BOOK REVIEW:
Alana Hunt, *Cups of nun chai*

Dilpreet Bhullar

In Alana Hunt’s *Cups of nun chai*, the 118 conversations about Kashmir with 118 people pierce through the shards of memory. The history of Kashmir is a complex labyrinth of political narratives and personal stories of loss and remembrance, enclosed within the dynamics of cultural contestation. The conversations held over the cups of *nun chai* (salt tea), a quintessentially Kashmir tradition, are organised into 118 chapters with an equal number of photographs by Hunt of the cups of nun chai served and consumed over the intimate meetings that comprise the core of the book. The Australia-based Hunt made her first visit to Indian-administered Kashmir in 2009, during her days as a student at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi. The killing of seventeen-year-old Tufail Ahmad Mattoo by the Indian army on 11 June 2010 as he was heading home from a tutorial centre, triggered a civilian uprising against the Indian government. On the day of the killing Hunt was travelling to Delhi from Srinagar and within the next few weeks she returned to Australia, but she maintained contact with her friends and acquaintances in Kashmir and remained informed about the situation in the Valley. Over the span of the next two years, Hunt’s exchanges on Kashmir and its politics with family, friends and acquaintances, conducted in Australia, India, Kashmir and beyond, are documented in the book in an act of remembrance manifested in both textual and photographic forms. The number of conversations is a deliberate parallel to the 118 young Kashmiri lives that succumbed to the violence unleashed against them by the Indian military in the summer of 2010.

Designed by Itu Chaudhuri Design, the book was published in 2020 by Yaarbal Books, an independent publishing house based in New Delhi, ten years after the protests in Kashmir in 2010. The conversations, with their accompanying photographs, had been previously disseminated in a variety of forms: in an exhibition at Mori Gallery in Sydney, on a virtual platform, and later serialised in the *Kashmir Reader*, a local Kashmiri daily. However, following

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1 The work is featured on the websites [www.cupsofnunchai.com](http://www.cupsofnunchai.com) and [Project Anywhere](http://www.projectanywhere.net/cups-of-nun-chai/); after the publication of the book, a digital iteration was produced, available from 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art [http://www.4a.com.au](http://www.4a.com.au)
the killing of the rebel commander Burhan Wani by Indian security forces on 8 July 2016, the state government imposed a ban on the Reader for three months, in an attempt to thwart the critical reportage published in its pages. The circulation of the nun chai stories came to an abrupt halt, but continued once the ban was lifted. The 118 conversations in the book are interspersed with excerpts from archival media reports, and it also includes the essay ‘Between Atrocity and Denial’ by the journalist and former editor of the Reader, Parvaiz Bukhari, and a text by the poet and academic Uzma Falak, ‘Life and Siege?.’ Both these offer an insight into the use of military aggression and coercive power by the authorities in silencing the voice of ‘ordinary life lived amid a silently raging war’ (p 153) in the region of Kashmir.

In harmony with the diverse history of the Kashmir Valley – currently one of the most militarised zones on the global map – the conversations documented through memory and photographs participate in the act of reimagining the past from multiple directions: the politics of cartography, local and national history, geopolitics, cultural metaphors, and, of course, personal and public narratives. The conversations, sprinkled with flecks of memory like the pieces of a broken mirror, illuminate a myriad of representations, against the illusory facade of a

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coherent singular narrative. Memory as a methodological tool as used by Hunt to approach the complexity of the situation in the region is not to be confused with nostalgic lamentation for the past or an act of mystic introspection. Rather, in the face of the state’s official claims of a peaceful situation in the region, as well as the wilful amnesia of previous state-sanctioned atrocities, individual memory functions as a tool of defiance against the logic of teleology to recognise the ruptures in the social fabric.

The systematic denial of the Kashmiris’ right to self-determination, together with the strategic erasure of the evidence of violence meted out against the people of the region, is intended to obliterate the voice of its citizens. Against this experience of alienation, in which the populace is forced to yield to the state, both exercises – memory mapping and consuming tea – are an extension of the endurance of the pretence of normalcy the authoritarians claim to achieve, devoid of the citizens’ opinion. Much like tea is brewed gradually to develop flavour and taste, the non-linear series of dialogues in the book nurtures and reflects upon a motley array of perspectives and familiarise the reader with the events that led up to the current state of struggle and unrest. A reductionist reading of Kashmir either sees its sectarian plurality or the colonial act of border creation as the two pivotal reasons that have incessantly triggered tensions in the Valley. In doing so, the present-day efforts by officials are (mis)construed as a way of undoing the deeds committed in the past. Conversely, the past is used as a means for furthering the ulterior motives of the dominant nationalist state, rather than providing a safe haven for the people of the Valley. Although Hunt navigates the conversations through the lens of colonialism/postcolonialism, she complicates the matter further by questioning the geopolitical forces at play in the present. To give an instance: the river tributaries flowing through the region of Kashmir serve as a rich repository of resources for hydroelectric plants and are thus a bone of contention between the two nations, India and Pakistan. Moreover, these power plants provide electricity to most regions of North India, yet villages located near these plants in the Valley still wait for electricity, despite the fact that ‘the locals were promised free electricity’ (the 3rd cup, p 32) when the dams for these projects were erected.

While making a point of discussing the dynamics of geopolitics that pervades the political narratives of India, Pakistan and China, Hunt manages to highlight the extent of a particular type of discrimination. But as the conversations progress over the nun chai, the participants bring in their personal histories and generate knowledge on the cyclic nature of hatred and violence (8th cup), drawing parallels between the bleak situation of Kashmir and other parts of the world, including Egypt, Ireland, Myanmar, Palestine, Somalia, Tunisia, to name but a few. Some conversations (the 30th–32nd and the 69th cup, for instance) are concerned with the task of identifying the location of Kashmir in an atlas or in the digital domain, an act against the isolation the ordinary Kashmiri undergoes. Both these exercises – traversing the circuits of latitude and longitude lines to pin down Kashmir, and drawing connections with histories of oppression across the world – illustrate a sense of solidarity, a dissent against the erasure of identity. Within the diachronic framework, Hunt, the author-cartographer, revisits the places...
intersected by the contested history to realign their location on the global map, lest the proximity shared between the geographies, fostered by the times rooted in the resistance against nationalist autocracy, are supplanted by the distances created by the borders.

To take a step further in her quest to draw the lines of similarities across the spatial-temporal axis, Hunt performs a cultural mapping of the Valley through its linguistic complexities. Before the fault lines of borders were drawn to divide the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan, the princely state of Kashmir unequivocally endorsed a spectrum of cultural-linguistic probabilities. The fact that Kashmir has been ruled over the centuries by sovereigns from different dynasties and cultures – from Lohara, Shah Mir and Mughal, later Afghans and Sikhs, and the last one, the Dogra – explains the deep roots of multilingualism in the region. But, caught in the web of the modern notion of the nation-state, the array of verbal expressions of engagement has been submitted to the rhetoric on inclusivity shared between nationalism and language. To disrupt this semblance of similitude and bring in to relief the plurality of the region, Hunt mentions at regular intervals how the chinar tree, crucial to the topography of the Valley, continues to retain its popularity amongst Kashmiris, with the common use of the Farsi name chinar, rather than bo‘n, the name for it in Koshur, the language of Kashmir.

In the conversation around the 8th cup, Hunt raises her first inquiry on the legitimacy of the monolithic identity based on a language, when the conversationalist, wearing a sweater that reads ‘100% Cashmere wool / Made in Scotland’, reminds her of the words penned by the Kashmiri poet Agha Shahid Ali (1949–2001) in ‘The Blessed Word: A Prologue’:

> Let me cry out in that void, say it as I can. I write on that void: Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir, Cashmir, Kashmere, Cachemire, Cachmiere, Cašmir. Or Cauchemar in a sea of stories? Or: Kačmir, Kaschemir, Kasmere, Kachmire, Kasmir. Kerseymere? (the 8th cup, p 40)

For Shahid Ali, his native Kashmir was embroiled in violence and in a perpetual state of displacement. The palpable, departure-led absenta, to which Kashmir is impelled, compels the self-exiled poet to populate it with a plethora of linguistic possibilities, hinting towards the diversity that defines Kashmir. In doing so, Shahid Ali – as well as Hunt, while introducing these lines to the readers – opens the door to the scale of reach of the region, while defying the recurrent attempts to confine it within territorial boundaries of homogeneity and remove it from the circuit of its historicity.

To elicit the complexity of the politico-linguistic imbroglio through lived experiences whilst having the 94th–95th cup, Hunt mentions: ‘Words had consequences in Kashmir, and this made them more precise with language’ (p 247). The agents of the Indian state use the word ikhwani (brother) – a frequently used Arabic word – to refer to militants-turned-loyalists.

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However, the term began to carry different meanings in different contexts: for a local person, an *ikhwani* was a traitor, while the Indian military saw him as a brother. Three cups before this (the 90th–91st cups, p 237), Hunt alludes to an incident when an Indian army member called a Kashmiri civilian *saale*, the Hindi and Urdu term used by a husband to refer to his wife’s brother. The word, indicating a familial relationship through marriage, is commonly evoked as an abusive epithet to suggest that the speaker has a (possibly illicit) relationship with the listener’s sister. The sexual underpinning of the term that this state officer uses is demonstrative of the hierarchy between occupier and occupied, where the former claims ownership of Kashmir as a territory to script the narrative of cultural and political pugnacity.

Through its design, the book pays tribute to the multifocal history of Kashmir. The pink colour, reflecting the colour of nun chai, appears to be spilt on selected pages to visually transcribe the undulated memory. Furthermore, the photographs of the cups, the kernel to the narrative, are conceptualised to subtly represent a visual syntax outside the common framework of the idyllic landscape synonymous with the Valley, which could be dubbed as the work of the camera through the eye of a coloniser. The photographs from a vertical perspective gauge the round cups of nun chai: half-filled or empty, the bottom strewn with tea leaves. The conversationalists hold their cups in an assortment of ways: the conventional way, through the handle; tightly grasped in either one or both hands; with thumbs and index fingers strongly gripping the cup; cradling them from below in both palms; or with the saucer held delicately between the fingers.
Each of the 118 conversations unfolds another narrative layer shrouding the Valley, while the lexicon of the 118 photographs representing the conversational events carries a metaphorical representation of the region itself. The nun chai is metamorphosed into the fragile condition of Kashmir, as if arrested into the round rims of the cups, analogous to the vicious circle of power and woven into a rich tapestry of political affairs and personal loss through the mannerisms of the hands. The gentle gestures of the hands clasping the cups of nun chai are a symbolic representation of the act of embracing the region of Kashmir in its multivariate form. Towards the end of the book, the photographs accompanying the conversations, captured during the month of Ramadan, show hands not clasping cups of nun chai but raised in prayer, indicating that, in the absence of material history, an organic prayer persists to commemorate the dead in Kashmir where ‘loss was at its most visible and pain was raw’ (the 117th–118th cups, p 294).

It is the inherent nature of nun chai to leave an ineffable flavour on the tongue, a waft of tea leaves in the air. Although momentary, the tactile essence of nun chai bequeaths an indelible mark of intimacy and remembrance for Hunt, and sets forth the purpose of the 118 conversations:

Nun chai is symbolic, yet also material. It accumulates. It grows memories. It ties everything together. Drinking and speaking with these cups of nun chai is entwined with a refusal to accept, a refusal to be silent and a refusal to forget the injustice of the summer of 2010.

(\textit{the 87th cup, p 229})

The fluidity Hunt favours in her work, either through the act of memory or in the material viscosity of nun chai, or in the visual documentation of the cups, is a manifestation of the multiple allegiances of the region to its textured history, setting its face against the stubborn singularity that the state has repeatedly tried to impose. Often, from an ontological standpoint, the quest to retrace the affirmative origin of existence overrides the epistemological search to recognise the presence of others. Embodying a dissonance with ideas that foist homogeneity, Hunt articulates an artistic language enriched by a variety of lived experiences. This move, emblematic of collaborative art – not just on the part of the author but also the participants – opens an intellectually and socially stimulating platform that attempts to disturb the status quo.

Taking a cue from Deleuze and Guattari on mapping,\textsuperscript{4} Hunt’s \textit{Cups of nun chai} could be seen within the framework of a performative engagement with Kashmir through the practice of mapping – the memories of the Valley, the history of the region, the political agenda and the everyday emotional turmoil. The peripatetic conversations, when mapped through memory, call not for a state of stagnation but a space of continual dialogue and discussion. \textit{Cups of nun chai} was published a year after the revocation of Article 370 and Article 35A of the Indian Constitution, which bestowed special status on Jammu and Kashmir, a decision that could not have been more felicitous. The rescindment of the status of the territory – perceived by the citizens as a

\textsuperscript{4} See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, \textit{A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia}, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987
pernicious intrusion, and a settler-colonial invasion of the Valley – and the strict lockdown that followed added another chapter in the distorted history of Kashmir. 

5 *Cups of nun chai* asserts the primacy of the language of participation and collectivism rather than an overarching singular narrative. The book holds promise for a discerning mind keen to walk through the kaleidoscopic history of Kashmir, beyond the banal lens of divisive policies on the two-nation theory promoted by the (post)colonial history.

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