

A FICTION OF MYSELF

TANVEER ANOY

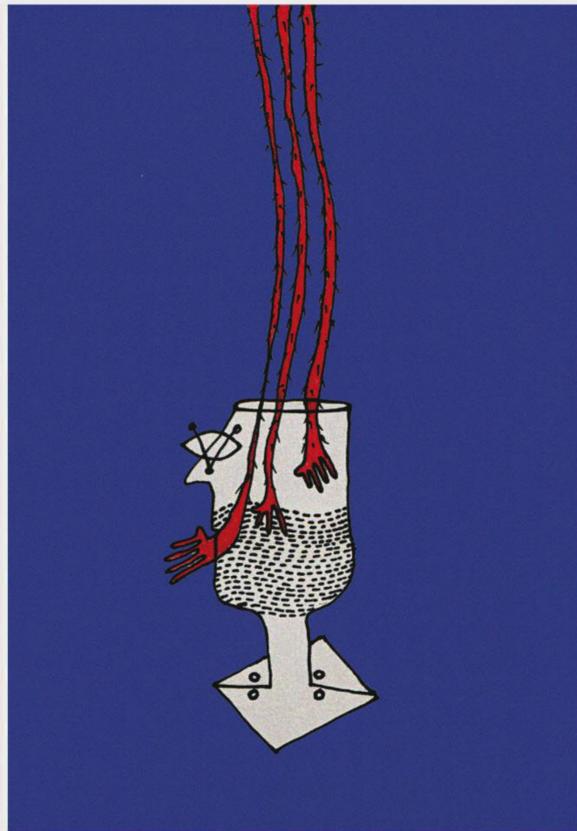


ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSEEN AGAZ APURBO

I used to get beaten up in childhood by my elder sister, a lot. My mother would sometimes wonder loudly why I always got beaten up, and why I couldn't save myself. I never replied. I would carry those marks on my body to school. Most boys there jeered at me too—mocked and ridiculed me for not being “a boy”. They called me “half-ladies”. As I grew up, the epithets evolved too—from “half-ladies” to “full-ladies” to “ladies” and eventually “hijra”.

I did protest. Sometimes. I got admitted to a big boys' school in the third standard. It could have been a new start, but as fate would have it, my docile nature, body language and gestures soon became the butt of ridicule. I was never a 'man' in their view. I didn't have any masculine traits as per societal norms. If I protested, I would inevitably get beaten up.

Every time I was humiliated and scorned, I tried engaging them in conversation, “Why do you all call me a 'girl'?” But they never cared. I have questioned myself time and again, and wondered if the problem was with me. Was I made from a different mould? Never into sports, always spending time reading, speaking softly, not behaving like any other average boy of my age—was it really true that I wasn't a boy?

Amidst these confusing thoughts, I finished school and entered college. Studying in a co-education college, I made quite a few female friends, with whom I always hung out. This is not to say that I did not make male friends; I had some, but I could not interact with most of them for the kind of language they used and the thoughts they nurtured. My friendships earned me another title in college—‘Apu’ (Sister). Some said I was a playboy, some said I was a snob, while others didn't miss the chance to proclaim, “Wasn't it obvious that I would befriend girls? After all, birds of the same feather always flock together...”

And thus, my college life was ruined too. I hardly went to college thereafter. There was no means by which I could face the reality, digest those venomous slurs. Anxious and depressed, I questioned myself all the time—why was it that I felt bad upon being called ‘a girl’? What exactly made one a ‘man’ anyway?

The distinction that society has forged between feminine behaviour and

masculine behaviour seems quite frivolous and arbitrary to me. Can we really ascribe behaviour to gender? Just because a considerable number of men behave in a certain way, do others have to follow too?

Once, in order to prove my masculinity, I lit a cigarette in front of a group of boys. I soon started coughing and could hear that they were making fun of me. They broke into laughter and commented that even women can puff cigarettes these days!

My physical appearance has also been the grounds of ridicule many times. I have been advised to put on weight and walk like a man, shoulders straight and not drooping.

My gestures, ways of walking and dressing generate a visible discomfort and repulse among people. Even my family members are vexed with me. Nothing about me is 'manly'; some say they are not 'feminine' either. This is when some started saying I am like *hijras*.

Is the confusion in them, rather than in me, I wonder?

It has taken me a long time, but I am finally at peace with who I am. I am not intimidated like I used to be. I don't feel the need to prove my masculinity any longer. I do not feel the necessity to vindicate my gender or sexual orientation to the world and society. I am myself. I am not like anybody else.

I had uploaded a picture of me wearing a flower band on my head. Many jeered and mocked me in characteristic fashion, but they do not affect me anymore. Over time, I have found people who are supportive of me; I have made many friends who themselves are gender non-conforming.

Lest you think it's a happily-ever-after, it's not. Even today, I have to face questions about my way of being. Trying to avoid them does not always succeed. People expect to find out why am I “like this”. Sometimes I think I should reply, but I don't. I don't feel like it.

When will people stop throwing their queries towards me? How long will this continue?

At some point in the future, people will forego problematic politics and accept people the way they are. I spend my days looking forward to such a future.

Tanveer Anoy is an activist and writer.

BOOK REVIEW

Malik Sajad's *Munnu: A Boy From Kashmir* takes all preconceived notions about Kashmir and breaks them into pieces. This graphic novel is far from what the title suggests — a surface biography of life in the valley in the '90s and 2000s. Be prepared: early on in the book you will be shown a raw and purely visceral war.

Munnu is a thoroughly important, alternative narrative of events in Kashmir, portrayed through a personal coming-of-age story in which life mirrors national events. Munnu starts off as a seven-year-old, grows older and becomes Sajad, while Kashmir continues to serve as a playground for opposing forces. Growing up in India-held Kashmir, he introduces us to his family, his neighbours, his teachers, and the routine “identification parades” that form the backdrop of his childhood. As he grows older, he becomes more and more politically aware, and at a very young age feels helplessly



KASHMIR: IN INK AND BLOOD

IFRA ASAD



disillusioned, frustrated by how none of the involved forces — the pundits, militants, the army, even EU delegates — seem concerned with the human lives brushed off as mere statistics for death tolls.

Sajad does a fantastic job at walking us through Munnu's life as a child caught in war. The memory of his first neighbourhood death seems to haunt him; he paints a picture of a child going from room to room, to all his siblings, asking if he can sleep in their room, wetting the bed every night until his father says “He has to get used to the situation then. Nothing else can heal him.” It's heartbreaking.

Each coming-of-age chapter is peppered with the background of war. His first real love affair, with an American researcher visiting Srinagar, ends because of the sheer disconnect between their lives. To her, Kashmir is a breathtaking tragedy, to be admired behind the lens of a camera; to him, it's a jail he must endure every day. When he goes to school as a young child it is school where students get publicly humiliated for speaking Kashmiri instead of Urdu. When, for the first time, Munnu has to attend to his sick mother, he faces near-fatal hurdles on the way to

the hospital. He has to dodge curfew police by stepping off his bike after every few minutes, holding up his mother's MRI scans like a placard. Many times, the narrator himself loses track of who is killing whom and for what. Eight-year-old children continue to become “just another statistic.”

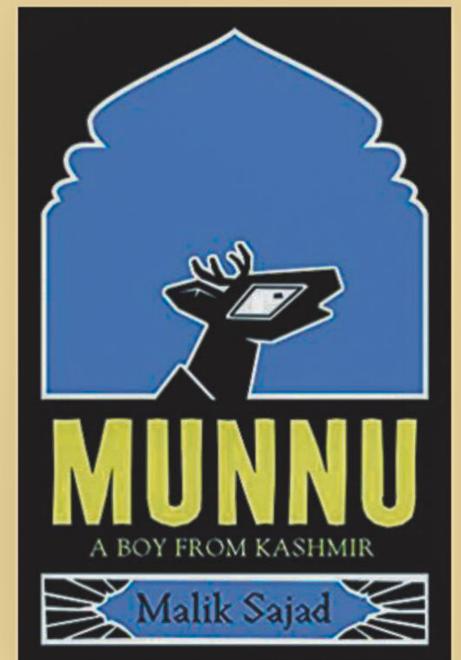
Where visualisation is concerned, the images consist of well-thought-out detail, cleverly-placed metaphors and strategic text. The style is reminiscent of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* series, in which Nazis are depicted as cats and Jews as mice. Kashmiris, in *Munnu*, are depicted as “*hangul*”, an endangered species of deer native to Kashmir. That's the specialty of a graphic novel: without prose to weigh it down, the narrative is distilled into its purest form.

Sajad lays emphasis on Kashmir's history, its now slowly eroding cultural heritage, its thrilling shrines that once drew so many “Western tourists” but now gather grime. The museums hold artefacts which also double as drying racks for army men's underwear. Abandoned houses that once belonged to pundits bear intricate carvings now covered up by newspapers. The “intellectuals,” Munnu scowls, build off the conflict to travel abroad and live in self-absorbed luxury. All this adds to the gloom and the sinking feeling of lost generations.

Through Sajad's eyes as a political cartoonist, we understand Kashmir in ways outside of what can be found in textbooks. There are important political interpretations of the events at play, the origins of the conflict (going as far back as the Mughal era, and the British who sold Kashmir for 2.5 million rupees), the role of the resistance leaders, the role of the Indian military. A stark reality is presented here, and for a while, you are on that motorcycle with Munnu, talking through the surrounding “We want freedom!” chants, hiding from the Indian police, ducking to avoid the barbed wires.

Still, despite all this, the story is told without a trace of sentimentality.

“The world is well-aware of the Arab Spring and the Intifada in Egypt and Palestine,” says Munnu's friend, in one of the self-referential sections of the book. “[Name your novel] Intifada. It makes it easy for an international audience to understand your story.” To which Munnu replies, “the world isn't just East and West. What if you were writing about the French Revolution, would you call it French Intifada? It's ridiculous.”



Munnu: A Boy From Kashmir
(GRAPHIC NOVEL)
By Malik Sajad
HarperCollins, UK
ISBN: 978-0008165628
352pp.

Too often, our stories, our national narratives get consumed by the media's current trends, often denying them the agency they deserve. *Munnu* is an important reminder of this: it stands out amongst the din, a narrative singed by the anger of injustice, and a plea for recognition.

Ifra Asad works for an NGO dedicated to education in Pakistan. By arrangement with Dawn, a partner of Asian News Network (ANN).

ABOUT TOWN

CriticalLink First Responders Training

CRITICALLINK FIRST RESPONDERS TRAINING VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENTS

Organiser: CriticalLink
May 19, 10am - 4pm, CriticaLink, House-18/B, Road-1, Block-B, Niketon, Gulshan-1

Workshop on Documentary Film Production

Organiser: International Academy of Film and Media
May 23- June 1, 11am - 2pm, International Academy of Film and Media, 126 - 131 Monipuripara, Tejgaon

Celebrating Menstrual Hygiene Day

Organiser: Wreetu
May 20, 10am - 12.30pm, Wreetu, Banani, Road-1, House-120