

WHILE I EXIST AS A SPIRIT IN THIS COLD GREY VALLEY, SOMETIMES I GET tired of not being seen and perceived, not being heard, and not being able to leave my footprints on the snow as I pass by mountains, towns, and villages. However, in this valley marred by grief, complaining about these little inconveniences seems a bit absurd and, at times, quite selfish. Selfish, even for someone like me, whose entire sense of self is unresolved and perpetually in doubt. This valley that I have grown to call my home, I don't call it by its name, for it makes me uneasy. Every time I hear its name being said out loud, I fear something bad might happen. The thought of leaving this place and its disquiet crosses my mind often. In the past, I have acted upon this impulse, but every time I left, I found myself making the arduous journey back.

I leave this valley, which is my home, because I get tired of being invisible here. Sometimes, I long to participate in the events that are taking place in the streets, rivers, and markets. However, people pass through me as I reach out for them. I am ridiculed by other spirits for these frivolous desires. They mock my longing for home by saying that spirits do not have homes. I disagree. I say home is only a place, and a place is its people. So, doesn't that make these people my people, and this valley my home?

I speak about these people in the valley as 'my people' like I know them or like they know me. I speak of them as if I like them and as if they like me. In fact, I do not know them, and they do not know me. We are mutually oblivious of each other's existence for the most part. However, something cuts through this relationship of oblivion and ties us to each other. There is a goby aer on our being. It is amusing that a phenomenon as physical as weight and heaviness connects me, who is supposed to have transcended the physical realm, to these people and this place.

At first, I did not understand how a word representing something so physical could describe what I was feeling. So I started paying attention to how humans across the valley were using this word. Once, I was passing through a cluster of villages by a small hill near the south of Jhelum. There, I saw that a crowd had gathered around a young boy who had fainted, just as he had reached his village, after spending a long day in the deep forest. The boy was speaking gibberish and appeared to have a concussion. It was intriguing, for I knew at first sight that it was the work of my distant cousins. The older djinns are known to take offence at humans disturbing the quiet of the deep forest. They get enraged when humans shamelessly relieve themselves under the old chinar trees that they've made their home. To teach them a lesson, and dissuade the rest of the villagers from venturing into the forest, they possess the bodies of people who've invoked their wrath. Having seen that it was just another young boy possessed by the djinns, I lost interest and started moving away from the crowd where the imam was inspecting the boy. However, as I started moving away, the imam suddenly got up, walking quickly in my direction. He stopped right before he could pass through me. It's the closest I've come to being perceived. I swear I thought he was talking to me when he said, 'Ye chu goby aer (It's the heaviness).'

**Heaviness or weight in Kashmiri. In the everyday vernacular, goby aer is also used to refer to the state of being possessed by djinns or other supernatural forces.*

After this incident, I started getting drawn to this word, to every conversation where it was mentioned. One night I was passing by an old street towards the south of the valley, and I saw a grim-looking young man smoking cigarettes, standing outside the house of his lover from long ago. The sound of the tumbaknari, the Kashmiri drum, from the house filled up the street, where he stood for a while. There was nothing he could do and nothing he wanted to do to stop the event, but the loss he experienced throughout that night of anticipation he also called goby aer. Similarly, towards the east of the valley, I was once roaming through an apple orchard enjoying the blossoms when I noticed an older woman in the middle of the orchard. She looked up at the May sky, overcast with dark clouds, and knew they were the clouds of misfortune and hailstones. She looked around her apple trees, knowing very well that in a few hours the blossoms and the promise of a good harvest would be gone. The heavy footsteps she took towards her home, as she waited for the rains to intensify, she called goby aer too.

However, this goby aer prompted by personal grievances is not what connects me to these people. Since I don't have loved ones who I yearn for, or land that I cultivate, or a future to prepare for, I cannot relate to these emotions. There is an overarching feeling of impending loss and terror that goes far beyond the everyday affairs of my people, something that everyone here is always waiting for. Sometimes it is realized sooner than at other times, but each cycle of loss confirms that our fears are not unfounded. The fear grows in hearts, as does the goby aer. I cannot tell exactly what this goby aer does to humans, for they don't seem to hear me, so I cannot ask them anything. I am only telling you what I have overheard in open markets and closed rooms.

Having heard about it from so many people over decades, I have started seeing it as well, even though I don't experience it like humans do. I have started seeing that goby aer has a personhood as abstract as mine. I say this because I have seen how goby aer surrounds and seeps into people and what it does to them. When I look at my people, I see that this strange
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presence has engulfed their lives, the goby aer has attached itself to their skin, sedimented in their bones, and it feeds off the hope in their hearts. It lives in their homes now, sits in their hammams, and shares their rice with them. And when they are watching TV late at night, it occupies the cosiest spot in the room, and my people pretend not to see it.

The old people in the valley seem to have found a dedicated corner in their lives for this goby aer. They put it in the deepest pocket of their baend, which they always wear under their pherans, carrying it around with them wherever they go. The younger ones, however, are more ambitious. 'Why should we carry this burden with us all our lives? Why should we give in like you cowards did?' they ask the old ones, who do not smile, and only smoke their jijeers. Spurred on by their ambitions, some young ones travel to far-off lands, hoping they could leave

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this gobyraer behind. Some go to the tallest mountains, some to distant deserts, and others towards seas because it was rumoured that seawater could melt it.

One time, when I ran away from the valley to travel the world and find a new home, I was surprised at how easily I could spot my people wherever I went. I had thought everybody carried this gobyraer with them until I met people who are not my people. It was then that I realized that it is something that only people of the valley have, and I also found the answer to what differentiated my people from the crowds in cities, riversides, and deserts. Naturally, I followed some of my people when I saw them outside the valley. I found some of them running through iced alleyways. Some were plodding through desert towns, and others were hiding in muddy lanes by the sea. I found a few walking briskly on the wide roads and dingy streets of big cities visiting pirs, faqirs, and shamans seeking foreign remedies for their very indigenous disease. Some of them kept running for years and years, and when they thought enough time had passed, they came back home. However, to their horror, they found this gobyraer waiting on their dastarkhwan to share their razma-dal with them.

Some people who have got tired of running have now realized that the gobyraer always finds a way home. So, they have started building houses with a spare room. They make it big and cosy so that they can scream and wail in it. Men who have only one room and not enough razma-dal to share cannot find a quiet place to sit with their fears. The children are always crying, and the creditors are always knocking on their doors. They deal with the gobyraer by bringing it up all the time and to everyone they can find. In the fields, in the bus, at the shop, on their verandas. They repeat the same stories every day with minor additions and deletions, of how they first encountered this feeling, how they tried to run away from it, and how there is no place like home, so they come back. 'Gari wandihai gari saasah, bari nyerihai ni zanh (There is no place like home)', they keep repeating all day. I often see women peeling vegetables on the verandas of their houses sigh in exasperation and put their hands on both their ears as they run inside. They seem to be sick of hearing the same stories gobyraer⁷⁹⁷

every day. Women have their versions of how they encountered gobyraer and how they live with it. But the men never stop talking, and so the women always leave the room in frustration.

One of the reasons I keep coming back to this valley from faraway places is my belief that the cure of this indigenous disease cannot be found outside the valley. So, I pass through the valley looking for comfort, if not the ultimate answer. There is a small, lonesome house in an apricot orchard in the valley's northern end, where an old woman puts her granddaughter and daughter to sleep every night. In this house, there are no men, so women talk out loud without interruptions. But that's not the only reason I come back here. Every night, before putting them to sleep, the grandmother whispers a six-letter word into their ears as they fall asleep. A six-letter charm that gets you in trouble if you say it out loud in the valley, but the only known

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charm that puts the gobyaer to rest, at least for some time. The old woman tells them stories of the day when the charm will manifest itself, cutting through the grey cloudy sky, falling softly on the valley like morning sunlight on all its living and non-living things. It will slowly melt away what occupies the heart and weighs it down. It is said that after that day the spare rooms in the houses will be filled with the aroma of sun-dried tomatoes, the young ones will not need to run off to deserts, mountains, seas, and cities, and men will finally let the women narrate their own stories.

After the lights in the entire valley are dimmed, the last batch of soldiers and rebels have gone off to sleep, and the placards and flags have been locked in for the night, I come back to hear the same story night after night. I feel comforted watching the little girl fall asleep to this reassurance. Last night, as she fell asleep, her little fist unclenched at some point to reveal the charm she had just learned to write: azaadi.

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