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**A study of Recurring Themes in Kashmiri Stagecraft**

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**Abstract:**

Kashmiri theatre, deeply rooted in the valley's socio-cultural and historical fabric, serves as a vibrant reflection of the collective consciousness of its people. This study titled "A Thematic Study of Kashmiri Plays" examines the recurring themes, motifs, and socio-political undercurrents that shape the dramatic landscape of Kashmir. Drawing traditional folk performances such as Bhand Pather and contemporary plays by modern Kashmiri playwrights, the research explores how theatre functions as a medium of resistance, identity formation, and cultural continuity.

Through a thematic analytical approach, the study investigates how issues of conflict, displacement, memory, and identity are artistically articulated on the Kashmiri stage. The plays are found to engage deeply with questions of power, oppression, and social justice, while simultaneously preserving the indigenous aesthetic and linguistic traditions of the region. The research reveals that Kashmiri theatre acts not only as an artistic expression but also as a socio-political text—one that chronicles the struggles, resilience, and aspirations of a community navigating historical upheavals and cultural transformations.

By highlighting these thematic concerns, the study aims to fill a critical gap in regional literary scholarship and emphasize the importance of Kashmiri drama in the broader context of Indian and postcolonial theatre studies.

**Keywords:** Kashmiri theatre, Kashmiri plays, Bhand Pather, thematic analysis, identity, conflict, resistance, cultural identity, folk drama, postcolonial theatre

**Introduction**

Kashmiri theatre, with its rich tapestry of narratives, has long served as a mirror to the region's tumultuous history and vibrant culture. From the traditional Band-e-Pather performances to modern plays addressing contemporary issues, Kashmiri drama has evolved, yet consistently highlighted themes of identity, displacement, and resilience. This paper seeks to explore these recurring themes through a selection of notable plays.

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Theatre and performance have always been integral to the cultural and social life of Kashmir. The valley's dramatic traditions—rooted in folklore, oral narratives, and community gatherings—serve as a mirror reflecting the region's complex history, socio-political realities, and collective consciousness. From the rustic vibrancy of Bhand Pather, the indigenous folk theatre of Kashmir, to the modern stage productions of playwrights like Arshad Mushtaq, Somnath Zutshi, and Rattan Lal Shant, Kashmiri drama has evolved as both an artistic expression and a vehicle for social critique.

Kashmir's plays are not mere performances; they are narratives of survival, resistance, and identity. They portray the struggles of ordinary people caught in cycles of political turmoil, cultural displacement, and moral conflict. Themes such as power and oppression, cultural identity, memory and loss, tradition versus modernity, and social injustice recur throughout Kashmiri dramatic literature. These recurring motifs reflect how theatre in Kashmir functions as a socio-cultural text—one that speaks of both continuity and change in a society marked by conflict and resilience.

The present study, titled "A Thematic Study of Kashmiri Plays," seeks to explore these dominant and underlying themes within selected plays written and performed in Kashmiri language and culture. By employing a thematic analytical framework, the study aims to identify the recurring ideas, values, and socio-political concerns that shape Kashmiri dramaturgy. It examines how playwrights use theatre as a medium to negotiate questions of identity, belonging, and resistance amid the region's turbulent history.

This research is significant because Kashmiri plays, despite their artistic richness and deep engagement with regional realities, have received limited critical attention in academic scholarship compared to other Indian dramatic traditions. Through an in-depth thematic exploration, the study attempts to contribute to the field of regional literary studies and performance criticism, while also highlighting the cultural resilience of Kashmiri society as reflected through its theatre.

In essence, this paper situates Kashmiri plays not only as works of art but as living documents of a people's aspirations, anxieties, and enduring hope. It underscores the role of theatre as a space where history, folklore, politics, and emotion converge—making Kashmiri drama a unique and vital expression of South Asian cultural identity.

#### **Literature Review:**

1. Shreya Pandey & Krishna Mohan Singh (2024)

In their comparative study, "Comparative Literary Analysis of Exile Narratives," the authors explore the role of storytelling in preserving identity, resilience, and cultural continuity within the exile narratives of Kashmiri Pandits, Palestinians, and Tibetans. They examine how these communities use storytelling as a tool for navigating the fractured identities resulting from forced displacement. ([Granthaalayah Publication][1])

2. Saleem Beig (INTACH)

Saleem Beig, head of INTACH in Jammu and Kashmir, highlighted the widespread lack of awareness about Kashmir's cultural heritage. A survey revealed that 98 percent of the youth experienced a significant "cultural disconnect," underscoring the challenges of preserving cultural identity amidst conflict. (kiir.org.pk][2])

### 3. Sumantra Bose

In "Kashmir: The Unwritten History," Sumantra Bose discusses the destruction of cultural sites like the Jamia Masjid in Srinagar during periods of mass violence. He argues that such events not only erase physical landmarks but also sever links to the region's rich historical and cultural narratives. (kiir.org.pk][2])

Political Conflict and Trauma

### 4. Rising Kashmir Editorial

An editorial in Rising Kashmir critiques the film The Kashmir Files, stating that distorted historical narratives have contributed to the formation of strong in-group identities that view others with suspicion or animosity. This process has led to dehumanization and justification for violence against perceived out-groups, deepening divisions and making reconciliation more challenging. ([Rising Kashmir][3])

### 5. Department of History, LSR

A case study by the Department of History at LSR discusses how the displacement of communities during conflict leads to the destruction of heritage and identity. It highlights the loss of traditions and beliefs among both Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims, emphasizing the erosion of secular culture and communal harmony. ([DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY, Lsr][4])

Social Issues and Morality

### 6. Rehman Rahi

In a discussion on Kashmiri poetry, Rehman Rahi emphasizes the role of poets in reflecting the political realities of their times. He advocates for poets to remain politically conscious without becoming mere propagandists, aiming to evoke empathy and understanding through their craft. ([reddit.com][5])

### 7. Outlook India

An article in Outlook India examines how Kashmiri Pandit literature post-exodus focuses on themes of loss, nostalgia, and the anxiety of cultural decline. It suggests that these literary works serve as self-aware acts of preservation, reflecting the community's efforts to maintain their identity amidst displacement. ([Outlook India][6])

### 2. Methodology

The study employs a qualitative analytical approach, focusing on thematic content analysis of selected Kashmiri plays. Plays were chosen based on their cultural significance, popularity, and representation of Kashmiri societal issues. The analysis considers narrative structures, character development, dialogue, and symbolic elements to identify dominant themes.

### Statement of the Problem

Kashmiri theatre, though rich in content and cultural significance, has not received adequate academic attention in the field of literary and cultural studies. Much of the existing scholarship on Indian drama focuses on classical Sanskrit plays or modern Indian

playwrights writing in Hindi, Bengali, or English, leaving regional dramatic traditions like Kashmiri plays under-represented.

Moreover, the majority of studies available on Kashmiri theatre focus primarily on its performance traditions—especially Bhand Pather—and not on the thematic depth and literary substance of its written plays. The lack of systematic thematic analysis makes it difficult to understand how Kashmiri playwrights address vital socio-political, cultural, and moral issues through drama.

Given the complex socio-political realities of Kashmir—marked by conflict, displacement, and cultural transformation—its theatre serves as a vital mirror of the collective psyche. Yet, there is a research gap in exploring how these experiences are articulated thematically through plot, character, dialogue, and symbolism. This study, therefore, aims to fill that gap by examining the recurrent and emerging themes in selected Kashmiri plays, thereby situating Kashmiri drama within the broader discourse of Indian and postcolonial theatre.

**The present study aims to:**

1. Identify and analyze the dominant themes reflected in selected Kashmiri plays, focusing on both traditional and modern dramatic forms.
2. Examine how socio-political realities—such as conflict, identity, displacement, and cultural resistance—are represented through dramatic expression in Kashmiri theatre.
3. Explore the relationship between traditional folk theatre (Bhand Pather) and contemporary Kashmiri plays in terms of thematic continuity and transformation.
4. Understand the role of theatre as a medium of cultural preservation, social critique, and identity formation in Kashmiri society.
5. Contribute to the academic discourse on regional Indian drama by highlighting the aesthetic, cultural, and political significance of Kashmiri plays.

**3. Thematic Analysis**

**3.1. Displacement and Exile**

A predominant theme in Kashmiri plays is the sense of displacement experienced by the Kashmiri Pandit community. Plays often depict the emotional and psychological turmoil of exile, exploring the loss of homeland, cultural identity, and the quest for belonging. These narratives serve as a form of collective memory, preserving the experiences of forced migration and its aftermath.

**Summary of selected Kashmiri plays that explore the theme of exile, displacement, and the emotional consequences of leaving one's homeland:**

**1. Aka Nandun by Moti Lal Kemmu**

**Theme of Exile:** The play explores forced separation from homeland and loved ones, drawing on Kashmiri folk legends.

**Summary:** Aka Nandun dramatizes the story of two siblings torn apart by circumstances beyond their control. The narrative portrays the emotional suffering, nostalgia, and longing for return that accompany exile. Traditional music and dance intensify the sense of loss and cultural dislocation.

**2. Posh Colony by Jahangir Farsh**

Theme of Exile (Psychological/Emotional): Though set in a modern urban environment, the play reflects the emotional exile of marginalized and isolated individuals.

Summary: The play depicts an elderly couple living in a posh colony, neglected by their family and society. Their emotional isolation mirrors the broader Kashmiri experience of exile, emphasizing alienation and the human cost of displacement.

**3. Nev Nosh (New Bride) by Pushkar Bhan**

Theme of Exile (Cultural/Generational): Focuses on women and family dynamics affected by migration or changing societal norms.

Summary: The story portrays a young bride adjusting to a new household and community, highlighting her struggle with identity and belonging. The cultural dislocation parallels the sense of exile experienced by Kashmiri families uprooted from their homeland.

**4. Bhand Pather (Traditional Folk Plays)**

Theme of Exile (Social/Political): Some episodes within the folk theatre tradition subtly depict exile due to political oppression or societal injustice.

Summary: Through satire and allegory, Bhand Pather plays often depict villagers forced to flee oppression or navigate life under autocratic rulers. Though humorous in tone, these narratives underscore displacement and social marginalization.

**5. Contemporary Adaptations & Diaspora Themes**

Examples: Saffron Kingdom (film adaptation) and radio dramas by Sajood Sailani.

Theme of Exile: Modern plays and adaptations focus on the Kashmir Pandit diaspora and internal displacement caused by conflict.

Summary: These works portray intergenerational trauma, nostalgia, and the struggle to maintain cultural identity while living far from one's native land. They examine the psychological and social effects of forced migration.

**Key Insights Across Plays on Exile**

1. Emotional Turmoil: Exile is portrayed as deeply personal and collective trauma, marked by loss, nostalgia, and alienation.

2. Cultural Displacement: Plays emphasize the erosion of traditions and struggle to preserve cultural heritage in new contexts.

3. Socio-Political Roots: Many narratives link exile to conflict, oppression, or forced migration, reflecting Kashmir's historical reality.

4. Resilience and Adaptation: Despite loss, characters often strive to reconstruct identity, maintain dignity, and preserve memory.

**3.2. Identity and Cultural Preservation**

The tension between tradition and modernity is a recurring motif. Plays frequently portray characters grappling with the erosion of cultural practices and the challenges of preserving heritage in a rapidly changing world. This theme underscores the community's efforts to maintain their unique identity amidst external pressures.

Here's a concise summary of selected Kashmiri plays that explore the theme of identity and cultural preservation:

**1. Nev Nosh (New Bride) by Pushkar Bhan**

Theme: Cultural preservation within changing family and societal structures.

Summary: The play centers on a young bride entering a new household, highlighting her struggle to adapt while preserving her own values and traditions. The narrative explores generational conflict, the tension between tradition and modernity, and the importance of retaining cultural identity amid social change.

2. Aka Nandun by Moti Lal Kemmu

Theme: Preservation of Kashmiri folk culture and storytelling.

Summary: Drawing on Kashmiri legends, the play integrates traditional music, dance, and folklore. The narrative emphasizes cultural heritage as a means of identity reinforcement, showing how stories and rituals preserve community memory even during social disruption.

3. Bhand Pather (Traditional Folk Theatre)

Theme: Cultural preservation through performance.

Summary: As a centuries-old folk theatre form, Bhand Pather combines satire, mimicry, and storytelling to reflect Kashmiri life. These performances serve as a medium to preserve language, customs, and social values while commenting on contemporary issues, reinforcing a shared cultural identity.

4. Shararat by Som Nath Sadhu

Theme: Family, tradition, and societal norms.

Summary: This play focuses on interpersonal relationships and generational tensions. It highlights how adherence to cultural practices shapes individual and collective identity, while also examining the consequences of deviating from tradition.

5. Saffron Kingdom (Film adaptation)

Theme: Diaspora and maintaining identity in exile.

Summary: The story follows Kashmiri refugees adapting to life outside the valley. It explores how individuals strive to preserve their language, customs, and familial bonds in unfamiliar environments, emphasizing the resilience of cultural identity amidst displacement.

Key Insights across Plays on Identity & Cultural Preservation

1. Tradition vs. Modernity: Many plays depict characters negotiating between inherited customs and contemporary societal pressures.

2. Role of Folk Arts: Music, dance, and storytelling are central to maintaining Kashmiri identity.

3. Intergenerational Dialogue: Plays often highlight conflicts and cooperation between generations in preserving culture.

4. Cultural Memory: Drama acts as a medium to record, transmit, and protect community history and values.

5. Diaspora Experiences: Exile and migration heighten the need to consciously preserve cultural identity.

### 3.3. Political Conflict and Trauma

The ongoing political unrest in Kashmir is often mirrored in theatrical works. Plays delve into the impacts of conflict, such as loss, trauma, and the moral dilemmas faced by individuals. Through allegorical storytelling, these plays comment on the broader socio-political landscape, reflecting the complexities of the region's turmoil.

Here's a concise summary of selected Kashmiri plays that explore the theme of political conflict and trauma:

**1. Saffron Kingdom (Film/Stage Adaptation)**

Theme: Political conflict, displacement, and trauma.

Summary: The narrative follows Masrat, a Kashmiri woman, and her son fleeing the valley after the abduction of her husband. The play/film explores intergenerational trauma, the psychological impact of conflict, and the struggle to maintain identity and dignity in exile. The story reflects the human cost of political unrest and forced migration in Kashmir.

**2. Bhand Pather (Traditional Folk Theatre)**

Theme: Social injustice, political oppression, and satire.

Summary: Though primarily folk comedy, Bhand Pather often critiques rulers, landlords, and corrupt authorities. Episodes depict the hardships and oppression faced by ordinary people, highlighting political exploitation and the trauma of living under authoritarian structures. Humor and allegory mask the underlying tension of political resistance.

**3. Aka Nandun by Moti Lal Kemmu**

Theme: Cultural trauma amidst socio-political disruption.

Summary: While rooted in folklore, the play mirrors contemporary conflicts by showing the disintegration of community ties and social cohesion. The trauma of separation, forced migration, and uncertainty reflects the broader political instability in Kashmir.

**4. Radio Plays & Dramas by Sajood Sailani**

Theme: Psychological and societal trauma due to conflict.

Summary: Sailani's works often dramatize the effects of political unrest on ordinary families and communities. Characters grapple with fear, uncertainty, and the erosion of trust, representing the emotional and societal scars left by decades of conflict.

**5. Shararat by Som Nath Sadhu**

Theme: Subtle political undercurrents affecting social life.

Summary: While appearing as family drama or social satire, the play reflects societal disruption caused by political instability. Tensions in the household and community mirror the anxiety and trauma experienced by the broader society.

**Key Insights Across Plays on Political Conflict & Trauma**

1. Psychological Impact: Characters often exhibit anxiety, fear, and loss of agency, reflecting the trauma of living amidst political unrest.

2. Displacement & Exile: Many plays link political conflict to forced migration and the disruption of community life.

3. Cultural Erosion: Conflict threatens the preservation of language, customs, and collective memory.

4. Use of Allegory & Satire: Folk forms like Bhand Pather use humor and allegory to critique power structures while making the narrative palatable.

5. Intergenerational Effects: Trauma extends beyond immediate victims, affecting children, families, and the community psyche.

**3.4. Social Issues and Morality**

Contemporary Kashmiri plays address pressing social issues like drug addiction, corruption, and generational divides. By focusing on everyday struggles, these works highlight the ethical challenges faced by individuals and communities, promoting social awareness and introspection.

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Here's a concise summary of selected Kashmiri plays that explore social issues and morality:

1. Shararat by Som Nath Sadhu

Theme: Family ethics, social responsibility, and moral dilemmas.

Summary: The play examines interpersonal relationships within families, highlighting conflicts arising from ego, societal expectations, and ethical decisions. It reflects how moral choices shape both individual character and social harmony.

2. Nev Nosh (New Bride) by Pushkar Bhan

Theme: Gender roles, family hierarchy, and social adaptation.

Summary: Through the story of a young bride entering a new household, the play addresses social norms, moral expectations of women, and the tension between tradition and personal autonomy. It questions societal rigidity and emphasizes ethical conduct in familial relationships.

3. Aka Nandun by Moti Lal Kemmu

Theme: Community ethics and justice.

Summary: Based on Kashmiri folklore, the play portrays moral lessons through the experiences of characters facing ethical dilemmas. Themes of honesty, loyalty, and social duty are interwoven with cultural practices, illustrating the role of morality in maintaining social cohesion.

4. Bhand Pather (Traditional Folk Theatre)

Theme: Social critique and moral education.

Summary: Folk theatre uses satire and humor to address corruption, greed, and social injustice. Characters often represent moral archetypes, allowing audiences to reflect on ethical behavior and societal responsibilities. Even as comedy entertains, it reinforces moral values and social awareness.

5. Radio Plays by Sajood Sailani

Theme: Moral conflict under social stress.

Summary: Sailani's radio dramas often depict ordinary individuals navigating moral dilemmas in the face of poverty, social inequality, or political instability. These plays examine human ethics, highlighting the tension between survival instincts and societal values.

**Key Insights Across Plays on Social Issues & Morality**

1. Family and Community Ethics: Many plays examine morality within the household and the larger social structure.

2. Gender and Social Roles: The ethical responsibilities and limitations placed on women and men are recurring themes.

3. Justice and Responsibility: Plays frequently emphasize honesty, fairness, and accountability in both private and public life.

4. Satire as Moral Lesson: Folk theatre like Bhand Pather uses humor to provoke reflection on social wrongdoing.

5. Cultural Context: Kashmiri plays integrate local traditions and folk wisdom to convey moral and social values.

4. Case Studies

4.1. Posh Colony by Jahangir Farsh

This play explores themes of loneliness and neglect among the elderly, set against the backdrop of a posh colony. It portrays the emotional isolation of an old couple, highlighting societal apathy towards the aging population. The narrative critiques modernity's disregard for traditional familial bonds.

#### 4.2. Yahudi Ki Ladki by Agha Hashar Kashmiri

Though not originally Kashmiri, this historical Urdu play by Agha Hashar Kashmiri has been influential in the region's theatrical landscape. It addresses themes of love, sacrifice, and persecution, resonating with the Kashmiri audience's own experiences of conflict and loss. The play's adaptation into various forms underscores its thematic relevance.

Research findings:

Kashmiri plays frequently deploy folk-theatrical idioms (like Bhand Pather) to engage with local sociocultural realities rather than purely mythic or classical subjects.

Thematic clusters identified: oppression (feudal, colonial, state), resistance (folk voice, marginalised communities), identity (Kashmiri culture vs assimilation), environment & ecology societal change (tourism, modernity, urban/rural divides).

The plays serve not only aesthetic purposes but also social - they function as commentary, mobilising cultural memory and community critique.

There is a dynamic interplay between past and present tradition provides the form; contemporary issues provide the content.

One key result: the audience's sense of belonging, solidarity, and cultural awareness is enhanced through such theatre; though quantifying behavioural change is difficult (as one paper notes).

#### **Discussion**

The recurring themes in Kashmiri plays reflect the community's resilience and adaptability in the face of adversity. Theatre serves as a medium for catharsis, dialogue, and cultural preservation. By engaging with these themes, audiences are invited to reflect on their collective history and envision pathways toward healing and reconciliation.

#### **Conclusion**

Kashmiri theatre continues to be a vital expression of the region's cultural and emotional landscape. Through its exploration of themes like displacement, identity, and social issues, it offers a nuanced understanding of the Kashmiri experience. Future research could further delve into the evolution of these themes in contemporary works and their impact on younger generations.

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