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From Paradise to Deathscape: Eco-Trauma and Occupied Landscapes in *Munnu:A Boy from Kashmir*

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Abstract

This paper reads Malik Sajad's *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* as a graphic narrative inwhich occupation is inscribed not only on human bodies but on the very ecology of the Valley. Once mythologised as "paradise on earth," Kashmir is visually transformed into a deathscape, where playgrounds turn into graveyards, canals carry corpses, and ancient chinar trees stand as silent witnesses to militarised ruin. By portraying Kashmiris as Hangul deer—a critically endangered species native to the region—Sajad exposes how the logic of occupation reduces a people to a threatened life-form, subject to surveillance, fencing, and disappearance. Through a stark monochrome palette and compressed panels, the memoir renders trauma as environmental, showing that land, species, and memory are equally colonised. The paper argues that *Munnu* recasts trauma theory by shifting it from the psychological to the ecological, where the landscape itself becomes the archive of loss and resistance.

Keywords: Kashmir, eco-trauma, graphic memoir, Hangul deer, deathscape, environmental memory

Kashmir has long occupied a mythic place in the South Asian imagination as a landscape of breathtaking beauty—an earthly paradise marked by snow-fed rivers, towering chinar trees, and a delicate ecosystem that sustains both human and non-human life. Yet this paradise has, over the past several decades, been violently reshaped by militarization, political conflict, ecological degradation, and the ongoing experience of occupation. Malik Sajad's graphic memoir *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* visually documents this transformation by depicting the Valley not simply

as a site of political unrest but as a wounded ecosystem whose beauty has been disfigured, regulated, fenced, and defiled. His monochromatic panels, compressed frames, and anthropomorphic portrayal of Kashmiris as Hangul deer expose how both land and life undergo a shared process of degradation.

Graphic narratives, with their unique blending of image and text, offer a powerful medium for portraying trauma that is not only psychological but ecological and spatial. Sajad employs visual metaphors to show that Kashmir's environmental depletion mirrors the lived experience of its inhabitants. His choice to represent Kashmiris as Hangul deer—an endangered species native to the region—reveals an ecological allegory: just as the deer's habitat shrinks due to conflict and deforestation, so too do the possibilities of Kashmiri life shrink under the weight of occupation. In this sense, *Munnu* reconceptualizes trauma as fundamentally ecological; the memoir positions Kashmir not only as a politically occupied territory but as an environmentally mutilated landscape whose forests, rivers, playgrounds, and vegetation bear the scars of violence. Through this reading, the text emerges as an eco-graphic testimony to the intertwined destruction of geography and identity, marking the slow metamorphosis of paradise into deathscape.

Malik Sajad's *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* recounts childhood in a region transformed into an all-pervasive surveillance zone, where terrorism, counter-insurgency, and decades of military occupation have reorganised everyday life into patterns resembling the plantation logic of enclosure, monitoring, and extractive control. The memoir, narrated through the experiences of seven-year-old Munnu, depicts Kashmir not as a free, lived landscape but as a carceral ecology—barbed, fenced, mapped, and patrolled—where bodies and movements are constantly measured, restricted, and disciplined. This graphically illustrated world operates with the same underlying principle as the plantation: a system in which land is seized, its inhabitants are surveilled, and their lives are regulated through coercive structures that demand obedience, labour, and invisibility.

Sajad's visual choice to portray Kashmiris as hanguls, the endangered Kashmiri deer, underscores this condition of vulnerability and controlled existence. Just as plantation subjects were reduced to extractable labour and stripped of autonomy, Kashmiris are rendered endangered beings whose survival depends on navigating an environment saturated with checkpoints, identity verifications, patrolling soldiers, and the perpetual threat of violence. The memoir's pages overflow with security towers, camouflaged bunkers, wired fences, and armoured vehicles—forming an architecture of control that transforms the valley into a monitored

monoculture of militarisation. Like the plantation's monocrop fields, Kashmir's rich ecological and cultural diversity is simplified, policed, and reorganised to serve the logic of national security and biopolitical management.

The memoir illustrates how ordinary life—going to school, crossing the street, buying groceries, or playing—is conducted under a gaze that never disappears. Children grow up under the shadow of guns; they learn to differentiate sounds of different weapons; they hide under beds during raids; they internalise fear as routine. This surveillance ecology resembles a plantation's pervasive oversight in which both labour and leisure are watched to prevent escape, rebellion, or non-compliance. The military's continuous presence transforms communities into subjects whose sense of self is shaped by externally imposed restrictions, much like plantation labourers whose lives were defined by rhythms of control. Through Munnu's eyes, readers witness how psychological patterns of submission, hyper-awareness, and bodily discipline emerge as adaptive strategies to survive militarised oversight.

Sajad extends this plantation-like logic to the sphere of labour as well. Munnu's father, a walnut-wood artisan, struggles to maintain a traditional craft that is slowly suffocated by curfews, economic blockades, and the militarised economy that displaces local livelihoods. The plantationocene framework reveals how militarisation not only controls bodies but also extracts from the land while constricting indigenous ways of working. The memoir shows how Kashmir's resources, crafts, and cultural practices become casualties of a structure that treats the region as a managed zone—its people reduced to endangered labouring bodies, its land transformed into a site of extraction and strategic utility.

Inside homes, too, the violence of surveillance penetrates. Crackdowns and nocturnal raids collapse the boundary between public and domestic space, turning houses into transparent sites of inspection—another echo of plantation architecture, where enslavers routinely entered and violated private spaces. Women, in particular, face humiliation during frisking and identity checks, reflecting gendered layers of plantation governance where female bodies bore disproportionate burdens of scrutiny and vulnerability.

Visually, Sajad's art reinforces the sense of enclosure. Dense black-and-white panels, crowded compositions, narrow alleys, and claustrophobic street scenes depict a suffocating spatiality where there is no escape from the military gaze. The valley's famed beauty—snow-clad mountains, rivers, orchards—becomes backgrounded, overshadowed by the overwhelming visual dominance of guns, uniforms, watchtowers, and bunkers. Nature itself becomes a participant in this

plantation ecology: forests are encroached upon, animals flee, and the symbolic hangul becomes a species threatened by the same forces that endanger human life.

Through this intertwining of ecological degradation, militarised governance, and the everyday suffering of civilians, *Munnu* presents Kashmir as a microcosm of the Plantationocene. Here, land and life are reordered through systems of surveillance and control, creating a world where freedom is rationed, visibility is weaponised, and existence resembles that of plantation subjects—always watched, always restricted, always surviving within a structure designed to dominate. Sajad's memoir thus provides not only a personal story of growing up amid conflict but also a profound visual and narrative critique of a region transformed into an extractive, enclosed, and heavily policed ecology, where the plantation logic of domination becomes the defining mode of life.

Eco-trauma provides an important conceptual foundation for reading the memoir, expanding trauma studies to acknowledge the impact of violence on environments. Rob Nixon describes such harm as "slow violence," (2) forms of environmental trauma that accumulate gradually and unevenly. In militarized spaces, this slow violence reshapes forests, waterways, soil, species, and atmospheric conditions, creating a landscape that absorbs injury alongside its inhabitants. In *Munnu*, Sajad depicts the valley as a living organism marked by wounds—forests thinned for bunkers, roads cut through orchards, and water bodies contaminated by conflict. Human biographies and environmental histories merge as the deterioration of Kashmir's ecology reflects the continuous strain upon everyday life. Trauma becomes ecological because the environment itself carries the memory of violence.

The theoretical lens of the Plantationocene can be best attributed to describe Kashmir's transformation. While the Anthropocene attributes environmental crisis to "humanity" broadly, scholars such as Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing argue that this framing obscures the specific historical systems responsible for ecological and cultural destruction. Haraway's concept of the Plantationocene identifies plantation logics—enclosure, control, extraction, monoculture, and imposed order—as key to understanding how landscapes become simplified and dominated (Haraway 162). The plantation is not only an agricultural space; it is a structure of power that reorganizes environments according to regimes of surveillance and productivity. Tsing similarly argues that plantations erase ecological complexity and cultural autonomy, turning biodiverse landscapes into controlled zones of exploitation (41).

The plantation system was never just an agricultural arrangement; it was—and remains—a regime of radical extraction, enclosure, and violence. The

> plantation depends on the calculated destruction of worlds, on the forced removal of peoples from their lands, on the breaking of kinship relations, and on the deployment of enslaved or coerced labor whose lives could be exhausted and replaced. It is a system that strips the land of biodiversity and the worker of autonomy, requiring constant policing and constant infusions of power to keep both land and bodies in line. The capacity to love and care for place is radically incompatible with the plantation because the plantation thrives only through domination, dislocation, and the systematic disabling of both human and nonhuman life. (Harraway)

Although Kashmir is not a plantation in the agricultural sense, its political and ecological transformation under military occupation strongly parallels Plantationocene dynamics. The valley becomes a highly monitored and enclosed terrain, where movement—human, animal, or vegetal—is continuously regulated. Military checkpoints, watchtowers, barbed wires, and fortified bunkers impose spatial restrictions reminiscent of plantation fencing and boundary-making. The soldier-to-civilian ratio creates a panoptic landscape where observation functions as a mode of domination, echoing the overseer's gaze in plantation geographies. These structures transform Kashmir from a vibrant, interactive space into a grid of regulated zones, diminishing ecological and cultural diversity.

Sajad's aesthetic choices intensify this reading. The monochrome palette conveys environmental exhaustion; the valley, once bursting with colour, appears drained and muted. Panels often resemble cages or boxes, capturing characters within rigid frames that reflect both physical confinement and psychological claustrophobia. These visual strategies mirror the logic of the Plantationocene, where land and bodies are confined within controlled spatial boundaries. The memoir's symbolic fusion of Kashmiris with Hangul deer further exposes how occupation produces ecological simplification. The Hangul, critically endangered due to habitat fragmentation and militarization, becomes a metaphor for Kashmiri identity—indigenous, vulnerable, and endangered. The shrinking habitat of the deer parallels the shrinking civil and ecological freedoms of Kashmiris under occupation.

One of the most striking sequences in *Munnu* is the transformation of a cricket ground into a cemetery. This shift marks a profound ecological and cultural rupture: a site associated with community, recreation, and childhood becomes a space of mourning and burial. The conversion of life-affirming spaces into zones of death epitomizes the movement from paradise to deathscape. Trees become tomb-markers,

their roots entwined with the memories of martyrs. Nature is forced into the service of memorialization, bearing witness to the political violence that redefines the valley. Sajad's imagery suggests that trauma saturates the land itself, turning vegetation into archives of grief and transforming landscapes into repositories of collective loss.

> *The Plantationocene indexes more than a historical period; it names an ongoing condition of violent transformation. In the plantation, diverse ecologies are reduced to simplified, extractive logics, and human life is sorted along racial and economic hierarchies that authorize the expropriation of labor and the exhaustion of bodies. The unending quest to produce ever more commodities is underwritten by a political economy that treats both land and people as exhaustible resources. Plantations materialize a world where violence is normalized—where enclosed and surveilled landscapes reshape not only ecologies but also social relations, making exploitation appear natural and inevitable.* (Barua, Ibáñez Martín, and Achtnich)

Throughout the memoir, Sajad juxtaposes natural elements with scenes of destruction. Leafless trees stand near armored vehicles; orchards are interrupted by military parades; tranquil lakes are overshadowed by troop movements. These contrasts reveal how long-term conflict severs traditional relationships between people and land. The environment becomes disarticulated from its inhabitants, stripped of its role as sustainer of life. This process reflects what Haraway describes as "forced simplification": under authoritarian regimes, ecologies lose their complexity and resilience. In Kashmir, this simplification manifests in the loss of biodiversity, the endangerment of species such as the Hangul, the militarized reshaping of forests and fields, and the psychological contraction of everyday life.

Sajad's depiction of ecological trauma thus redefines Kashmir's transformation as a Plantationocene process. The occupied valley becomes a managed ecology where both human and non-human life undergo similar forms of regulation, vulnerability, and injury. Surveillance replaces freedom, enclosure replaces mobility, and deathscapes replace living landscapes. The memoir's visual grammar—its greyscales, its boxed panels, its deer-humanoid figures—captures these intertwined devastations with profound emotional and ecological resonance.

Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir demonstrates that trauma in Kashmir cannot be understood solely through political or psychological frameworks. The memoir insists that the environment itself is a central witness to violence. By situating human

suffering within a wounded landscape, Sajad reveals how paradise slowly becomes a deathscape under the pressures of militarization and ecological collapse. The Plantationocene offers a compelling framework for interpreting this transformation, exposing how systems of control reorganize both land and life through enclosure, surveillance, and simplification. *Munnu* becomes a testimony not only to the political plight of Kashmiris but also to the slow, persistent erosion of the valley's ecological richness. It urges readers to expand trauma theory to encompass land, species, water, vegetation, and the fragile, endangered relationship between people and place. In doing so, the memoir emerges as a crucial eco-traumatic narrative documenting the intertwined fates of Kashmir's landscape and its people.

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