Peer-Reviewed Article

OJED
OPEN JOURNALS IN EDUCATION

Volume 9, Issue 5 (2025), pp. 139-159
Special Issue on Human Trafficking in Global South
ISSN: 2574-3465 Print/ ISSN: 2574-3481 Online
http://ojed.org/jump

Militarization and Youth Exploitation: Forced Crime and Trafficking in Malik Sajad's Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir

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ABSTRACT

Grounded in Johan Galtung's Theory of Structural Violence, this paper focuses on systemic oppression and militarized control in politically volatile regions, with particular emphasis on Kashmir. Through a close reading of Malik Sajad's graphic novel Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir, it examines how societal-structures contribute to trafficking, especially exploitation of youth. The graphic novel, portraying the Kashmiri people as endangered hanguls, provides an intensely personal narrative that reflects the broader socio-political challenges faced by the region. By examining the recruitment of vulnerable young boys into insurgent groups and their coercion into criminal activities, this study highlights how conditions of poverty, lack of education, and constant surveillance create an environment that mirrors the exploitative dynamics of human trafficking. The research situates these experiences within the framework of structural violence, drawing attention to the manipulation and psychological toll inflicted on individuals forced into insurgent activities. It emphasizes the need for community-based interventions, including education and rehabilitation programs, as preventive measures against trafficking.

Keywords: Conflict Zones, Forced Crime, Human Trafficking, Militarization, Structural Violence, Youth Exploitation.

INTRODUCTION

Permanently deformed by a long-standing conflict, Kashmir now stands encumbered by militarization, political turmoil, and deep social fractures, which have a considerably disproportionate effect on its young population. The melancholic beauty once revered by generations, Kashmir is now evocative of occupation, insurgency, and persistent unrest. Scholars such as Sumantra Bose have pointed out that the region has been subjected to state-led violence and counter-insurgency operations for decades, systematically uprooting the socio-economic fabric of Kashmiri society (Bose, 2005). Youth have, however, become entrapped in the paradox of being watched, unemployed, ideologically manipulated, and coerced into criminality - conditions they share with trafficking-like exploitation. While such coercion is often framed in narrow criminological or political terms, it demands a deeper exploration of how power, deprivation, and crime interrelate.

Graphic narratives have emerged as a powerful medium to document and resist such hidden forms of structural harm. The evolution of the graphic novel has been marked by its transition from popular entertainment to a legitimate vehicle for social critique and historical testimony. Will Eisner's A Contract with God (1978) helped coin the term "graphic novel," demonstrating the form's capacity for personal narrative. Art Spiegelman's Maus (1986) further cemented the genre's relevance by chronicling Holocaust trauma through sequential art, while Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis (2000) positioned graphic memoir as a mode of engaging with political oppression. In South Asia, works such as Vishwajyoti Ghosh's Delhi Calm and Sarnath Banerjee's Corridor have illustrated how visual storytelling can contest official historiographies. In this continuum, Malik Sajad's Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir (2015) situates itself as both a personal testimony and a counter-hegemonic archive of life under occupation.

Sajad's semi-autobiographical graphic narrative uses the metaphor of the hangul deer, a rare and endangered species native to the Kashmir Valley, to represent the vulnerability and gradual erasure of the Kashmiri people. Much like the hangul, whose population has dwindled due to habitat loss and fragmentation (Ahmad et al., 2023), Kashmiris in the novel are portrayed as a community under constant threat—fragile, isolated, and on the brink of extinction. This symbolic alignment emphasizes the brutality of invisibilization they endure under militarized occupation. Through the life of the protagonist, Munnu, the narrative unpacks the psychological and social consequences of this militarization, particularly the forced induction of boys into cycles of violence and the normalization of surveillance and coercion as policy. This paper elaborates on how the visual and narrative techniques of

the graphic novel depict youth traumatization within a model of systematic violence. Furthermore, it uses Johan Galtung's theory of structural violence (1969) to argue that the coercive conditions under which young Kashmiris are pushed toward criminality under duress resemble broader definitions of human trafficking as it manifests across the Global South.

To contextualize this analysis theoretically, it is essential to consider multiple criminological perspectives. George Vold's Group Conflict Theory argues that crime arises from inter-group competition over power and resources, highlighting how dominant and subordinate groups clash over norms and enforcement (Vold, Bernard, & Snipes, 2002). Richard Quinney's conflict criminology likewise emphasizes that definitions of crime are socially constructed by those in power, framing criminality as a product of structural inequality and ideological control Quinney, 1970). While these frameworks foreground the role of power in defining deviance, this study privileges Johan Galtung's Theory of Structural Violence (1969), as it more directly captures the silent, normalized deprivation that constrains life chances without necessarily requiring direct confrontation. Galtung's model offers a vocabulary for understanding how youth in Kashmir are not simply caught between contending groups but are systematically denied the conditions necessary for human flourishing.

In his seminal work, Galtung states that violence occurs whenever human beings are influenced in a way that their actual somatic and mental realizations are less than their potential realizations (Galtung, 1969). This form of violence is not direct; rather, it is abstracted and enshrined within the very structures that deprive individuals of dignity, agency, and development. When applied to Munnu, structural violence operates through intersecting social inequalities: restricted access to education, constant militarization and surveillance, ideological indoctrination, and economic deprivation. These forces collectively render youth more vulnerable to cycles of insurgency and criminality, not as masters of violence but as its victims.

The significance of analyzing Munnu through the lens of structural violence becomes especially urgent when situated within the wider discourse on human trafficking in the Global South. Human trafficking does not limit itself to narrow parameters such as sexual exploitation or forced labor. As Bales and Lize (2005) explain, it encompasses a range of exploitative practices, including forced criminal activity, where persons are recruited, transported, or coerced through threat, deception, or abuse of power. In conflict-ridden contexts such as Kashmir, the same trafficking dynamic emerges through the coercion of young boys into insurgent networks or criminal activities, realities often obscured by political narratives. Sajad's

graphic novel offers a rare ethnographic testimony to these otherwise hidden forms of exploitation, portraying how Munnu and his peers are subtly lured into such environments.

Munnu highlights the singular power of graphic narrative to represent everyday life under occupation. Chandra (2018) observes that, in comparison to classical prose, visual storytelling enables trauma, resistance, and memory to be layered and implied in ways that conventional text cannot. Graphic novels offer a more visceral portrayal of structural violence, where barbed wire, military checkpoints, and funerals become repetitive motifs that shape the characters' emotional landscape. Beyond its artistic expression, Munnu also functions as a counter-hegemonic narrative that interrogates how state discourses of national security and insurgency are constructed and perpetuated.

This research paper, methodologically, adopts a qualitative visual-textual analysis that draws upon both narrative structure and panel composition to examine how Munnu depicts coercion, surveillance, and psychological manipulation. It further engages with insights from critical literature on the novel, including Andrew Hock Soon Ng's (2018) exploration of nationalism and affect and Baishya's (2018) work on animacy hierarchies. These scholars illuminate how Sajad's use of metaphor and visual symbol disrupts normative frameworks of representation, offering instead a deeply situated account of Kashmiri subjectivity under siege.

While previous studies have engaged Munnu in terms of identity, resistance, and trauma, little scholarly attention has been paid to its relevance for understanding trafficking-like exploitation through forced crime. This paper extends the theoretical conversation on trafficking by inquiring into how structural violence operates as both context and mechanism of exploitation. Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir thus offers a haunting but necessary insight into the lives of youth forged not merely through conflict but through normative structures of violence that stifle human potential. As Galtung aptly states, the absence of personal violence does not mean peace if deprivation is produced by the social order (Galtung, 1969). The story of Munnu is, in this sense, a story of absence—not merely of peace, but of opportunity, choice, and freedom. It is within these absences that trafficking-like exploitation takes root, making Sajad's narrative an essential text for understanding the intersections of conflict, youth, and structural harm in the Global South.

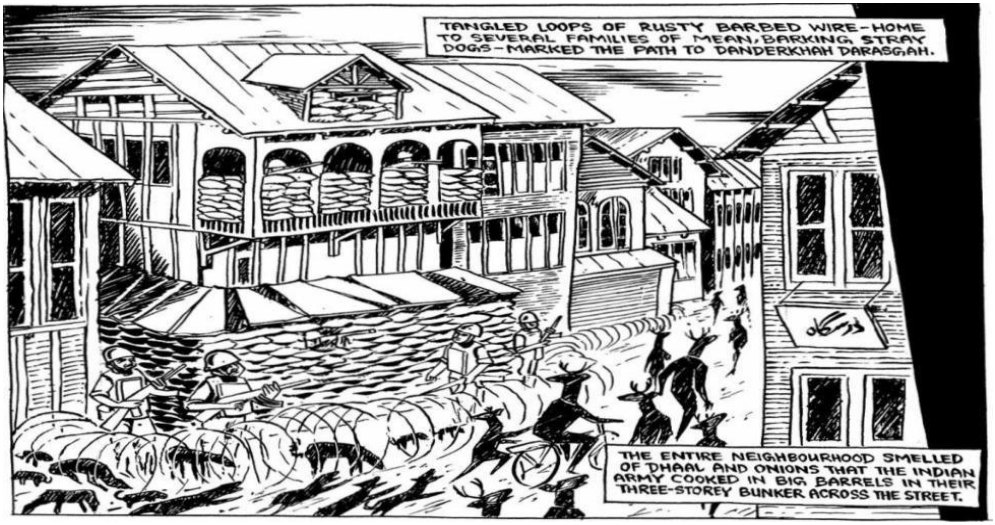
Kashmir, Structural Violence, and the Roots of Forced Crime

The Kashmir conflict, rooted in decades of geopolitical contestation and ethno-political marginalization, has precipitated not only direct violence but also the pervasive and insidious consequences of structural violence. Structural violence was defined by Joan Galtung in 1969 as harm that exists within social structures owing to an unequal distribution of power and unequal life chances. He states, "violence is whenever human beings are being influenced in such a way that their actual somatic and mental realizations are brought below their potential realizations" (Galtung, 199). In the context of Kashmir, this violence is woven into the daily lives of its youth, many of whom grow up amid curfews, militarized schooling, surveillance, displacement, and psychological trauma. These embedded inequalities normalize indirect harm and erode the foundational structures necessary for the healthy development of young individuals. It is in such an environment that the roots of forced crime and trafficking-like exploitation take hold.

Several studies underscore the entrenched structural inequalities that define the everyday experiences of Kashmiri youth. In his research regarding the consequences of armed conflict on children's behaviour in Kashmir, Hilal Ahmad Wanie maintains that constant exposure to violence, arbitrary detentions, and the continuous presence of armed forces have impeded the socio-economic development of Kashmiri youth (Wanie, 2018). Youth are often compelled to leave formal education due to insecurity, repeated school closures, or financial hardship, leading to severely curtailed opportunities for employment and civic engagement. This creates a vacuum easily exploited by insurgent networks, where young individuals are drawn into forced crime under the guise of resistance, survival, or social belonging.

The graphic novel Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir provides a poignant, first-hand perspective on how these structural forces operate. Munnu's schooling is frequently disrupted, and his family lives under a persistent cloud of fear and uncertainty. The presence of gun-toting soldiers, enforced curfews, and the constant threat of violence becomes a regular feature of life (Figure 1). The novel captures these conditions visually and narratively, such as in scenes where soldiers ransack homes or when Munnu's brothers and father are forcefully taken by the military during a crackdown, revealing the erosion of personal and collective security. These disruptions represent more than personal tragedy; they reflect the institutionalization of deprivation, which is a core element of structural violence.

Figure 1
Munnu, 2015



Further exacerbating this condition is the psychological burden borne by young adults exposed to ongoing armed conflict. The study conducted by Dar and Deb (2020) on the psychological distress among conflict-affected youth in Kashmir states that Kashmiri youths have developed PTSD, anxiety, and depressive disorder due to various ongoing stressors, including the death of family members, arrests, and exposure to torture. Stigmatization of trauma and the absence of mental health support only deepen their vulnerability. In such a context, coercion into insurgency or criminal behaviour does not necessarily stem from ideological conviction but from fractured psychological states and a lack of alternatives. The psychological environment itself becomes a site of exploitation, enabling patterns that parallel trafficking mechanisms, including recruitment through manipulation, sustained control through fear or indebtedness, and restriction of personal agency.

These findings resonate with the broader discourse on trafficking in the Global South, where systemic inequalities form the backdrop for various forms of exploitation. As the journal's special issue outlines, human trafficking must be understood not merely through the lens of physical movement or commodification but also through 'conditions of coercion and control imposed upon vulnerable populations in structurally violent systems'. In Kashmir, coercion into insurgency or crime, especially when compounded by generational trauma, economic desperation, and lack of state protection,

can be located within the trafficking discourse, especially the category of 'forced criminality'.

The narrative of Munnu also aligns with this expanded understanding of trafficking. The protagonist's family and community are consistently caught in a web of systemic neglect and coercive power structures. In one important scene, a teacher urges Munnu to abandon his aspirations in favor of political obedience, in turn asserting that survival in Kashmir requires knowing how to disappear (Munnu, 2015). The instruction, though metaphorical, points to how institutional spaces such as schools become sites of internalized control rather than liberation. This mirror, according to Galtung, "the cultural legitimization of structural violence," whereby oppressive conditions are not merely accepted but even ideologically justified (Galtung, 1969).

The study "Conflict and Narratives of Hope" by Ganie (2022) deepens this argument by analyzing youth discourses that oscillate between hopelessness and resistance. Drawing from interviews with Kashmiri adolescents, the author concludes that despite desires for peace and autonomy, young people internalize a deep sense of uncertainty which limits their ability to envision alternate futures. When the structures that facilitate hope, like education, stability, employment, and justice, are continually eroded, young people's capacity to resist recruitment into violence diminishes. In Munnu, this loss of vision is strikingly represented in the protagonist's gradual disillusionment, where even drawing the very act of self-expression becomes a risky political act.

Militarization, therefore, functions not only as a visible apparatus of surveillance and control but also as a psychological and social condition that breeds coercion. As Baishya observes, the pervasive militarized aesthetic of Munnu, like barbed wire, watchtowers, and checkpoints, serves as more than backdrop; it becomes "an architecture of entrapment" (Baishya, 2018). Within this architecture, young lives are shaped by conditions where the line between survival and subjugation becomes increasingly blurred. Forced crime, in this light, emerges not from deviance but from the absence of meaningful choice, echoing Galtung's assertion that "violence exists when people are unable to realize their potential because structural arrangements prevent them from doing so" (Galtung, 1969).

Thus, the experience of Kashmiri youth, as depicted in Munnu and corroborated by empirical studies, exemplifies how structural violence not only reproduces deprivation but also facilitates coercion into criminalized or insurgent roles. This coerced participation, shaped by context rather than volition, bears the hallmark of trafficking-like exploitation. It is here that

graphic narrative, theory, and lived experience converge to expose the layered injustices of a conflict that traffics not only in bodies but also in futures.

Visualizing Structural Violence in Munnu

Malik Sajad's Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir is a profoundly visual and autobiographical narrative that documents the lived experience of growing up in a militarized zone. As a graphic novel, it provides a compelling counter-hegemonic perspective on state violence, surveillance, and ideological coercion. This section examines how Munnu translates the invisible mechanisms of structural violence into a visual idiom, portraying the coerced, often involuntary entanglement of Kashmiri youth in forced crime and insurgency. By blending textual and visual semiotics, Sajad captures the embedded ness of structural violence in everyday life, its subtle but devastating presence in the education system, domestic spaces, and psychological landscapes.

Johan Galtung's (1969) theory of structural violence is instrumental in decoding this portrayal. Structural violence, as posited by Galtung, is embedded in social structures that systematically disadvantage specific populations. It is invisible and normalized, unlike direct violence, yet equally devastating in its effects. The absence of necessities such as education, safety, autonomy, and economic opportunity constitutes this form of violence. InMunnu, these deprivations are encoded in the imagery of bombed classrooms, military checkpoints, and curfews, visualized as barriers to normal childhood.

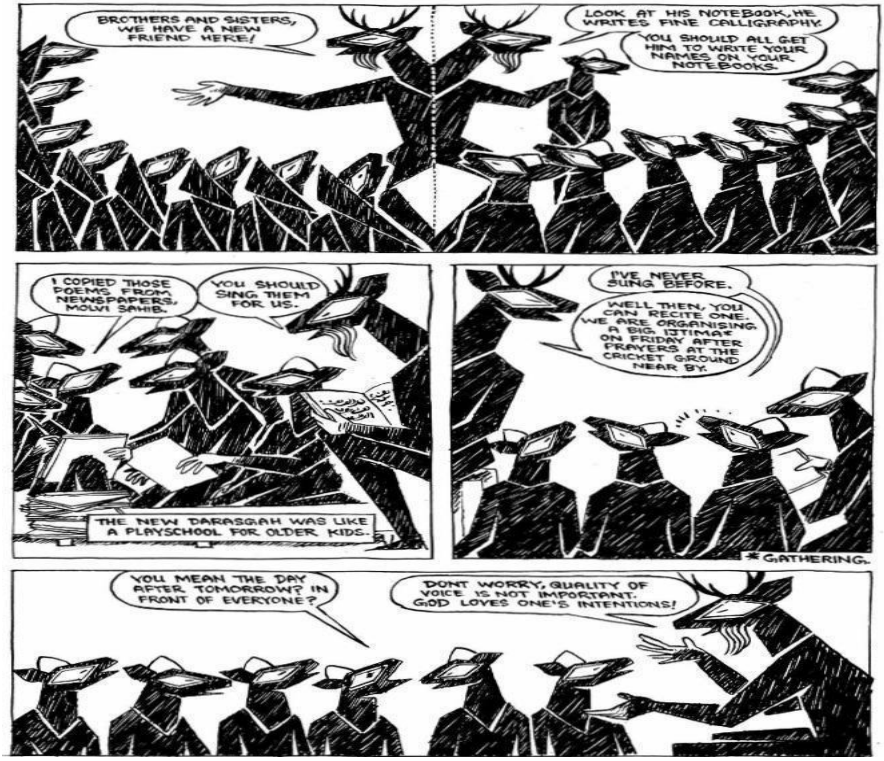
One of the most salient metaphors in Munnu is the depiction of Kashmiris as endangered hanguls (Figure 2). This symbolic representation of the self as an animal facing extinction powerfully conveys the existential vulnerability of the Kashmiri identity. As Sarkar notes that Sajad's use of multispecies storytelling and "speculative fabulation" resists hegemonic nationalist narratives by representing Kashmiri history as an embodied, sensorial reality rather than a sanitized political abstraction (Sarkar, 2018). The hangul metaphor disrupts dominant representations of the Kashmiri as either a terrorist or a passive victim, and instead, locates the Kashmiri child as a being under siege culturally, politically, and psychologically.

Sajad's invocation of the endangered hangul also invites a critique of entrenched anthropocentric hierarchies. By equating Kashmiri identity with a non-human species on the brink of extinction, the narrative destabilizes human exceptionalism. It challenges the centrality of the human subject as the exclusive locus of political agency and moral worth. This metaphor exposes how political erasure operates not only through militarized domination but

also through representational frameworks that reduce certain populations to subhuman status. As Baishya argues that Sajad constructs a space "where the Kashmiri subject is rendered animate but not fully human," thus troubling the boundaries between species, personhood, and precarity (Baishya, 2018). The graphic novel thereby enacts a posthuman critique of anthropocentric violence, where denying humanity becomes a precondition for structural abandonment.

Figure 2

Munnu, 2015



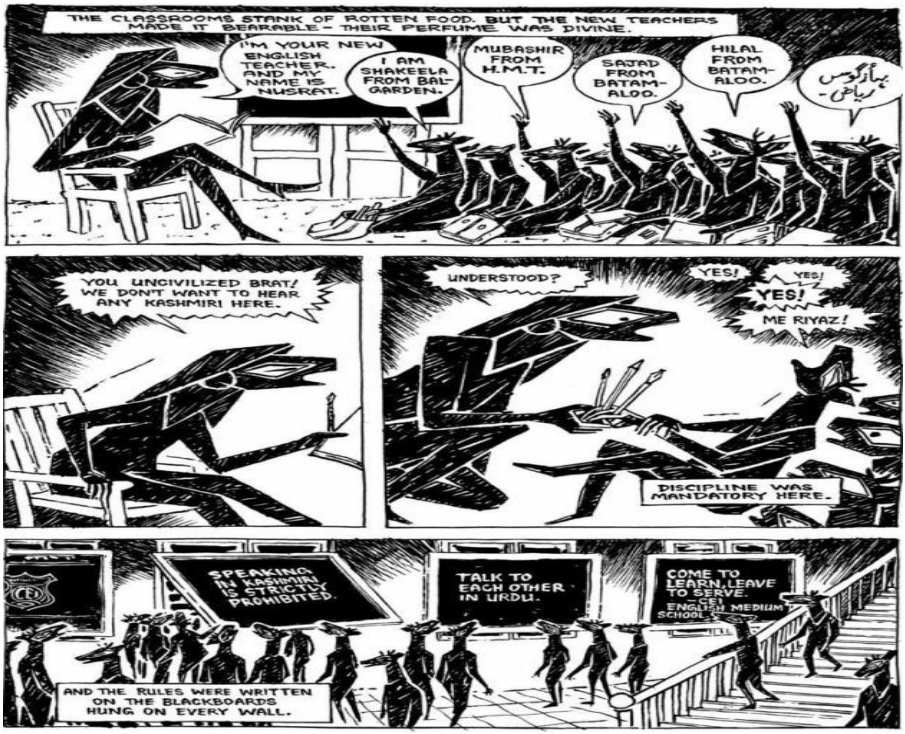
Note. Depiction of Kashmiris as endangered hanguls

The education system, one of the key sites of socialization, has become a mechanism of state control in Munnu. The depiction of militarized schooling, where teachers are forced to parrot state propaganda and students internalize fear, serves as an entry point for structural indoctrination (Figure 3). As Ng suggests that the novel not only represents tangible violence but also "encodes it in its textuality" through symbolic disruptions and dissonance, reflecting the psychological toll of living under systemic coercion

(Ng, 2018). Sajad's classroom panels depict teachers retreating from critical engagement, while students learn to fear the "other" through state-sanctioned curricula. This distortion of education aligns with Galtung's (1969) observation that structural violence often operates through ostensibly neutral institutions but serves the status quo of domination.

Figure 3

Munnu, 2015



Note. Munnu's School

A particularly haunting instance of visual storytelling is the chapter titled "A Shoe and a Nylon Bag," in which a soldier molests young Munnu (Figure 4). The four-panel sequence uses stark black backgrounds and close-up angles to isolate the moment of violation. The spiralling background in the final panel visually enacts the protagonist's descent into psychological trauma. As Sagar and Nair explain, the "gyration effect created by a prominent black graphic weight" hypnotically draws the reader into Munnu's trauma, fusing the fictional space with the reader's consciousness (Sagar and Nair, 2021, p. 1279). This scene exemplifies how graphic novels can represent

violence not just through narrative content but through the very form and structure of the medium. Such visual choices do more than illustrate suffering. They critique the normalized presence of military personnel in everyday spaces, such as streets, schools, and homes. The novel shows how children are desensitized to the presence of soldiers and the arbitrary use of force. This normalization fosters a cycle of vulnerability that coerces youth into insurgent activity not through ideological conviction, but through the logic of survival.

Figure 4

Munnu, 2015

Note. A soldier molesting young Muunu

This notion of coerced participation is further reinforced in a scene where young boys mimic military behaviour during play, chanting slogans and brandishing imaginary guns. It is here that the novel critiques the ideological conditioning of children under occupation, reflecting Galtung's view that structural violence not only limits access to resources but also distorts cultural and emotional development. Earle emphasizes that in narratives of atrocity, trauma becomes both personal and collective, articulated through the tension between what is seen and what is implied

(Earle, 2019). Sajad's panels often feature close-ups of faces, particularly eyes, to capture the silent witnessing of violence, a narrative strategy that demands emotional and ethical engagement from the reader.

Moreover, the autobiographical undertone of Munnu imbues the graphic novel with documentary force. Sajad's first-hand account, filtered through the fictionalized voice of Munnu, collapses the distance between author and subject. As Daiya (2018) observes, graphic novels such as Munnu provide a unique visual space where the emotional and physical toll of structural violence can be conveyed through embodied representation. Through this embodied narrative, Munnu transcends the limits of conventional reportage or academic discourse, offering a visceral account of how state violence penetrates the most intimate domains of life.

The graphic novel also performs a visual resistance by re-mapping spaces of control. As Sarkar notes in her research paper "The Art of Postcolonial Resistance and Multispecies Storytelling in Malik Sajad's Graphic Novel Munnu: A Boy From Kashmir," Sajad's cartographic interventions, like his detailed illustrations of Srinagar's checkpoints, alleyways, and bunkers, transform the landscape into a character that participates in the narrative (Figure 1). This spatial storytelling aligns with Robert T. Tally Jr.'s concept of "literary cartography," where narrative becomes a symbolic act of reclaiming space from hegemonic narratives (Sarkar, 2018). In this way, Munnu visualizes not only trauma but also resistance. A resistance that is against erasure, against imposed identities, and against the violence of silence.

Thus, Munnu renders visible the intricate mechanisms of structural violence that pervade life in Kashmir. By portraying militarized childhoods, educational disenfranchisement, and coerced insurgency through a complex interplay of text and image, Sajad's graphic novel offers an urgent commentary on trafficking-like exploitation in conflict zones. Through the visual language of trauma, metaphor, and memory, Munnu asserts itself as a powerful act of counter-hegemonic storytelling, one that insists on the visibility of those rendered invisible by dominant political and media narratives.

Trafficking Through the Lens of Forced Crime

The recruitment and participation of Kashmiri youth in insurgent activities, as depicted in Malik Sajad's Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir, complicate the binary of choice versus coercion. While dominant state narratives often frame the youth as radicalized militants or agents of disorder, the graphic novel exposes a more troubling reality, one in which forced crime

becomes a consequence of structural deprivation, psychological manipulation, and militarized surveillance. This section argues that such coerced involvement reflects a form of trafficking, not through the conventional paradigms of sex or labor, but through state- and structure-induced criminality.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2018) has increasingly recognized that trafficking includes not only sexual and labor exploitation, but also "the recruitment, harboring or use of a person for the purpose of forced criminal activity" (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018). Such definitions shift the understanding of trafficking from a solely transnational or economic framework to one that foregrounds coercion, exploitation, and the erosion of agency. Within this conceptual shift, Munnu offers critical insights into how systemic violence entraps youth in militarized zones like Kashmir into insurgent roles that bear the hallmarks of trafficking-like exploitation.

In the graphic novel, Munnu's world is saturated with fear, surveillance, and ideological pressure. Although his brother Bilal is not portrayed as a militant, the social fabric surrounding him reflects the psychological toll exacted on Kashmiri youth. The graphic novel frequently depicts routine crackdowns imposed by military forces. These were military raids in which male members of each household were forcefully taken away for verification. Since Munnu's house was hidden among trees, it was initially bypassed. However, a neighbor's betrayal led to their home being reported to the military. As a result, Munnu's father and brothers were violently dragged out and taken for interrogation (Figure 5). These events expose the layered nature of structural violence where fear, mistrust, and coercion infiltrate both public and private life, disrupting familial security and rendering male bodies permanently suspect.

As Galtung argues, structural violence emerges from the systemic denial of individuals' potential due to unequal distributions of power, resources, and opportunities (Galtung, 1969). This form of violence is often invisible, routinized, and embedded in the very institutions that claim to protect the public. In Munnu, the dual presence of state and non-state actors fosters an environment in which youth cannot exercise full agency. The Indian military maintains checkpoints and imposes curfews, while insurgent narratives circulate through posters, graffiti, and community whispers, feeding into a volatile ideological climate. Between these extremes, youth are compelled to navigate a terrain where neutrality is often construed as betrayal, and resistance becomes both a psychological refuge and a dangerous choice.

Figure 5
Munnu, 2015

Education, often imagined as a liberatory tool, is depicted in Munnu as fragmented and manipulated. Before Munnu's school is closed for the first time in the book, there is a sequence in which Munnu and his classmates are instructed to prepare posters and slogans, unaware that these materials will be used in a protest against the military. Since their principal is detained by the armed forces, teachers of the school coerce the school students into organizing this demonstration. The next day, the students, still uninformed, are marched to Lal Chowk to participate in what they believe is a school activity. When the protest turns chaotic and the military retaliates with tear gas, the students are caught in a violent stampede (Figure 6). This sequence powerfully illustrates how even educational institutions are not insulated from ideological conflict but are instrumentalized by both state

and insurgent forces, contributing to the entrapment of youth in high-risk political expression without informed consent.

Figure 6

Munnu, 2015

Note. Unaware school students are being taken to Lal Chowk to protest

Figure 7
Munnu, 2015

Note. Munnu's family is being subjected to repeated military intrusion

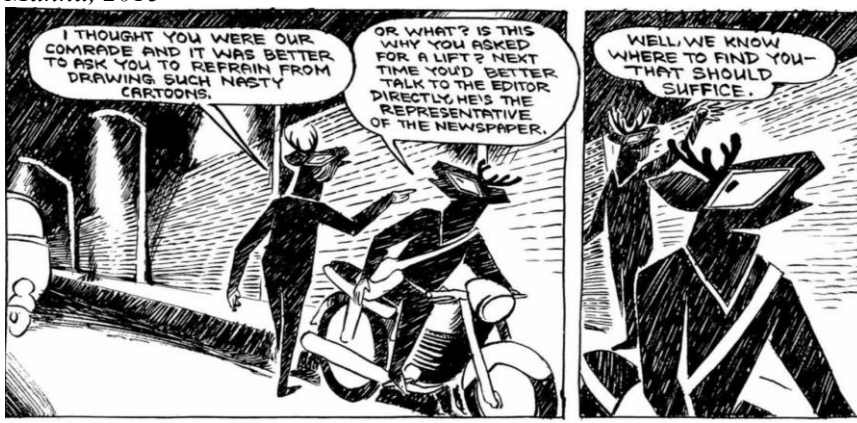
Psychological manipulation plays a pivotal role in this process. Throughout Munnu, young boys are surrounded by images of martyrdom and nationalist slogans. Public spaces, including school walls and alleyways, display posters of slain militants, many of them portrayed as heroic figures. These visual cues embed a culture of resistance that is not always critically processed but rather internalized under emotional and political duress. The domestic sphere is also not exempt from this atmosphere of coercion. Munnu's family is subjected to repeated military intrusion, homes are searched without warrants, personal belongings are destroyed, and silence is demanded in the face of injustice (Figure 7). These acts of intimidation not only generate fear but also rupture the emotional stability of the household. Structural violence here is both physical and psychological, producing trauma that narrows the space for critical reflection or resistance. As Sagar and Nair explain, Munnu "encodes atrocity within everyday routines," showing how the persistent presence of militarized power distorts the very rhythms of ordinary life (Sagar and Nair, 2021, 1279).

This erosion of agency mirrors trafficking dynamics where individuals are not forcibly abducted but are instead trapped by structures that constrain meaningful choice. Youth in Munnu are not shown as fanatical or ideologically extreme, rather, they are depicted as deeply conflicted, disoriented, and wounded. Their entrapment arises not from criminal

intention but from systemic failure of institutions, leadership, and protection. The trafficking-like quality of their experience lies in the gradual dissolution of autonomy under sustained coercion.

Figure 8

Munnu, 2015



Note. Munnu is being warned to be careful about what he draws

Crucially, Sajad offers no tidy resolution to this entrapment. The novel concludes not with liberation but with silence, loss, and the haunting acknowledgment of continued surveillance. In one of the panels, Munnu is warned to be careful about what he draws, a chilling reminder that even artistic expression is monitored, policed, and politicized (Figure 8). This self-referential moment encapsulates the paradox of representing trauma in a space where narrative itself becomes dangerous. It is a reminder that structural violence extends not only to bodies but to speech, memory, and imagination. By framing youth insurgency as structurally coerced rather than ideologically motivated, Munnu challenges dominant discourses that criminalize Kashmiri youth while erasing the conditions of their exploitation. The graphic novel demands that readers view these individuals not as agents of chaos but as trafficked lives shaped by conflict, abandoned by systems, and caught in cycles of violence not of their making. This reframing is essential for a nuanced understanding of human trafficking in the Global South, where coercion often hides behind national security rhetoric and where systemic inequalities manufacture consent through fear and deprivation.

CONCLUSION

Malik Sajad's Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir resists dominant narratives of security and insurgency by presenting a ground-level, deeply personal account of life under militarized occupation. Its value lies not only

in documenting the structural violence endured by Kashmiri youth but also in reframing their experiences through a humanizing, counter-hegemonic lens. The mainstream portrayal of Kashmiri youth in state and media discourses often oscillates between that of militant and victim, erasing the systemic forces that shape their realities. In contrast, Munnu reclaims the agency of subaltern voices, offering "a textured testimony of trauma, resistance, and coming-of-age in conflict" (Ng, 2018).

The visual grammar of the novel plays a pivotal role in achieving this counter-narrative. The use of the hangul metaphor, the interweaving of real and imagined spatial geographies, and the fluid navigation between memory and immediacy work together to unsettle hegemonic frames. Sajad visualizes the banality of military occupation—checkpoints, school closures, household raids—through a child's eyes, exposing the normalized conditions that produce trafficking-like coercion. As Daiya explains, graphic narratives can work through embodied storytelling to articulate otherwise obscured forms of social injury (Daiya, 2018). Munnu, in this light, is not just a record of injustice but a mode of resistance and remembrance.

Given the critical insights provided by the novel, it becomes imperative to translate these understandings into grounded, community-based solutions that address the vulnerabilities of youth in militarized regions like Kashmir. Education, when meaningfully accessible, remains the most transformative intervention. However, this must extend beyond access to include curriculum reform and the demilitarization of educational spaces. Schools should not operate under the shadow of surveillance or ideological control. In Munnu, the classroom is depicted as an environment of fear and political neutrality. Students are urged to remain silent on controversial topics. Reversing this requires fostering critical pedagogy that encourages dialogue, historical complexity, and emotional literacy.

Psychosocial support is equally essential. Studies such as Dar and Deb have shown that prolonged exposure to armed conflict leads to "increased prevalence of PTSD, anxiety, and depression among Kashmiri youth" (Dar and Deb, 2020). Community-based trauma counselling that is delivered by trained local practitioners can provide safe spaces for healing. Programs must be embedded within cultural contexts, avoiding the top-down imposition of external frameworks. Peer support groups, school-based wellness programs, and arts therapy initiatives can be particularly effective in creating resilience among affected populations.

Demilitarizing youth spaces is also crucial. Public parks, sports fields, schools, and cultural centres must be protected from becoming surveillance zones or recruitment hotspots. In Munnu, even domestic spaces such as homes

and neighborhoods are shown to lose their sanctity, becoming vulnerable to ideological and physical incursions by both state and non-state actors. The subject of Munnu's family and every other family in his neighbourhood to arbitrary violence during the crackdowns illustrates how proximity to conflict makes every male member a potential suspect. Structural violence not only destroys infrastructure, but it also erodes the emotional and symbolic safety of communal life. Thus, any long-term intervention must focus on restoring these environments as zones of safety, belonging, and growth.

The power of storytelling itself must not be underestimated. Graphic narratives like Munnu serve as bridges between lived experience and public discourse. As Sarkar argues that the graphic novel's layering of visual memory, emotional resonance, and socio-political critique "challenges both colonial and postcolonial regimes of invisibility" (Sarkar, 2018). Integrating such narratives into school curricula, public exhibitions, and community discussions can foster empathy and cross-generational understanding. These stories not only document trauma but also carve out alternative futures that are grounded in recognition, accountability, and hope.

Furthermore, Sajad's use of the endangered hangul metaphor invites critical reflection on the anthropocentric frameworks that underlie dominant discourses of identity, conflict, and victimhood. By decentering the human and aligning the Kashmiri subject with a non-human species on the brink of extinction, the graphic novel critiques both political dehumanization and representational erasure. It underscores how populations are often denied political recognition by being symbolically positioned outside normative definitions of humanity. This posthuman gesture foregrounds the need to rethink justice and vulnerability beyond rigid species hierarchies, thereby expanding the ethical terrain upon which trafficking, structural violence, and resistance must be understood.

The relevance of structural violence theory becomes especially potent in shaping advocacy and policy around trafficking in the Global South. By highlighting how systemic deprivation of education, security, and opportunity functions as a mechanism of exploitation, Galtung's framework expands our understanding of trafficking beyond its conventional binaries. It reveals how forced crime, particularly in conflict zones, is not a deviation from the norm but a symptom of normalized inequality. As Galtung asserts, "structural violence is silent, it does not show, it is essentially static, it is the tranquil waters" (Galtung, 1969). It is precisely this invisibility that makes it so insidious and persistent.

Munnu offers a powerful lens through which to interrogate these tranquil waters. It compels readers to see youth trafficking not simply as a

matter of crime, but as a failure of justice. It reinforces that resistance, whether through storytelling, education, or community engagement, is both necessary and possible. The novel's closing pages, marked by silence and fragmentation, do not offer closure. Instead, they leave space for critical engagement for the reader to recognize the continuity of violence and the urgency of intervention.

Hence, this paper demonstrates that Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir not only narrates the personal costs of growing up in a conflict zone but also critiques the structural conditions that push youth into coerced insurgency. Through the lens of Johan Galtung's theory of structural violence, the paper has shown how education disruption, psychological trauma, and militarized public life intersect to create conditions akin to human trafficking. By situating the narrative within broader trafficking discourse in the Global South, the research emphasizes the need to recognize forced crime as an outcome of systemic exploitation. Community-based responses that are rooted in education reform, psychosocial support, demilitarization, and cultural storytelling offer a path forward. In centering the voices of the marginalized, Munnu not only bears witness to violence but transforms it into a call for justice.

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Manuscript submitted: ***March 5, 2025***
Manuscript revised: ***May 4, 2025***
Accepted for publication: ***November 5, 2025***