



# Silenced Voices: Representing Kashmiri Children in Paro Anand's *Weed*

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## Abstract

The conflict in Kashmir, spanning over seven decades since India's partition in 1947, has profoundly impacted the lives of people who live there, particularly children who have grown up surrounded by violence, uncertainty, isolation, and systemic oppression. Contemporary Indian English literature has increasingly turned its attention to these marginalised voices, offering a platform for stories that might otherwise remain unheard. Paro Anand's *Weed* depicts the story of Umer, a young boy in Kashmir, who loves his father deeply, but the world tells him that loving his father, who has joined the militants, makes him guilty, too. This is the reality Paro Anand captures in her powerful novel, which portrays the profound isolation experienced by children like Umer - children who find themselves punished for choices they never made. Through Umer's honest, sometimes heartbreaking voice, we see how these young people navigate a world that has decided they don't belong anywhere. The paper examines different forms of isolation these children face: social, economic, psychological, cultural, and institutional. More than just a literary analysis, this study examines how *Weed* helps us understand what happens to the most vulnerable victims of conflicts - children who inherit their parents' battles without ever choosing to fight.

**Keywords:** Kashmir children, isolation, conflict literature, childhood trauma, social exclusion

When we think about victims of war and conflict, we often focus on soldiers, civilians caught in crossfire, or political leaders making difficult decisions. But what about the children who wake up one day to find that their father's choices have made them outcasts in their communities? They become the victims who have to carry the weight of decisions they never made, in conflicts they never chose to join.

Paro Anand's *Weed* brings us face-to-face with these forgotten victims. Through the story of Umer, whose father has joined the jihadis in Kashmir, we enter a world where childhood innocence collides with adult politics in the most devastating ways. The Kashmir conflict has been extensively documented in academic literature, with numerous studies examining its psychological and social impact on children. Armed conflict in Kashmir has a negative impact on all inhabitants of the valley, but the most serious effects are seen on children (Sharma et al). The conflict in Kashmir has affected the children in almost all aspects of their childhood development, whether it is physical, mental or emotional. Research shows that prolonged exposure to conflict creates lasting trauma, with children in the conflict zones often struggling to express themselves freely due to the constant fear of interrogation or imprisonment (Kumar). The novel doesn't just tell us about the Kashmir conflict - it shows us what it feels like to be a child growing up in the shadow of that conflict,

especially when your family name has become a source of shame rather than pride. Grappling with his father's legacy as a terrorist, Umer is trying to pursue an alternative path for himself and his family.

The title *Weed* itself is a powerful metaphor that tells us everything we need to know about how these children are seen by society. "We are the weeds. The wild, unwanted things. Who wants weeds? No one. Thrown out. Out of everyone's lives. Out of our own lives". (Anand, 2008, p.54) Weeds are plants that grow where they're not wanted, that survive despite everyone's efforts to remove them. They're always unwelcome. This is exactly how Umer and children like him exist in their communities: resilient but rejected, surviving but never truly accepted. As a follow-up to her acclaimed *No Guns at My Son's Funeral*, *Weed* shows us what happens to the next generation. While the first book deals with parents losing children to violence, this sequel asks an even more troubling question: What happens to the children who are left behind when parents choose violence?

The stories of children caught in Kashmir's conflict have been largely untold in literature, making Anand's work particularly valuable. While scholars have begun examining the psychological impacts of the conflict on young people, few writers have dared to explore the specific experiences of children whose families are associated with militancy. The author herself has described *Weed* as a hard-hitting exploration of uneasy questions that arise from the war on terror in Kashmir. The novel refuses to provide comfortable answers or simple moral judgements, instead forcing readers to confront the chaotic reality of how political conflicts affect the most innocent victims.

The broader field of childhood studies in conflict literature helps us understand why *Weed* matters so much. Researchers have increasingly recognized that children's experiences in war zones are fundamentally different from adult experiences. Children can't make independent choices about their circumstances, and they're entirely dependent on adults for their physical and emotional well-being. When those adults become associated with violence, children find themselves in an impossible position.

The most immediate and painful form of isolation Umer experiences is being rejected by his relatives and community. People started looking away. Doors were closed, where they had once been welcomed, and conversations stopped. Haneef's tragic fate, murdered by the terrorist group he sought to leave, exemplifies the ultimate form of isolation. His death underscores the pervasive fear and lack of agency that define the lives of many young people in conflict zones. Similarly, Umed's absorption into the militant group highlights another insidious form of isolation. While seemingly integrated into a community, this 'belonging' comes at the cost of his former life, his family, and his identity.

This isn't just about losing friends or feeling left out, though those experiences are painful enough for any child. The isolation Umer faces is systematic and deliberate. After his father joins the militants, the family discovers that "the government and charities working in Kashmir, in their better wisdom, believe it is best not to offer sustenance to the children and widows of militants" (Anand, 2008). The deliberate nature of this exclusion is captured in the phrase "in their better wisdom" - a bitter irony that highlights how those in power justify abandoning the most vulnerable. Umer hasn't chosen his father's path. He hasn't committed any crimes or made any political statements. His only "crime" is being born to a man who later chose violence. Yet he finds himself punished as severely as if he had pulled the trigger himself.

The novel shows us how this social isolation works in practice. It's not just that people avoid the family - it's that institutions that are supposed to help vulnerable children actively exclude them. Schools, hospitals, charitable organizations, and government programmes all turn away from children like Umer, not because they lack resources, but because they believe these children somehow deserve their suffering. For any child, social acceptance is crucial for healthy development. Children learn about themselves and their place in the world through their interactions with others. When a child is systematically excluded from social connections, it affects not just their happiness but their entire sense of identity and self-worth.

The economic consequences of social isolation hit families like Umer's with devastating force. The novel depicts how quickly they are "pushed to the brink of poverty and desperation" once the father leaves, while his mother will have "nothing to do with her husband" (Anand, 2008). This creates a household, torn between economic necessity and moral principles, with the children caught in the middle. But this isn't just about losing a breadwinner - it's about being cut off from entire economic networks and support systems. For children,

economic isolation means much more than just having less money. It means not having enough food to concentrate in school, not having proper clothes to feel confident around peers, not having access to books, supplies, or opportunities that other children take for granted. It means watching your mother struggle to provide necessities while knowing that help exists but is deliberately withheld. The cruelty of this economic isolation becomes clear when we realize it serves no practical purpose in fighting terrorism. Starving children and desperate mothers don't make communities safer - they often make them more vulnerable to extremist recruitment. Yet the policy persists, punishing innocents while failing to address the root causes of violence. What makes this particularly heartbreaking is how it affects a child's understanding of fairness and justice. Umer sees other children receiving help and support while his family is deliberately excluded.

Perhaps the most devastating form of isolation depicted in *Weed* is psychological - the internal conflict that tears at Umer's heart and mind. The novel opens with his raw, honest confession:

And I didn't even do anything. Ah, yes, my father did. And aren't sons forever following in their fathers' footsteps? Even if those footsteps are blighted? So, this weed, filled with bitter bad blood, was cast out. To follow in his father's footsteps. All right, I will share my deepest, darkest secret. I loved my father...like, sons love their fathers, I loved mine too. I don't know if he loved me back. (Anand, 2008, p.3)

These words of Umer reveal the impossible position these children find themselves in. Love for a parent is natural, instinctive, and necessary for healthy development. But when that parent chooses violence, the child faces an unbearable choice: reject the parent and lose a crucial relationship, or maintain the relationship and accept guilt. Umer's psychological isolation stems from this internal conflict. He can't fully embrace his father without accepting violence, but he can't fully reject his father without rejecting part of himself. This creates a form of loneliness that goes deeper than social exclusion - it's a loneliness that exists within the child's own heart and mind.

The novel explores how this psychological burden affects a child's development. Umer constantly wrestles with the haunting question: "And aren't sons forever following in their father's footsteps? Even if those footsteps are blighted...?" (Anand, 2008). This question encapsulates the terrible weight of inherited expectations and the fear that violence might be somehow inevitable, passed down like a family curse. This internal conflict is worsened by the fact that Umer has no safe space to process these feelings. He can't talk to his community about his love for his father - they would see it as evidence of his potential for violence. He can't communicate his doubts to his father - his father is gone, having committed to a path that Umer finds troubling. Even within his own family, these conversations are fraught with pain and complexity.

While the novel doesn't explicitly focus on cultural isolation, it touches on the ways children like Umer, Umed, and Hameed find themselves caught between different cultural identities. As Kashmiri children, they have their rich cultural heritage, but the conflict has made that heritage complicated and sometimes dangerous to embrace. The broader context of the Kashmir conflict includes the marginalization of local languages, traditions, and ways of life. Children like Umer find themselves needing to navigate between their local cultural identity and the dominant cultural frameworks they encounter in schools, media, and official institutions. Their association with militancy intensifies this cultural isolation. They can't fully embrace their Kashmiri identity because it's associated with the conflict their fathers joined. They can't fully embrace mainstream Indian culture because they're seen as potential threats. They exist in a liminal space, belonging fully to neither world. For adolescents like Umer, who are naturally in the process of forming their identities, this cultural isolation can be particularly destabilizing. They must figure out who they are without clear cultural anchors or role models to guide them.

One of the most tragic aspects of the isolation depicted in the novel is how it extends to institutions that are supposed to protect and nurture children. Schools, hospitals, and social services - the organizations created to help vulnerable young people, become additional sources of exclusion. Educational isolation is particularly devastating because education represents one of the few paths available for children to transcend their circumstances. When Umer and children like him are excluded from educational opportunities, society effectively limits their future possibilities. This isn't just unfair - it's counterproductive, as education is one of the most effective ways to prevent young people from being recruited into extremist movements. The novel

shows how this institutional isolation works in practice. It's not usually explicit. Instead, it works through subtle mechanisms: applications that are lost, requirements that are suddenly more stringent, informal networks that exclude certain families. For children who depend on institutions for structure, support, and opportunity, this isolation can be devastating. It sends the message that society has given up on them, that they are beyond redemption or help.

One of the most powerful aspects of *Weed* is Anand's decision to tell the story through Umer's voice. This narrative choice allows us to experience isolation through a child's eyes, revealing aspects of the experience that might be overlooked in adult-centred discussions. We see how complex political realities appear to a young person, often confusing, overwhelming, and deeply personal rather than abstract. Through Umer's voice, we also see the remarkable resilience of children. Despite everything he faces, Umer maintains his capacity for love, hope, and moral reasoning. He questions, he struggles, he hurts - but he doesn't give up. This resilience is inspiring without being unrealistic about the genuine challenges he faces.

Despite its focus on isolation and suffering, *Weed* is ultimately a story about hope. The novel suggests that even in the most difficult circumstances, children retain some capacity for choice and self-determination. Umer's struggle with his father's legacy represents not just victimization but the possibility of choosing a different path. The character of Umer's mother becomes crucial in this context. Her "determination to turn her back on violence" serves as a moral anchor for the family, showing that it's possible to maintain principles even in the face of tremendous pressure (Anand, 2008). The tension between her moral stance and the family's desperate circumstances is palpable - she "will have nothing to do with her husband" even as his absence pushes them toward destitution. This creates a complex dynamic where doing the right thing comes at an enormous personal cost, forcing readers to grapple with difficult questions about the price of moral integrity.

However, the novel's treatment of hope is nuanced and realistic. It doesn't present simple solutions or easy victories. Instead, it shows hope as something that must be actively maintained in the face of ongoing challenges. The mother's determination is tested daily by poverty, isolation, and the constant pressure to give up. This realistic portrayal of hope is one of the novel's greatest strengths. It acknowledges the genuine difficulties faced by children in conflict situations while maintaining faith in their potential for agency and growth. It suggests that while changing circumstances may be difficult, changing responses to those circumstances is always possible.

*Weed* contributes to our understanding of childhood in conflict by showing us experiences that are often invisible in broader political discussions. When we talk about the Kashmir conflict, we focus on political negotiations, military strategies, and historical grievances. We rarely talk about children like Umer, who inherit the consequences of adult decisions without having any say in making them. The novel reveals how conflict affects child development in ways that can last a lifetime. Children who grow up experiencing systematic isolation don't just suffer in the moment - they may struggle with trust, self-worth, and social connections throughout their lives. They may find it difficult to believe in justice, fairness, or the possibility of positive change.

The work also shows how counterterrorism policies can inadvertently harm the people they're supposed to protect. By punishing children for their parents' choices, these policies may create exactly the kind of resentment and alienation that fuel future violence. This insight has important implications for how we think about effective approaches to address extremism. Perhaps most importantly, *Weed* demonstrates the importance of seeing children as individuals rather than extensions of their parents. By recognizing this, we open up possibilities for intervention, support, and positive change that wouldn't exist if we saw these children as inevitably doomed to repeat their parents' paths.

Paro Anand's *Weed* is more than just a novel - it's an act of courage. It takes courage to look at uncomfortable truths, to give voice to experiences that society would rather ignore, and to ask difficult questions about how we treat the most vulnerable members of our communities. Through Umer's story, we see the human cost of policies that punish children for their parents' choices. We see how isolation operates as a form of collective punishment that harms innocents while failing to achieve its stated objectives. We see how resilience and hope can survive even in the darkest circumstances, but only with support and recognition of human dignity. The novel's greatest achievement is its ability to transform statistics into stories, policies

into personal experiences, and abstract concepts into lived realities. When we read about Umer's struggles, we can't help but see him as a real child with real feelings, hopes, and fears. This emotional connection is crucial for developing empathy and understanding across political divides.

*Weed* also shows us that even in the most difficult circumstances, change is possible. Children like Umer can choose different paths than their parents, but only if they're given the opportunity, support, and hope that make such choices possible. This message is both inspiring and challenging - it suggests that we have a responsibility to create conditions where positive choices are possible. The novel's contribution extends beyond its immediate context to broader questions about how we treat children affected by political violence anywhere in the world. The isolation experienced by Umer is not unique to Kashmir - similar patterns can be found wherever children are punished for their parents' political choices. In giving voice to children like Umer, the novel doesn't just tell us about the Kashmir conflict - it shows us what it means to be human in the face of impossible circumstances.

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