

Charlotta Kotik

Childhoods stolen at gunpoint

The partly autobiographical graphic novel *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* by Malik Sajad, illustrates the grim realities of growing up in a highly militarised Kashmir valley.

Small children lack linguistic or cultural frames to put around their perceptions. Reality enters them torrentially, without passing through the schematizing filters of words and concepts... The immediate absorption of reality, which mystics and poets strive for in vain, is what children do every day.”

Cesar Aira, *The New York Review of the Books*, p.38, 13 August, 2015, vol LXII, Number 13

Growing up is hard to do, doubly so in a community polarised by long standing strife with little hope for a comprehensive solution. To navigate in the sea of uncertainty, with adults who can hardly answer the complex questions for fear of repercussions, leaves many of those growing up in such circumstances full of doubt and self destructive tendencies that could turn into outward hostility.

However, for those endowed with special talents to record unfolding events in visual or written form, coupled with boundless amount of courage and willingness to share deeply personal experiences, it can be a starting point for lifelong creative journey. The incessant need to draw, and the ability to do so rather superbly, brings a measure of solace to *Munnu*, a boy growing up in Kashmir.

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Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir is an extensive graphic novel by Malik Sajad, who begins his story at the age of seven and keeps us following him for another eighteen years. Drawn strictly in black and white, with text pared down to vital information, the sharpness of

observations seems to be heightened by the narrator's young age and the ability of the author to keep the clarity of voice consistent throughout the novel.

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The tale of Munnu unfolds on the background of family life, with strong ties between five siblings — sister Shannaz and brothers Bilal, Akhtar, Adil and Munnu — the youngest one, hence the name, father Gulya and mother Haseena.

This tightly knit family is only a seeking protection from the dangerous and confusing world that surrounds it — it is rather a fragile unit that can be destroyed at any moment by the external circumstances such as the frequent parades set up to identify those opposed to military presence.

When youth and adult males are taken to such identification parades many personal animosities and old grievances could be exploited. The informers become omnipotent in the atmosphere of general mistrust, fear and suspicion. Those justly or unjustly identified as opposed to the status quo might never be seen again — some are returned to their families as bleeding corpses.

The funerals attended by the whole community, including young children spark more resentment and feed the explosive atmosphere of simmering animosity. Acts of violence are witnessed since early age while the borders and the dividing line between warring neighbours — India and Pakistan, with the international community keeping a safe distance — ensnarl the valley.

But not all in the book is framed by the aura of conflict — there are tender passages describing children's games, celebrations of holidays and warm hearted interaction of family members and neighbours.

There is humour and gentle irony.

The cast of the characters presented through the pages is endlessly rich — they conjure up a world populated by hardworking Kashmiris, citizens disaffected by the division of the country, the victims of armed conflict, tortures, the resigned, the hot headed, the do gooders and the wise ones.

Rendered in black and white, with Kashmiris presented as hangul, a red stag, the state animal, the expressive power of the drawings alludes to the knowledge of early 20th century German Expressionist prints — works much admired by Sajad for their conceptual

underpinning, the inclination to fuse art, life and politics while simultaneously examining aspects of nature, trends within the society and the power of direct expression and commentary.

The novella is organised chronologically into nineteen sections of various lengths. Most could function as short graphic novels on their own. We follow Munnu through school and the tumultuous events surrounding the arrest of his principal and student demonstrations in his support, closing of the school, the enrolment into Darasgah and the youthful infatuation with a beautiful classmate, Saina.

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The Artist Malik Sajad uses images and words to draw a grim picture of Kashmir. Munnu's adoration of Saina's beauty leads him to send her poetic messages and when those are discovered, Munnu is severely punished for his nascent feelings of love. The delicate feelings evoked

by those memories is quickly dispelled by the news of a family friend's death at another crackdown parade.

Munnu participates in the funeral procession witnessing the heightened emotions of adults while attempting to comprehend the very idea of death, the enigma that can never be understood. The finality of death, the frightening visions of cold grave and the everlasting darkness that surrounds the departed, becomes a source of Munnu's nightmares and brings the recognition of fragility of life. To avoid compulsory, but meaningless elections, used mainly for propaganda purposes, the family travels to grandparents' house. There is a lot of love, tenderness and special activities bestowed on the children, especially by the blind grandfather, Abba. "Abba made Fridays special." Sajad declares and dedicates the book to Abba's memory.

As the school is continually disrupted by curfews and location changes, Munnu spends more and more time drawing, perfecting his skills. Encouraged by the principal of yet another school, he sends his drawings to a local paper and has his first cartoon published in his mid-teens. Soon thereafter Munnu, who has now underwent the metamorphosis into Sajad, becomes a cartoonist for Greater Kashmir, a Srinagar-based daily.

At this tender age, and especially while being successful, one has all the bravado of youth but can be only partially cognizant, and understanding of local and the world history, not to mention the complexities of life and political situations or the genesis of the present Kashmiri conflict.

As Sajad decides to study Kashmir's past, he treats us to a succinct and beautifully illustrated story of the valley — certain pages recall European medieval illuminations with rich borders that are here composed of stylised hanguls and intricate depiction of various activities framed in circular fields.

Agriculture, learning and trade flourished as the Silk Route weaved its way through the country. The prosperity itself seems to be a cause of misfortune that later befell the territory and through various cataclysms led toward the present situation of division and occupation.

Becoming something of a celebrity, Sajad is visited by a journalist from [New Delhi](#) who introduces him to the art of graphic novel and urges him use that format to tell the story of Kashmir. Sajad reaches into his own past.

In around 2005, he made a cartoon where he put a deer and a Kashmiri next to one another, with the tag line reading “ Endangered Species” . The habitat of hangul, disturbed by the presence of the armed forces, deforestation and the dividing line, mirrors the fate of the Himalayan state. Sajad chose to expand on this idea and turned it into a graphic novella. He decided to humanise the hangul to narrate the tale of Kashmir.

Sajad travelled through the country to interview families of those victimised by the military occupation. He records the testimonies as he uncovers the wide range of harsh treatments, disappearances, cruelties and a failed justice system. His need to better comprehend all the perplexing of situations leads him to seek out more books about Kashmir, to search through magazines and to attend various gatherings.

However, the information gleaned from these efforts seemed to be unsatisfactory. He chooses a different approach and decides to interview Kashmiris who are believed to exert influence over society. The more he hears and learns, the more he realises the divisions within the ranks of those who should shape the future of the state – divisions often fuelled by personal rivalries and not by a true dedication to a common interest.

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Disillusioned by his findings and by his own work that seems to be a repetition of tasks already mastered, toppled by the fatigue stemming from unusually harsh winter, Sajad seems to reach a low point of his young life.

“But that year spring arrived early.” A phone call from a beautiful American artist, from Brooklyn, no less, who saw Sajad’s work on his website and was seeking him out to learn more about Kashmir, changed his mood instantly. The mutual attraction grows into a deep love affair described with disarming honesty – until the cell phone that appears at first to be an element of magical connection turns into a tool of this romance’s destruction.

Renewed dedication to his work brings solace. Sajad is invited to create a piece for India Habitat Centre, [New Delhi](#). The title of his large installation, *Terrorism of Peace*, spells trouble, and trouble there is. Due to the most unfortunate coincidences and the paranoid reactions to all things Kashmiri, Sajad is arrested, released and subsequently almost destroys his installation composed of cartoons, photographs, razor wire and pages of his earlier graphic novel *Endangered Species*.

The piece was a parable of life in Kashmir where all the living things are ensnared by visible or invisible restrictions and where falling ill could be made fatal through artificial divisions of once peaceful functioning state. Using mother’s illness as an example Sajad turns the family story into broad statement about living in a place where sheer luck and fortunate timing, or it’s absence, could mean the difference between life and death.

Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir describes a specific location and the sphere of conflict, nevertheless, it has an universal appeal. It illuminates lives of those trapped by the political or religious barriers, by conflicts that are increasingly difficult to resolve. Yes, there are those with good intentions, such as ambassadors from EU, who came for “Conversation over Dinner” trying to hear and understand what Kashmiri youth really strive for. And since no one who did not live in the zone of conflict can truly imagine what life in such a place is, the solar powered flashlight, brought as a gift of the ambassadors,

illuminates the complete incomprehension of the conflict and the absurdity of the world ignorance.

Although cultural heritage of the particular society might be based on different principles and religions, the tentacles of power are suffocating its victims using similar tools world wide – starting with the vengeful perfidy of the informers , the house searches that destroy any semblance of privacy and identity, followed with unlawful imprisonment and death, when the victim is cast as perpetrator and when the true perpetrators assume the roles of guardians of law and order.

The overburdened and often corrupt judicial system is the integral part of the process.

Seemingly, works such as Munnu, a Boy from Kashmir, cannot turn around the valley's situation, nevertheless their impact is indisputable. They not only clarify the nature of the conflict for those on the outside, they also bring a degree of understanding of the roots of conflict to those living in its midst.

Not that it lightens the burden of growing up in such circumstances, the shadow of sadness remains ever present in one's mind and finds its way into the work, but the special ability to express oneself through creative process is at least partially liberating.

The works identify and expose the society's ills thus becoming stepping stones leading towards the possibility of a solution. They help to articulate the method of opposition, guiding those who feel the need to react but lack the means to form their own strategies.

Sajad joins ranks of those artists who were able to transform personal experiences into universal statements giving voice to the weak and oppressed. He proves one more time that there is indisputable truth in the philosophy of one of his heroes, the late Czech president Vaclav Havel, that there is a true force in the Power of the Powerless.

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