

Undivided yet Divided Piece of Land Called Paradise on Earth; Kashmir

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*Agar Firdaus bar ru-e-zamin ast, Hami ast-o hami ast-o hami ast.*¹

—Mughal Emperor Jahangir

This paper will view and explore Kashmir, the land of legendary beauty and bliss transformed into a land divided on the basis of religion, ideologies, beliefs and emotions through different yet similar perspectives. My paper focuses on the accounts of two diasporic writers, Sudha Koul, a Kashmiri Pandit's memoir; Tiger Ladies, A Memoir of Kashmir (2002) and Agha Shahid Ali, a Kashmiri Muslim's anthology of poem; The Country Without a Post Office (2013) and a Kashmiri journalist Basharat Peer's memoir Curfewed Night (2010). Kashmir has been a victim of divisive politics ever since the Treaty of Accession was signed by its then ruler Maharaja Hari Singh with India in 1947. My paper will discuss the censorship imposed now and then, curfews day and night in the past and present as well, the feelings of nostalgia, the reminiscences of childhood and adulthood, the bitter sweet experiences, the pain and happiness related to one's own land, the issues of lost and confused identity, the emergence of terrorist groups and militants demanding 'Azadi' from 1947, the role of Indian Army in Kashmir, the Kashmir of pre and post Partition of the subcontinent and the transition that Kashmir and Kashmiris have gone through over the years.

Keywords: Kashmir, Hindu-Muslim, memory, violence, trauma, Army, Azadi.

1. CHILDHOOD AND ITS DIFFERENCES

Sudha Koul, in her poignant coming-of-age tale *Tiger Ladies, A Memoir of Kashmir* (2002) recalls a charmed childhood in the Kashmir valley. Born in the city of Srinagar, in a Kashmiri Pandit family, Koul shares memories and experiences entwined with happiness, history, trauma and violence. Hindus were a minority, but lived in peace with their Muslim neighbours through much of Koul's happy youth, which was full of the ordinary lessons of growing up, as well as those particular to her region. She writes, "It is 1947. Outside the valley, nothing stays in place as churning lines of humanity run hither and yon in a hellish frenzy, trying to find their way."(26)

Koul describes her childhood growing up in a beautiful and somewhat idyllic Kashmir before the crisis of survival and identity took over. Koul captures the lives of four generations of women in her native land Kashmir, a beautiful place caught between India and Pakistan since the Partition of 1947, the year of her birth. She weaves a magical childhood, folk tales, friendly neighbours and family celebrations together with the unresolved political and religious battles that threaten the very existence of a most fragile region. She notices the first signs of trouble as a young girl, when some of her neighbours began to burn images of the Prime Minister of India, a Kashmiri Pandit, Jawahar Lal Nehru. Koul says; "It was my first cognitive encounter with the menacing possibilities of hatred."(77) And then the cries for *Azadi* grew louder. This demand for *Azadi* is very well picturised by Basharat Peer in *Curfewed Night*, he says; "*Azadi!* Throughout the winter, almost every Kashmiri man was a Farhaad, ready to dig a stream of milk from the mountains for a rendezvous with his Shireen: freedom!" (17)

Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night* (2012) is another account of a Kashmiri child portraying an uncommon and difficult childhood with honesty and lack of bias. Beginning in the years before the militancy, Peer speaks of beautiful and peaceful Kashmir, a strict Muslim grandfather who wants his home and his grandson to follow all the rules and become the best in future like his bureaucrat son. Peer grew up in foothills of the Himalayas in the beautiful valley, reading Shakespeare, Stevenson, Dickens, Kipling and Defoe. Peer had a happy, uneventful childhood, surrounded by a loving family and a tight knit community. The shadow of Kashmir's turbulent story and unresolved conflict never quite goes away, and even in Peer's happy childhood, he knows that his homeland is involved in a perpetual struggle for identity. Kashmir has become the purgatory of the ghost of Partition. Peer talks about the 1990s when the whole of Kashmir valley was embroiled in Pakistan sponsored militancy.

Peer tells the story of the emergence of the struggle of Kashmiri youth, armed and trained across the Line of Control (LoC) by Pakistan's dreaded ISI and the impact of all this on their friends and families. The massacres of the early 1990s

changed Kashmir forever. Militant groups sprung up in every village, initially armed with only home-made weapons, and the Kashmiri Hindu population fled the valley where their ancestors had lived for thousands of years, cohabiting peacefully with Sufi Muslim Kashmiris for centuries. Peer when returned to his school in the spring, he saw his village schoolroom empty; “The deaths had scared the Pandits and thousands including my classmates and their families, had left the valley by march 1990 for Jammu, Delhi and several other Indian cities and towns.”(22)

Peer in his account talks about the curiosities of himself and other Kashmiri students regarding the militants. He says:

By the summer of 1990, thousands of Kashmiri men crossed the Line of Control, for arms training in Pakistan-controlled part of Kashmir. When they returned as militants, they were heroes—people wanted to talk to them, touch them, hear their stories, and invite them for a feast. Like almost every teenager, I wanted to join them. Fighting and dying for freedom was much desired, like the first kiss on adolescent lips.(24)

Peer’s cousin Tariq known for his good sports and academics joined some militant group across the border. Peer describes his home coming like the above lines; he was surrounded by people and there was no place in his house when one woman asked him about her son who also crossed the border but had not returned. The “families whose sons died crossing the LOC, from where bodies cannot be recovered held funerals in absentia.”(37). Peer says; “Homecomings for militants were shortlived. Tariq visited home, hurriedly, and stealthily. Soldiers often knocked at their door, looking for him, beating his father, his brothers, seeking information about him, telling them to ask him to surrender.”(38)

In Peer’s village, militants attacked the security forces with Kalashnikovs (a kind of rifle), and on several occasions Peer and his family had narrow escapes as army convoys were attacked around them and their house was sprayed with bullets. He describes the “crackdowns”, when Indian security forces would surround a village and parade its inhabitants in front of a ‘masked mukhbir’ (informer). Anyone identified by the informer would be subjected to inhuman torture. He says, “Kashmir was rife with stories of soldiers misbehaving with women during crackdowns.”(51) In Kashmir, India responded to the insurgency by setting up two medieval torture chambers, Papa 1 and Papa 2, into which large number of local people, as well as the occasional captured foreign jihadi, would “disappear”. Their bodies would later be found, if at all, floating, bruised, covered in cigarette burns, missing fingers or even limbs in River Jhelum and its parts. Peer describes how many of his generation of Kashmiris were rendered impotent by their cruel torture. He says; “...death and fear became routine like going to school, playing cricket and football.”(47) This continuous physical and psychological torture is depicted in the lines of Agha Shahid Ali’s poem, “Farewell”; “They make a desolation and call it peace. Who is

the guardian tonight of the Gates of Paradise?”(7). This poem presents the shattering evocation of a conflict. It is regarding belief pitted against belief, of memories and histories intertwined and warring. Shahid Ali says:

Army convoys all night like desert caravans:

In the smoking oil of dimmed headlights,

time dissolved—all

winter –its crushed fennel.

We can’t ask them: *Are you done with the world?*(7)

These lines bring forward the continuous surveillance and interference which every Kashmiri irrespective of religion, caste and class has to go through since it was made a state with its own Constitution and given the special status under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution. As a result of terrorism, Kashmir has also become one of the most militarized regions in the world. Roadblocks and checkpoints have isolated the region and has made free movement nearly impossible. Normal life has been grossly interrupted and people are forced to live in constant fear of both terrorists and Indian security forces. In fact, Indian security forces have been known to commit severe human rights violations in Kashmir. Indian security forces have been known to commit rape (Kunan Poshpora incident where more than twenty women were raped in the village in 1991 by the Army men), performed extrajudicial executions and detained people without proper trial or treatment. Atrocities by the Indian Army includes the worst massacre in Kashmiri history; the Gawdakal Massacre where the Indian Paramilitary troops of the Central Reserve Police Force open fired on a group of Kashmiri protestors in Srinagar’s Gawkadal bridge on January 1990. Such atrocities by Indian troops radicalized a population who were vaguely pro-Pakistan, but whose activism had previously never gone beyond cheering for Pakistani fast bowlers during Indo-Pak cricket matches. The violation of Human Rights has further added to communal tension in the valley and worsened the situation. Peer in the lines below from his memoir writes about the lack of communication between people, lack of awareness and understanding of each other’s needs and beliefs and lack of proper administration which has made Kashmir one of the disturbed regions of the world. He says :

Prague protested and won; Berlin had protested and won; Kashmiris too had believed that our protests would win Kashmir its freedom..... But Kashmiri demonstrations faded out after the massacres of protestors. I often think the conflict might not have turned so fatal if India had allowed those peaceful demonstrations. Maybe those demonstrations and not the armed militancy would have become the dominant aspect of politics in Kashmir, maybe Indians and Kashmiris would have talked and thousands of deaths might have been avoided. But that did not happen. Instead, firing on protestors, arrests, disappearances, custodial killings, kidnappings, assassinations and torture dominated Kashmir.(136)

ii. Period of Transition

Kashmir before the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 and after Partition are the two different places to be understood and interpreted in many ways. This paper attempts to understand Kashmir and its residents through the accounts of Koul, Peer and Shahid Ali. Koul writes; "At the height of madness, to precipitate its acquisition to Kashmir, Pakistan sends Afghan hill tribes called Kabailis to invade Kashmir." (26) This was the first attack and assault during the partition process realising that to the Non-Kashmiris, the Hindus were Hindus not Kashmiris thus, initiating a never ending strife between Hindus and Muslims. She says; "The assault made us aware that to outsiders we are not Kashmiris, but Hindus." (28) Koul presents the peaceful surrounding where no Kashmiri could betray another Kashmiri, there was no separation between Hindus and Muslims. They were only Kashmiris with their own rich cultural background, language, festivals and friendship but; this invasion of Kabailis drew a line in between. Though, they were surrounded by religious tensions, they took part in one another's good and bad times and remained Kashmiris. This lamenting on the rising tension continues to be seen in Agha Shahid Ali's "I See Kashmir From New Delhi at Midnight" (12). He laments the fading unity between the Kashmiri Hindus and Kashmiri Muslims. There were many things in Kashmir which kept them united for years like paisley, saffron, the green threads which both the Hindus and Muslims wear when visiting Sufi shrines. But during the exile of Kashmiri Pandits those green threads and the saffron did not work anymore:

I've tied knot
with green thread at Shah Hamdan, to be
united only when the atrocities
are stunned by you jeweled return, but no news
escapes the curfew, nothing of your shadow,
and I'm back, five hundred miles, taking off
my ice, the mountains granite again as I see
men coming from those Abodes from Snow
with gods asleep like children in their arms. (12)

Shahid Ali's anthology *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997) from where the above lines are taken is a collective presentation regarding the political affecting the personal and social aspects of people of Kashmir who are, were and is associated with the place. There is an autobiographical, even confessional, aspect to many although not all of the poems collected in his anthology. Such a transition is also presented in Koul's memoir. She writes about the Kashmir that once was, and sadly, will never be again. *Tiger Ladies* is a loving memoir of Kashmiri food, ancient

folklore, bawdy wedding traditions, gossamer-soft pashminas, the rhythms and colours of the valley itself that made up the author's childhood and the traditional ways that are gradually being lost to younger generations. Set against this is the wider story of Kashmir's painful history, as it is torn apart by fighting between Muslims and Hindus, with repercussions that are being felt across the world today. She writes about those times when Hindus and Muslims lived together as neighbours in the valley, their lives punctuated by visits from the pashmina shawl merchants, yakshas who would descend to their earthly abodes annually and demand to be fed rice, mung beans and lamb, the grand Shivaratri festival, picnics on houseboats, and treks high up into the magical Himalayas. Then there is the house spirit that lives in the attic, and tales passed down from generation to generation such as those of the poetess Lal Ded. Shivaratri, the most celebrated day for every Kashmiri Pandit was a festival of prayers, good food, worship and sharing among both the religious groups of Kashmir:

At Shivratri, we invite friends of other religious persuasions to our house for meals. We also send fruits and nuts to our Muslim neighbours, while their children come over to our house for lunch or dinner. In turn we look forward to eating at their house on the two Eids celebrated by Muslims. (76)

Koul's *Tiger Ladies* is a magical memoir of a land now consumed by political and religious turmoil, a richly detailed story of a girl's passage into maturity, marriage, and motherhood in the midst of an exquisite and fragile world that will never be entirely the same. The interesting parallel drawn by the writer was with her own growth and development from school to a college girl to getting married and in the backdrop is Kashmir getting changed and destroyed more and more with time and politicisation. The Treaty of Amritsar in 1846 between East India Company and Gulab Singh made him Kashmir's first Dogra ruler and the Treaty of Accession in 1947 between India and Pakistan gave Kashmir to India. On one hand there is the tag of special status attached to Kashmir under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution and Kashmir also has its separate Constitution but before getting its benefits, its fate was already signed and written by some leaders like Gulab Singh and Sheikh Abdullah. There is a blame game going on between India and Pakistan for continuously testing their respective ideologies of statehood in Kashmir which was converted into a battlefield and still holds this name. Everyone waits; seekers of freedom for their dream, lovers of Pakistan for some epochal miracle, pro-India sections for it all to end and business as usual to resume, displaced Kashmiri Pandits to return home. The wait continues with bloodshed but without any solutions. Peer says in his memoir; "I did not know how long it would take to return home. Every departure ever since has been a continuation of that moment." (61)

Koul describes her days at college when they were taken for summer camps where both Hindu and Muslim girls were

together and enjoyed being away from their homes. In this trip, trekking through a village, some children watched them mischievously, laughed and shouted; “Long live Pakistan.”(106). Koul’s grandfather, Shyamji, a retired English professor was invited to teach English at a new college, but, he came back disturbed from there; “The students only want Muslim professors. They threatened us Hindu staff members with dire consequences if we did not resign immediately.” (132) There were continuous protests by the separatists in the valley.

Peer in his work writes of how all the embarrassment and failures of adolescence fall away when one joins in a protest march and feels himself to be a part of a larger entity. He writes of how the militants who crossed into the Pakistan-controlled part of Kashmir for guerrilla training would return as heroes. Peer’s fascination with the militants was shattered when his whole family objected to his idea of joining the insurgents. His grandfather, he writes; “fixed his watery green eyes on him and asked, how do you think this old man can deal with your death?” (28) Peer came to an agreement with his father that he would wait for a few years before deciding whether or not to sign up, and in the meantime he would study. In order to save him from taking a rash decision and rushing into a dangerous terrain, he was sent away from Kashmir, first to Aligarh Muslim University near Delhi, and then to Delhi’s newspaper offices, from where he often ventured back into Kashmir to report. Peer says; “Parents saw getting their children out of Kashmir as the only solution.”(60). Peer shares some experiences of his Muslim friends who were ill-treated after the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992, a year before he joined Aligarh Muslim University. He says; “The demolition triggered religious violence throughout India and thousands were killed.” (64)The Karsevaks (Hindu right activists)travelling on the same train as his Muslim friends asked them their identity; “Most students gave their real names and said they were from Kashmir, then, he saw frenzied group of Karsevaks calling them ‘Kashmiri Muslim terrorists’ and attacking them with crowbars and daggers.”(64-65)He left his job as a journalist and travelled back to his war ravaged homeland. As he went about writing a book on Kashmir in his head with a notebook in hand, he was often haunted by the past, at times unable to write and ask the questions he wanted to. He speaks about the unspoken experiences of Kashmir, its language and its people. His memories of Kashmir gave him pain; “The telling even in the shade of intimacy was painful. I felt the absence of our own telling, the unwritten books about Kashmiri experience....” (95). Such a lost identity of his hometown made him feel that he was losing Kashmir as its memories were fading away; “The memories and stories of Kashmir that I had carried with me like my VIP suitcase could fade away. I had to find words to save memory from the callous varnish of time.”(96) These writers have not only voiced their bitter sweet experiences but also have given voice to thousands of Kashmiris irrespective of their religion, beliefs and identity.

And I feel memories to be engrained in minds and souls needs to be pictured and penned down so that they never leave, be it haunting or sweet, it needs to be given black lettering like these writers did. These writers have presented evocative and profound views of Kashmir, its history, disputes, experiences for the readers to read and understand them without being biased.

iii. The Trio; similar yet different

Curfewed Night is Peer’s attempt to present the facts of what he has seen, heard and experienced, including but not limited to his own emotional response, and leaves all the room possible for readers to form their own opinion. With learned and vivid reportage, Peer develops a historically powerful narrative that rips open the heart of the conflict. His love for his land and his strong desire to give voice to the wounds of his fellow beings and to record their harrowing sufferings, takes him to the remotest parts of his land where armed conflict had already unleashed a reign of terror. Peer brings out the dominant existing narrative of political imbroglios into the actual lived condition of the people in a war-torn zone. Peer also assesses the societal mental health of a conflict zone meticulously by visiting the victims. About Kashmir, he says; “Checkposts, searchlights, and fear owned the night.”(79) His work is remarkably taut and restrained that enriches contemporary Indian history and reveals an unexplored facet of life in Kashmir. The plight of the ordinary people and their daily struggle for existence since 1947 has made life a living hell for Kashmiris. Such struggles have left 45% of Kashmir’s population under mental distress due to exposure to traumatic events. (The Hindu)

Shahid Ali through his anthology shows interest in the transition and transgression of travel. In one of the poems from his anthology, “I Dream I Am the Only Passenger on Flight 423 to Srinagar”(16), uses a resonant image of the night time flight; in which the narrator exists between two countries in a provisional, liminal space. Perhaps he intends to reflect both the migrant, non-resident Kashmiri’s hybrid position, and Kashmir’s no man’s land vulnerability in the middle of India and Pakistan’s animosity. In this dream-like poem, he is taken on taxi ride and is then rowed on a boat to an island where a keeper guards the ‘world’s last saffron’ — an image of a fast fading Kashmir. As well as these physical crossings and the letters and correspondence already discussed, there is a recurring image of the long-distance telephone call. Different worlds collide when the phone rings, as in “Some Vision of the World Cashmere”(23), in which the poet’s milieu in Amherst is interrupted by the news that his grandmother is dying in Srinagar.

The issues of nostalgia and longing for one’s home land is also evident in Koul’s *Tiger Ladies*. After becoming the first Kashmiri woman to qualify through the Civil Services Examinations, she moves from village to village, solves and settles the problems which was a part of her work. Nostalgia

pervades over her mind and soul. She compares her government camps with the summer camp in which she went to Pahalgam while studying in a college. She says; "I wake up to a beautiful winter day, almost as warm as a summer day in Kashmir."(155). Being an IAS officer performing her duties, she is reminded time and again of Srinagar, her grandfather, grandmother and her mother. She is worried and broken at the present hellish state of her own state; "The mujahidden well provided by foreign reinforcements, are positioned to fight the troops and they terrorize soldiers and civilians alike."(155)Her wedding function could not be performed in Srinagar valley because things were difficult for them in the valley. The democratic state of Jammu and Kashmir was reducing slowly and gradually into being anarchic. There is a constant craving and finding of a way back to go their own homeland discusses both in writings of Koul and Shahid Ali.

Koul describes about coming to terms with life in America, as an outsider, who cannot return home. The most touching of all are the little ways in which she tried to remember her home, her Kashmir, in a distant land- the scent of the narcissus flowers she planted in her garden after her friend helped smuggle the bulbs to America, the cold rice-hot fish combination that her daughters delight in, the pashmina shawls handed over from her mother that she will eventually give to her daughters. These are the little ways in which one remembers home. These narratives are a haunting testimony to a beautiful and troubled land; their birthplace. Koul says in a lamenting tone about the immigrancy issues and in her efforts to cope up with a foreign land, her own land gets left out; "While I have been busy building a life here the old in Kashmir has crumbled. Letters from home are milestones of an evaporating past. No remedy is in sight and everyone is singing the same incoherent song pattern." (192) Similarly, Peer writes about his life in Delhi when he was working as a journalist, nobody was ready to give their house on rent to him. He spent several nights adjusting with his friends; "Living in Delhi as a Kashmiri Muslim had become even more difficult after the attack on the Indian Parliament despite the warmth and generosity of my friends."(87) Finally, he got a Kashmiri Pandit lady as his house owner and she showed no disparity unlike others who did not gave him room on rent hearing him to be a Kashmiri Muslim. Situations also made it tough for Peer to get a room because it was just after the Indian Parliament was attacked by a group of terrorists on December 13, 2001 which raised a war like situation on Indo—Pak border; and media cautioned everyone that a Kashmiri could also be a militant. Continuous attacks and firings on the border made people residing near them frustrated; "A lot of people wanted a war; 'It will be better than dying slowly every day.'"(83)Such incidents have mostly erased secularism in the valley thus destroying all commitment to a united and multi-religious India. It has also damaged the impression of the government at the centre as it has been unable to do much about the situation in Kashmir. In addition, it has destroyed any remnants identifying the state

with India thus creating a sense of alienation for the people. The writers have poured their heart out by presenting this bittersweet read that leaves us aching with a yearning to go back home, to do something for the place and people, to resist the situations but they cannot, Koul says; "Of course, you can never be a complete immigrant or completely domiciled, and one still carries one's hometown within one, in so many ways."(206)

Kashmir and Kashmiris have to be understood and then some solid working solutions need to be taken to save it from further more destruction and conflicts. This paper attempted to present the shattering of beliefs and ideologies of not a Hindu, not a Muslim but a Kashmiri. My paper based on the writers and their works portrayed the sufferings of a child along with his/her family who is used to war and war like situation to a psychologically disturbed life, identity crisis of every Kashmiri man or woman who leave Kashmir or were forced to leave but Kashmir never left them, a place where either everything is white as in the beautiful snow covers or red as in the bloodshed. This paper attempted to present Kashmir which it was and how it has been moulded and remoulded by not being in safe and good administrative hands. Kashmir and its issues needs to be understood, conceived and interpreted beyond religious lines. It needs just the humanitarian approach for its people beyond religion, caste and class. Kashmir is not just betrayed and hurt by the two countries fighting for it till date, but also by some angry residents turned into militants and from the very beginning by its rulers and administrators. Time and again, this piece of land and its people have been examined both by internal and external forces in face of militants, Army people, administrators, politicians and some self-proclaimed leaders. This reminds that there is a necessity to look into Kashmir not as a special status or militarized state of India, rather, it needs to be given the equal status as other states of India have because it truly deserves that. The narratives used and discussed in this paper are stories of lost innocence, in which every sentence laments a vanishing way of life. They are a haunting testimony to a beautiful, troubled land their birthplace. I also found through the works talked in my paper that Kashmir and Kashmiris deep down urge a normal human life devoid of threats, fear of life and death, surveillance, curfews and violence. Map of India has the state of Kashmir as its head which needs to be held high always; the place and its people have that spirit to rise above the sufferings and atrocities being given a humble support. Countries fighting for it and using it as a part of their politically talked agenda should administer and value it with whatever portion of 'Paradise on Earth' they have without fighting for more. As far as my understanding of Kashmir, I discovered every Kashmiri wants to rise above their saddened state of mind and body and want their state to have usual sunsets and sunrise like others, which reminds me of some lines from Maya Angelou's beautiful and encouraging poem *Still I Rise*:

You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies,
 You may tread me in the very dirt
 But still like dust, I rise.
 Out of the huts of history's shame
 I rise
 Up from a past that's rooted in pain
 I rise
 Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
 I rise
 I rise
 I rise⁵

Notes

1. Mughal Emperor Jahangir's quote taken from google.com. It means, If there is heaven on Earth, it is this, it is this, it is this. These lines are also mentioned in Agha Shahid Ali's poem "The Last Saffron"(15) from his anthology *The Country Without a PostOffice*.
2. Lines from Agha Shahid Ali's anthology *The Country Without a Post Office* are taken from poems "Farewell"(7), "I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight"(10-12), "I Dream I Am the Only Passenger on Flight 423 to Srinagar"(16-17), "Some Vision of the World Cashmere"(21).
3. Lines quoted from Sudha Koul's *Tiger Ladies* in part i of the paper are from page numbers 26 and 77. Lines in part ii of the paper are from page numbers 26, 28, 76, 106 and

132 and lines in part iii of the paper are from 155, 192 and 206.

4. Lines quoted from Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night* in part i of the paper are from page numbers 17, 22, 24, 37-38, 47, 51 and 136. Lines in part ii are from page numbers 28, 60, 61, 64-65 and 95-96 and lines in part iii are from page numbers 79, 83 and 87.
5. These lines are an excerpt from Maya Angelou's poem *Still I Rise* taken from www.familyfriendspoem.com

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