared and constitutive of each other. The family becomes the site where national histories are often played out in postcolonial fiction, as demonstrated primarily by the works of Salman Rushdie. The family and belonging as a theme in such texts connects with the theme of nation and belonging or, concomitantly, exclusion/expulsion from *this* family, as studied by several commentators (Schultheis, 2004). National traumas of exclusion, belonging and terrorism find their resonance within the family. Homi Bhabha famously argued that

> "the intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting." (1992, p. 141)

Figure 1: Munnu

The unhomely nature of the home, in this reading, is not the effect of family spectres, incest and patriarchal madness in avuncular uncles – all features of the Gothic story – is the consequence of public/national history entering domestic spaces. Thus, in contrast with the traditional Gothic where the violence is endemic to the family, in the postcolonial Gothic the family merely echoes, draws upon or is impacted by the violence writ across the *nation-as-family*.

In *Munnu*, the state of terror which is Kashmir finds its expression in the terror the family lives in. During the crackdown parades where the men of the house have to appear before the army so that informers might identify the 'terrorists', Munnu's house, tucked away behind some trees, often escaped the checking. Yet this minor triumph does not bring joy to the family because they constantly exchange stories of how other families have been affected by the events in the region. So, in one instance, the family discusses how a neighbour, Shakeela, found a machine gun in her school-going son's bag (p. 14). On crackdown days 'Mamma's face would swell from blood pressure' (p. 33). Other families wait for their men-folk to come back from the parade (p. 33).

Munnu presents families torn asunder by the terrors coming into the home from the violence of the region, the international (Indo-Pak) disputes and the Indian government. This last is represented by the Indian army in *Munnu*. Numerous images of the army's excesses, rudeness and sheer intensity of violence mark Sajad's work. The army as the most visible face of the nation-as-family serves as the constant reminder in Sajad's work that the Kashmiri families do *not* belong to the larger nation-as-family. In a postcolonial Gothic twist to the family-as-embedded-violence in the traditional Gothic, we have in *Munnu* the nation-as-family whose chief characteristic is violence. Into this family none can fit, except those who acquiesce.

Sajad gives us stories of homes and families marked only by disappearances and deaths. Mushtaq (p. 51), Ajaz (p. 65), Mubashir (p. 124-5), Rehman (p. 232) are either dead or come from families disrupted by the violence in Kashmir. With family bonds broken by violent death in each of these cases, the nation-as-family has altered forever the world of the individual families. Sajad amplifies the visceral and affective aspect of such an alteration in the family in several instances. Mubashir cries in school: '**th-they killed by father. They killed my father**!', placed in a speech balloon whose borders are ragged, suggestive of strong emotion (p. 124, emphasis in original). Sajad's artwork then contributes its share. In a small panel we are shown the head of a dead man on a stretcher. The sheet covering him has black streaks, indicating blood. The accompanying text, in the words of the grief-stricken Mubashir, says: 'it was my father, drenched in blood, lying on the stretcher' (p. 125). In the next panel he explains: 'his body had been cut with razors' (p. 125). On the next page, in the first panel we are shown a man suspended from the ceiling and an army man getting ready to cut him with a razor blade. From the man's body we see blood flow, although it is inked as black on black (p. 126). The boy howling for his dead father constitutes the next two panels. The family marked by the death of its members does not belong to the nation-as-family because the latter constitutes the former only in terms of a violent relationship.

The sheer unpredictability of the violence that could, at any moment, enter the family is further indication of the impossibility of bringing the individual family in alignment with the nation-as-family. Writing about the modern Gothic, David Punter wonders whether we live in a 'culture of horror' wherein

> "we appear now to know more than the writers of the late eighteenth century about the potential for violence of our fellow human beings; yet the "more" that we know is precisely a knowledge of unpredictability, an anxious, entirely social, and spasmodically political, awareness that as we discover more about psyche we become less and less certain that it is, or ever can be, "under control"." (1996, p. 210)

In the case of the postcolonial Gothic as embodied in Sajad's work, the knowledge of cultural and national psyches (if nations indeed do have psyches) is coterminous with the awareness that we cannot control the psyche. The bawling school children, the grief-stricken families and the traumatized individuals in *Munnu* testify to the unpredictable nature of extreme violence that enters their lives, even as they know with considerable certainty that the Indian army is capable of such extreme violence in Kashmir. In other words, *Munnu's* postcolonial Gothic focuses on the imminent but unpredictable violence the nation-as-family *will* perpetrate on individual families. This knowledge about the Indian nation is a certainty among the Kashmiris, but such knowledge only drives the culture of horror.

Haunting, Memorials and the Melancholic Picturesque

In the preceding section I spoke of the postcolonial Gothic as one that, in *Munnu*, emphasizes the terror and violence that defines the individual family, and which proceeds from this family being embedded in the nation-as-family. The result of such endemic violence is fractured families and multiplying numbers of corpses. But Sajad does not close off his Gothic with violent deaths. Instead he turns to that standard feature of all Gothic: haunting, memorials and spectres. He also makes effective use of the uncanny but that deserves a separate section.

David Punter and Glennis Byron argue that postcolonial reworkings of the Gothic tell us that the postcolonial Gothic

> represents a specific view of history … as history written according to … a logic of the phantom, the revenant, a logic of haunting … [where] the attempt to make … the nation in a new form is inevitably accompanied by the traces of the past. (2004, p. 55)

There is an 'insistence on the memorial' (p. 56) in postcolonial texts as a result. In *Munnu* the entire region of Kashmir has a history whose primary logic is of haunting and memorials.

On page 5 the first panel, running the breadth of the page, shows us an image of tombstones, in two rows, and gives us three important instances of the logic of haunting (**Figure 2**). This image is borderless and therefore is not quite a panel in the comics' sense of the term. At the bottom left, cutting into one such tombstone is a textbox which announces: 'many of them were already dead' (p. 5).

First, Sajad's art ensures that we pay attention to the arrangement of the tombstones. Lacking a border, the tombstones are themselves the border or frame for the entire page and its other panels, placed beneath this one. Therefore, the tombstones are not just image-frames for the page but are cultural frames for the events and stories in the book and in Kashmir itself. The tombstone image, to phrase it differently, is a cultural frame through which we read Kashmir. The cultural frame is of death and memorials: Kashmir is marked by memorials and tombstones.

Second this particular image looks like a heading, or a title, for the entire page. It runs across the entire width of the page and functions as the first line of the page – a line marked by death. All texts and narratives that follow are placed under this haunting title.

A third reading of this image is invited by the textbox in the bottom left corner. Reminiscent of *Maus'* final image (the tombstone, with Art Spiegelman's name also inscribed), the textbox looks like an epitaph inscribed on the tombstone. There are no names on the tombstones only a generic 'many of them were already dead'. This powerful symbolism of the image proposes the logic of haunting where the dead are unnamed and unnumbered but 'real' nevertheless. The

last panel on the page shows Sajad looking at several newspapers, each carrying the photograph of at least one dead body. If we connect the first image – the tombstones – with this one, we see a narrative of Kashmir itself emerging. Sajad's entire page, but especially the end-paper images of the tombstones and the newspapers, is to be read is enthyematically structured. The page is an enthymeme whose logic enables the readers to understand the assumptions and significance underlying the images from existing *cultural* texts.

Sajad[i] forces us, the readers, to draw the connections: Kashmir is peopled with the dead, its narratives are framed by the dead, its stories are stories of the dead. From the newspaper photographs to the tombstones – Kashmir might only be read through the tombstones, through its dead. Even in the news reports, Sajad says, the bodies are disfigured and the identities of the dead are difficult to ascertain (last panel on the same page).

Figure 2: *Munnu*

Throughout the text there are images of the dead, tombstones, graves and mass mourning (pps. 34-6, 37, 41-3, 51, 64-5, 67-8, 189-191, 204, 210, 231, 234 and elsewhere). In fact the images of

mourning and memorials are the most recurrent ones in the work. In another set of examples, Sajad has nightmares about gravestones (pp., 51, 58-9, 70). Mourning and memorials for the dead dot the idyllic Kashmiri landscape – of which, incidentally, we see very little in *Munnu*. There are no grand picturesque views of hillsides, rivers and the quiet life. Haunting and memorials constitute the landscape as an instantiation of the *melancholicpicturesque* in the postcolonial Gothic. Replacing the labyrinths and derelict buildings of the traditional Gothic, the postcolonial Gothic has its tombstone-dotted spaces of Batamaloo in *Munnu*.

The melancholic picturesque of Sajad's postcolonial Gothic has the dead metamorphosed into martyrs by the public, thus transforming the landscape of Kashmir into a heroic one as well. This is the transformation of the public through a *mobilization* of mourning around the dead. I propose that the melancholic picturesque is an affective aesthetic that organizes the people of Batamaloo through mourning.

Sites of the dead remain linked to the living. Diana Kontsevaia speaking of the mass graves in Srebrenica writes:

> dead bodies occupy a specific physical space, claiming the territory for the group of people who are related to the deceased ... Despite attempts to deemphasizeterritory, it continues to play an important role in the politics of the living, especially in the reburial of past victims. As a result, the territory a memorial occupies is significant because it re-organizes the territorial boundaries of an ethnic group. (2013, p. 17-18)

More importantly, Sajad shows how Kashmiris come together for burial processions and rites, and come to mourn the dead, even when they do not know the victims personally. This is a key aspect of Sajad's postcolonial Gothic where a community *becomes* a public around its *dead*. Sajad's melancholic picturesque must therefore be seen as a process of constructing a powerful symbol of Kashmiriyat. An *individual* comes, in *Munnu*, to mourn alongside the mourning *family*. They carry individual memories of *their* dead, and participate in the memorials to *other* dead. In this process, the postcolonial Gothic's logic of haunting is reiterated where every individual contributes a personal memory and haunting to the community's mourning.

Marita Sturken writes of the process of merging personal and collective memories:

> When personal memories are deployed in the context of marking the anniversary of historical events, they are presented either as the embodied evidence of history or as evidence of history's failures. Survivors return to the sites of their war experience; they place their bodies within the discourse of remembering either to affirm history's narratives or to declare them incomplete, incapable of conjuring their experience. They represent a very particular form of embodied memory. While history functions much more smoothly in the absence of survivors, and survivors are often dissenting voices to history's narratives, history making also accords to them a very particular authority as the embodiment of authentic experience. (1997, p. 688)

The individual's memories thus become a subset of the Kashmir narrative itself, but constitute the larger narrative too.

The Uncanny

Thus far I have examined *Munnu's* employment of the family-trope to speak of Kashmir's violence and, further, the aesthetic of the melancholic picturesque that energizes, through the

mobilization of mourning, the logic of haunting that marks Kashmir. I now turn to the novel's deployment of the uncanny as it continues to craft a postcolonial Gothic for Kashmir.

David Punter has proposed that the Gothic might point to the 'unbalanced difference between official and unofficialhistory' (1996, p. 187). In one section, Sajad describes the history of Kashmir. Moving between myth and historical record, this section titled 'Footnotes' ensures that verifiable facts and beliefs merge (p. 197-211). In the pages devoted to post-1947 Kashmir (p. 207-211), Sajad underscores the fact that the Kashmiris want neither Pakistan nor India, but wish to remain independent. But the uncanny does not emerge in these sections although they prepare the ground for the uncanny.

Figure 3: *Munnu*

The uncanny in *Munnu* is the sense of the unhomely (Freud's *unheimlich*) where people are 'out of place' in their homes. This uncanny sense is compounded by the persistent haunting of the living by the memories of the dead. The uncanny in Freud (1919) is the human 'sense' of house and home. It is the *perception* of a space where the individual finds himself/herself simultaneously 'at home' and 'not at home', a space that is at once familiar and strange, safe and threatening, 'mine' and 'not mine'.

Several features render Kashmir both home and foreign to its residents. First, the landscape is now a landscape of haunting, of the melancholic picturesque and memorials as already noted.

Second, the presence of the Indian army – 'foreign' to Kashmiris who see themselves as 'occupied' in *Munnu* – renders the Kashmiris foreign in/to their own homes. Third, constantly taken out of their homes for harbouring terrorists, their homes are no longer *their* sovereign territory. We are shown images of the army kicking open homes and dragging out the residents, shooting the sons dead in the presence of their fathers, beatings, etc., all of which render the familiar space of the home as 'not quite home' (**Figure 3**).

Nicholas Royle argues that the 'foreign' is integral to the uncanny, and elicits horror for being at once inside and familiar and external and unfamiliar (2003, p. 12). In the postcolonial Gothic of *Munnu* the uncanny is not only the return of the repressed – the memories of the martyrs and the dead – but also the unfamiliar and foreign Indian Army at the heart of Kashmir that has been there for so long that it is almost familiar. The uncanny is the insistence of the tension between belonging and non-belonging, and the transformation of familiar spaces into unfamiliar ones.

Buildings remembered for more pleasant reasons are now barracks and the museum is now used by the army (p. 254). Schools and houses stand derelict or converted into other spaces (pp. 270, 279-280). The town is at once familiar and foreign, and encodes the violent history of Kashmir itself – from the 1947 period through the expulsion/exile of the Pandits to the present.

The uncanny is an effect of repetition (Cixous 1976, p. 539) and in *Munnu* the searches, the crackdowns, the curfews, the killings and, most of all, the repetition of death reconstitute Batamaloo as a place where the same things keep happening. Every family in Batamaloo lives in the fear of such searches and unexpected killings. Every chapter in *Munnu* has at least one instance of these events, and the articulation of fear by the inhabitants of the town.

Such an uncanny however is associated with a sense of paranoia. Indeed, Punter proposes that it is 'impossible to make much sense of Gothic fiction without continual recourse to the concept of paranoia' (1996: 183). Punter terms such fiction 'paranoiac fiction'in which

> the 'implicated' reader is placed in a situation of ambiguity with regard to fears within the text, and in which the attribution of persecution remains uncertain and the reader is invited to share in the doubts and uncertainties which pervade the apparent story' (p. 183).

Punter's argument gives us a frame of reading *Munnu's* uncanny and by extension its postcolonial Gothic.

The uncanny as an effect of the repetition of violent incidents, torture and deaths in *Munnu* leaves, as noted above, the inhabitants living in a culture of unpredictable expectation of more of the same. Their fears of the *repetition* of violence, often borne out by the violence that actualizes, render the citizenry of Batamaloo paranoid. Munnu's mother is forever urging her children not to go out of the house, for instance. But, as Punter proposes, we as readers are drawn

into this culture of fear and persecution because we oscillate between the genuine fears Munnu's mother expresses and the doubt that these fears are exaggerated. That is, given the prevalent cultural notions of the Army as protector, as guardians of the nation and as brave warriors, the reader is plunged into uncertainties over Sajad's representation of the Army actions in Kashmir. Just as the Kashmiri inhabitants find themselves facing the option, as Munnu puts it, of 'dying with a bullet and dying with a bullet' (p. 340). Should we share the fear of the Army as Munnu and the Kashmiris do? Is the Army an unwanted and evil presence in Kashmir, given Pakistan's proximity and general interference?

Sajad's postcolonial Gothic comes full circle here with this insistence on the uncanny and the paranoiac. In the postcolonial Gothic the efficacy of the nation state and its potent symbols – the Army – become the source of fury, tragedy and fear. The cycle of violence that repeats in Kashmir is driven, Sajad suggests, by the state, against the people of Kashmir. Forced into statehood they are effectively 'out of place' (*unheimlich*, 'not at home') in their town and homes. When we see Kashmiris live in paranoia and fear of the Army, mourning for their numerous dead and in the ruins of their homes, we participate in their grief. Drawn into their world we too become paranoid but the sense of uncertainty does not quite leave us. Compiling the instances of violent deaths as Sajad does ensures our participation in the collective tragedy that is Kashmir, of the *unheimlich* in their lives. The direction of persecutionremains messy and ambiguous: of the Kashmiris by the Indian Army, of the Kashmiris by Pakistan, of the Pandits by the Muslim Kashmiris, of the civilians by the militants. Although Sajad's text centres the Army as the chief source of persecution he provides enough evidence for us readers to experience a degree of uncertainty and ambiguity about the multiple points of persecution.

Conclusion: The Postcolonial Gothic and the Cultural Crypt

The postcolonial Gothic is one where the nation-as-family becomes the site of embedded violence. By this I mean to say that violence is *natural* to the nation-as-family: it is embedded in the very fabric of the nation. Violence, oppression and killings repeat endlessly, and trauma, as a result takes on the structure of repetition. The survivors are haunted by memorials and memories of the dead as the landscape becomes transformed into a melancholic picturesque, marked by sites of burial and haunting. Individuals and families thus haunted live in perpetual fear of the return of *similar* violence. They are unhoused and unhomely in their own homes and place of birth. They are, in other words, rendered foreign to their birthplace even as 'foreigners' (such as Pakistanis, Indians, reporters from around the world, in *Munnu*) come to 'occupy' Kashmir.The postcolonial Gothic in this reading shifts the focus away from incestuous families, the family ghost, haunted castles and 'domestic' violence toward the nation as the site of such violence, hauntings and uncanny repetitions. Unlike the traditional Gothic's family ghost emerging from the house's crypts, *Munnu's* postcolonial Gothic posits a cultural crypt.

The traditional Gothic relies on the repressed, hidden away in individual crypts. Fragmentations, distortions, gaps and ellipses in the language of trauma victims represent what psychoanalysts have called 'cryptonymy' (Abraham and Torok, 1986). Gabriele Schwab discusses the crypt as a 'burial place inside the self for a love object that is lost but kept inside the self as a living corpse' (2010, p. 45). The crypt contains 'secrets and silences formed in trauma' (p. 45).

The postcolonial Gothic proposes such a crypt at both the individual-psychological and communitarian-cultural level for, as Schwab proposes, there can be 'collective crypts, communal crypts, and even national crypts' (p. 46). Every family in *Munnu* carries the memories of their

dead inside them, and are locked forever into this crypt because the loved one remains inside the living. The numerous scenes of burial, tombstones and mourning in the novel (listed above) and the tragic faces of the mourning individuals/families indicate this kind of crypt. But Sajad does not stop with this.

Kashmir itself carries a collective, communal or cultural crypt within it. There occurs a cultural encryption of an entire community's tortures, deaths and silencing. Only the stories individuals *tell* (of Mubashir, Ajaz, Mushtaq) reveal the silencing of trauma. Kashmir falls into a crypt of silencing enforced by both, the violence and their own tragedy, but which opens up in the form of stories people tell.

In the postcolonial Gothic the cultural crypt marks the space of frightening silence and even more frightening revelations of stories of torture, disappearances and deaths – all carried out by the nation-as-family. Like a family secret – a crypt – the entire region of Kashmir is aware of the crypt within. Inside this crypt are their nightmares, their loved ones and their silences.

Note

[i] Medhurst and Desousa note that graphic rhetoric relies heavily on the enthymematic form. The artist utilizes the beliefs, values and attitudes of his audience and the audience has to participate in the form (204-05). Enthymeme is a rhetorical strategy where the basic premise is not offered directly to the reader, and which the reader needs to *discern* from the sentence. In visual language, we extract the basic assumption when we read the signs – the assumption and 'truth' is always only implied.

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Pramod K. Nayar teaches in the Department of English, the University of Hyderabad, India.