

The Loom and the Panopticon:

Art, Power, and Subjectivity in Shabir Ahmad Mir's *The Last Knot*

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Abstract: Shabir Ahmad Mir's novel *The Last Knot* (2025) represents a significant contribution to Kashmiri Anglophone literature, weaving together the brutal historical realities of nineteenth-century Dogra rule with a powerful existential meditation on human freedom, creativity, and despair. This paper offers a comprehensive critical analysis of the novel, examining its synthesis of magical realism and political allegory, its engagement with philosophical traditions from Pascal to Foucault, and its distinctive contribution to the literary representation of Kashmir. Through an exploration of the novel's central metaphors (the loom, the knot, the Panopticon of Hari Parbat fort), the paper argues that Mir constructs a narrative in which political oppression and metaphysical anguish become inseparable, each amplifying the other. The protagonist's quest to weave a magical, flying carpet emerges as a complex symbol of artistic creation under constraint, while the novel's circular structure and mythical underpinnings suggest that human longing is itself an eternal, Sisyphean condition. In dialogue with theorists of power, existentialism, and post-coloniality, this analysis positions *The Last Knot* within both Kashmiri literary tradition and global conversations about art, resistance, and the meaning of existence in the face of overwhelming forces.

Keywords: The Last Knot,, Kashmiri literature, magical realism, existentialism, Dogra rule, postcolonial fiction, Panopticon

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Introduction

Shabir Ahmad Mir's *The Last Knot* unfolds as a poetic rendering of despair - a narrative steeped in a haunting, often disquieting interior monologue that traces a bleak pilgrimage through indecision and darkness, both within and without, illuminated by flashes of startling poetic brilliance. As true to his debut novel *The Plague Upon Us* (2020) also, Mir demonstrates an incorrigible, almost inevitable affinity for image, metaphor, and simile. In this novel, human pain and suffering are rendered through decay, and the author selects perfect, arresting metaphors to trace that dissolution alongside the ensnared yearnings of the soul. Indeed, the novel's very architecture feels poetically innate; were one to rearrange its sentences, passages, and chapters, they would cohere effortlessly into a sublime poetic composition, one embodying the very qualities Longinus might have praised as hallmarks of the sublime. In Shabir Ahmad Mir, contemporary Kashmiri literature has discovered a promising storyteller, a genuine literary voice who merits not only celebration and encouragement but also deep, attentive reading.

Published by Pan Macmillan India in 2025, *The Last Knot* arrives at a moment when Kashmiri writing in English is gaining increasing critical attention, following in the trajectory of authors such as Basharat Peer, Shahnaz Bashir and Mirza Waheed, whose work has brought the region's complexities to global readerships (Hogan 156). Yet Mir's novel distinguishes itself through its particular fusion of historical allegory and metaphysical inquiry. Set in nineteenth-century Kashmir under Dogra rule, the narrative follows an unnamed carpet weaver whose dream of creating a magical, flying carpet becomes the focal point for exploring questions of freedom, creativity, and the limits of human agency. As one reviewer notes, the novel "balances aesthetics and politics to reflect on Kashmir's past, present and future" (Ghoshal).

This paper offers a comprehensive critical analysis of *The Last Knot*, examining its thematic architecture, its engagement with philosophical and theoretical traditions, its place within the broader landscape of Kashmiri and South Asian literature, and its distinctive contribution to the magical realist mode. Through close reading and theoretical dialogue, the paper argues that Mir's novel constructs a powerful meditation on what it means to create, to desire, and to exist under conditions of radical unfreedom, conditions that are at once historically specific and existentially universal.

The Architecture of Oppression: Hari Parbat and the Panopticon

The novel opens with a controlled, almost austere portrait of Dal Lake and its encompassing mountains, a landscape rendered as "callous" and "implacable." Their "adamant" loftiness casts a foreboding shadow, inciting within the narrator a desperate urge to take flight. This impulse, however, seems less a quest for peace or transcendence than a visceral evasion of a grim existential reality, later revealed as the suffocating weight of Dogra rule over Kashmir. The narrator's plight is captured in a potent simile: a horse frantically galloping to escape its "burning stable."

Within this concise first chapter, the author masterfully establishes the narrative mould that will shape the entire tale, a deft weaving of the magical with the real, and of artistic beauty with raw lived experience.

The narrator's yearning to flee the portentous mountains is articulated with precise artistic felicity, mirroring a parallel reality below. There, the 'domineering' *wusteh* (master) intones the *taalim* - the unique cryptographic script of Kashmiri carpet weaving - to his apprentices. Their fingers, moving like "bewitched silkworms," dart through the tight warp threads, actions "no longer bound by their will" (Ahmad 5). Stripped of autonomy, these weavers embody the crushing monotony, docility and submission to the Dogra rule. Their existence is subsumed by the master's commanding chants, a sound that fills their world with a "mellifluous monotony" and an "agonizing repetition," becoming the very rhythm of their captivity.

The Fort perched atop Hari Parbat stands as an incorrigible symbol of the atrocities inflicted upon this docile populace. It embodies a modern, comprehensive surveillance system, designed to watch and regulate public action with omnipresent authority. Its mechanism mirrors the very architecture of control analysed by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*: a Panopticon where the few, positioned at the centre, can observe the many, who, isolated in their cells, must internalize the gaze of an ever-possible watcher. As Foucault observed, this creates "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201). The Fort, much like that fearsome, moving warder, operates not merely through direct violence but through the psychological vise of perpetual observation, a grip that tightens silently upon the throat of the subjected. The historical Hari Parbat, a silent witness to centuries of struggle, is cast in contrast to the adjacent Makhdoom Sahib shrine. There, the narrator, like countless beleaguered Kashmiris, prays not to be ensnared in the spiderweb of oppression, even as he strives to grasp an elusive dream. Thus, the novel pits the silent, indifferent splendour of a mythical Kashmir against the harshness of its lived realities, framing the narrator's quest within this unsettling, beautiful dissonance.

Juxtaposed against this oppressive apparatus is the narrator's transcendent dream: to fly beyond its reach by weaving the knots of personal desire and choice upon the loom of life. These two forces - the institutional machine of control and the intimate, rebellious act of creation - form the novel's central thematic dialectic. They are woven together with artistic indispensability, recalling the spirit of other literary struggles against monolithic power, from the individual defiance in Kafka's labyrinths to the symbolic acts of resistance in Salman Rushdie's magical realist landscapes. The narrative itself becomes a loom, interlacing the threads of Foucault's grim carceral reality with the fragile, luminous thread of human yearning.

The Political Economy of Desire: Unclaimed Subjects and the Cost of Love

The novel's central tension lies in the perpetual contestation between the imaginary quest for freedom and the unblinking gaze of the repressive state apparatus, a stark embodiment of what Louis Althusser termed the "Ideological State Apparatus," here enforced with brute, physical violence (Althusser 127-86). As the narrative unfolds, the narrator, now a *moult* (a vagrant or tramp), pursues his dream only to find precarious refuge in the small *karkhana* (workshop) of a Rangur by the Jhelum. There, he stumbles into an awkward, poignant love with Rangur's daughter, Heemal, a relationship born from shared misfortune. This fragile, private world is swiftly and savagely unmade by the men from the Fort. Their torture of the family underscores a brutal political

economy: even unspoken feelings, the silent truths buried within hearts, incur a debt to power. As the system dictates, all unclaimed subjects belong to the King. Thus, the vagrant narrator can never truly belong to Rangur's family or Heemal's heart; his very lack of status makes him a vector of catastrophe. Rangur pays the price in a spiralling confiscation, first the vagrant's labour, then his earnings and possessions, and ultimately, his life. Heemal follows a parallel fate, her body consigned to the brothel as payment for a crime of association, for a mad lover and an unfortunate father she never chose to claim.

In this relentless extraction, the novel exposes a system desperate not merely for control, but for the total capitalization of human existence, echoing Marx and Engels's observation of a logic that converts all social bonds into "callous 'cash payment'" (Marx and Engels 220). The personal (love, refuge, the body itself) becomes currency in a ledger of domination, rendering the quest for freedom not just an act of imagination, but a dire and costly rebellion against an arithmetic of absolute possession. This theme resonates with broader discussions in postcolonial existentialism, which examines how "characters tackle the crisis of existence in the face of colonial traces, and what might be termed as the dislocations of diasporas" ("Postcolonial Existentialism"). In Mir's novel, however, the dislocation is not geographical but ontological, a displacement from one's own desires, one's own body, one's own capacity to claim or be claimed. The narrator's tragedy is that he exists in a state of radical unclaimability, his very being a kind of debt to a power that will ultimately foreclose on everything he touches.

Confinement and Creation: The Cave as Womb and Tomb

In the silent, womblike darkness of the cave, the narrator, under Abli Bab's guidance, labours to birth a miracle: a blue carpet imbued with the power of flight. The cave into which the narrator descends with Abli Bab, nestled within the shadow of Hari Parbat, becomes a stark physical echo of his inner landscape, a deep, dark void saturated with the dread of capture, for nothing escapes the brutal clutches of Dogra rule. Abli Bab, the crafty, thumbless man, fills the cavern not only with the ceaseless smoke of his pipe but also with a haze that permeates the narrator's own murky world of desire. Yet, it is precisely within this imaginative darkness that a sun breaks: the first fragile hope of weaving his magical, flying carpet.

The carpet's completion and its subsequent, autonomous journey to the foot of Hari Parbat serves not as liberation, but as a profound, silent indictment, leaving the creator more inconsolably isolated than before. This magical object, a tangible piece of woven yearning, becomes a perfect focal point for the state's oppressive gaze. Upon its discovery by the Fort, the reaction is not wonder but terror, a systemic panic. The weavers, the very subjects of this artistic tradition, are collectively threatened to unveil the one who dared to weave outside the domain of the King's rules. The carpet's magic, shockingly, holds no interest for the King; what transfixes power is not the sublime, but the transgression of its ordained order. This perverse logic is crystallized in a chilling audience. When a thumbless weaver, a body rendered "unproductive" by the state's brutal metrics, is presented, the King is appalled not by the mutilation, but by its uselessness. In the King's gaze, a subject who cannot weave cannot belong; their humanity is voided by their inability to contribute to the regime's extractive

economy. This moment echoes Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life"; a life stripped of political value and reduced to its biological fact, disposable to sovereign power (Agamben 8). The thumbless weaver embodies this condition: his mutilation, a product of the system's own violence, becomes the justification for his exclusion from the system's recognition.

The novel's tragic denouement unfolds from this core brutality: Heemal's disintegration in the brothel, Abli Bab's public execution at Zaina Kadal, a spectacle meant to cauterize hope, and the narrator's ceaseless confinement, together form a stark triptych of suffering under Dogra rule. Each fate represents a different facet of state violence: the commodification of the body, the annihilation of the rebellious artist, and the perpetual imprisonment of the dreaming spirit. The blue carpet, meanwhile, lies confiscated, a captured dream, its magic inert under the weight of the very system it was woven to escape.

The Existential Turn: From Political Oppression to Metaphysical Despair

From its midpoint, particularly after the pivotal chapter "The Bronze Box," the narrative undergoes a profound tonal shift. While the novel's signature poetic luminosity remains, it now serves to illuminate not the external world, but the broiling interior, the psychic smithy where the protagonist's darkness is forged. Here, he plummets into a private abyss, surrounded only by despair and desolation. This unravelling of consciousness is masterfully mirrored in the very fabric of the prose: a syntactic hurry marked by frantic dashes, stuttering repetitions, and unresolved questions. Language itself becomes a site of fragmentation, echoing the protagonist's disintegration. This descent is depicted in the potent symbolism of the dark pit and its inhabitant, a wheezing old man who functions as a grotesque alter ego, embodying the protagonist's most elemental fears. In flashes of philosophical brilliance, the narrator confronts and ridicules this internal spectre, recognizing in its imperial stubbornness a force that appears to operate beyond human choice or will. This recognition marks a crucial pivot. The protagonist's inability to embrace a convenient possibility of the good stems not solely from the brutal, external oppression of the Dogra rule, a system built on *begaer* (forced labour) and torture, but from a deeper, more terrifying philosophical intervention.

The novel suggests that true despair emerges from the realization of a fundamental negation: the impossibility of human sovereignty over one's own existence. It questions our agency over choice, freedom, and even the very categories of being trapped or being free, of despair or its absence. This aligns with the existential and postmodern critique of autonomy, reminiscent of Samuel Beckett's immobilized tramps or the cosmic indifferentism in Franz Kafka's parables. His despair is thus twofold: a reaction to a cruel king, and a philosophical rotting born from the realization of this essential entrapment. In a state of enforced, claustrophobic creation, the narrator obeys Abli Bab's directive, knotting the blue thread in an endless, Sisyphean ritual within the cave's confines, a space he now deems preferable to the oppressive world outside. Here, even the poetic glimpse of dawn or dusk, a flickering hope seeping through a crevice, cannot anchor him. Instead, it amplifies a devastating metaphysical confrontation. His labour becomes a stark foil against which he measures the incomprehensible quandary of human existence. In a bleak and poignant inversion of

Pascal's terror before the "eternal silence of infinite spaces," the narrator reflects not with awe but with nihilistic clarity on the sheer insignificance and purposelessness of a poor, wretched life when cast against the vast, indifferent cosmos, an unconquerable void that renders all human effort, unlike the temporary forms on his loom, fundamentally absurd (Pascal 201). His internal monologue reaches a crescendo of existential despair:

What does it matter whether the knots are tied or not? In the vacuous emptiness of the universe, what folly it is to knot something into being and leave it to the mercy of cruel meaninglessness. What idiocy it is to assume that a knot—any knot—in this godforsaken cave could be of significance when the only language of a sky full of stars is insignificance (Ahmad 69).

This passage resonates with the philosophical despair of E.M. Cioran or the cosmic pessimism of H.P. Lovecraft, where human creation is a fleeting, ludicrous protest against a universe devoid of intrinsic meaning. The "knot," the fundamental unit of his art and his struggle, is demoted from a symbol of order and connection to a testament of folly. The narrator's realization is that he is not merely weaving under political oppression, but performing a meaningless ritual under the silent, absolute verdict of a metaphysical one. His confinement is thus dual: physical within the cave, and existential within a cosmos whose ultimate grammar is oblivion.

The Fractured Self: Trauma and the Collapse of Time

The persistent mythical and magical narrative twists (the dreams, the apparitions, the symbolic metamorphoses) no longer serve merely as aesthetic flourishes. They deepen the mystique of the protagonist's becoming or, more accurately, his unbecoming. They chart his descent into the sewer of his desire, a confrontation with the base, the impossible, and the abject, where the only remaining truth is the contours of a deep and lingering *Weltschmerz*: a world-weariness that is as much a product of the soul as of the state. The narrative deepens its exploration of a fundamental schism: the real and the idealistic are rendered not as dialectical partners, but as mutually inconclusive realms, desperately and futilely attempting to thaw a semblance of meaning in their depressing dissimilitude. This fracture is etched into the very landscape. The typically enchanting snowflake is transformed into a "seed of an inconsolable loss," while a picturesque, snow-draped vista becomes "acres and acres of frozen disquiet." This is a world stripped of romanticism, viewed through a lens of existential grief. The protagonist's agonizing trek through this surreal, snow-blanketed terrain around Hari Parbat thus feels less like a journey and more like a trudge across "desolate dunes of snow and sorrow," mapping his internal desolation onto the external world.

This painful thematic strain solidifies in the chapter "Wheezes and Darkness," a philosophically dense core that moves beyond political critique to grapple with metaphysical uncertainty. Here, the novel sheds light on the irrefutable possibility - the terrifying certainty - of uncertainty itself. Trapped in the interminable darkness of being, subjugated by forces beyond his control, the narrator confronts the abyss of unknowing. He cannot know his future, nor can he access the counterfactual self in a parallel reality where suffering might be lighter or lesser. This resonates with the existentialist confrontation with absurdity - Albert Camus's Sisyphus

must imagine his rock happy, but Mir's narrator cannot even imagine a rock of a different weight. No one, the text asserts, has knowledge or control over these fundamental 'loose ends' in their story. The darkness around him, therefore, operates with a vampiric logic; like leeches, it "sucks the light out of his eyes," draining not just vision but hope and the very capacity to envision alternatives. Amid this incorrigible, inevitable chaos, the narrator makes a haunting observation: he finds a multitude of "blind old people" who cannot remember their erased pasts and are unsure of their present, yet are burdened with strange memories settled in a lingering future. This brilliant inversion (memory, the faculty of the past, colonizing the future) suggests a collapse of linear time under the weight of trauma. It echoes Walter Benjamin's concept of history as a catastrophe piling wreckage at our feet, but here, the wreckage is psychic and proleptic (Benjamin 392). These figures embody a collective consciousness where the future is not a site of potential, but a repository for displaced, unresolved dread, a Kafkaesque sentence passed before the crime is even conceived. Their blindness is not merely physical but epistemological, a condition of existing within a system where the only certainty is the pervasive, shape-shifting presence of loss. This representation of fractured consciousness aligns with recent scholarship on psychological liminality in postcolonial fiction, which examines how characters experience "fractured identities, paranoia, and existential crises as they navigate the contradictions" of their worlds (Remana and Priya). The blind elders of Mir's novel exemplify what Homi K. Bhabha might term the "unhomely" condition, the estrangement from self and world that characterizes the postcolonial subject's experience of trauma and displacement (Bhabha 13).

The Myth of Shraz: Sisyphus in the Cave of Being

The wheezing old man's recounting of the Shraz myth, a Kashmiri-localized, symbolically richer iteration of the Myth of Sisyphus, serves as a devastating mirror for the narrator. It is not merely a parable of repetition, but an excavation into the insignificance of human will and desire, which, like a river carving its own bed only to flow back to its source, cycle endlessly toward their point of origin, devoid of any teleological purpose. The myth lays bare the existential ennui that feasts upon the narrator's interior, transforming him from an individual into a symbolical event of futility. In its light, every human endeavour - love, kindness, the desperate will to anchor oneself in a safer present or future - is exposed as part of the same repetitive, ultimately meaningless travail. The narrative confronts the futility of willing itself, and the incompressible nothingness of despair, which holds unassailable sway over the meek, ordinary human heart.

The desperate, circular dialogues between the old man and the narrator in the cave's confinement resonate powerfully with the inconclusive, grotesque, and paradox-laden exchanges between Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Their purpose is parallel: they await a Godot of hope, a future, some respite from the dull agony of being or the sharp oppression of a system. Yet, in both scenarios, Godot fails to arrive, perhaps lost forever in the noise of the traffic jam, a modern metaphor for the chaotic, indifferent mechanisms of history and existence that drown out individual longing. Like Beckett's tramps, they are trapped in a performative stasis, using conversation not to reach a conclusion, but to endure the unbearable silence of

a universe that provides no answers. Their dialogue becomes the knot they tie to pass the time, a fragile, human noise against the vast, indifferent silence of the stars, a silence first articulated in the narrator's earlier despair. Here, the Kashmiri cave becomes another barren country road, and the wait for meaning, or mercy, is endlessly deferred.

The Shraz myth also invites comparison with other South Asian literary engagements with cyclical time and existential repetition. As one critic notes, the turn toward myth in Kashmiri fiction represents "an important development" away from social realism, allowing writers to "reimagine Kashmiri identity" through the lens of folklore and allegory (Qazi). Mir's innovation lies in his fusion of this local mythical tradition with the existentialist problematic inherited from European philosophy, creating a hybrid discourse that speaks simultaneously to Kashmir's specific historical traumas and to universal questions of human meaning-making.

Magical Realism and the Kashmiri Literary Tradition

The novel's synthesis of the mythical and the real distinguishes itself from the tradition of postmodern magical realism. Unlike the elaborately layered, historically dense, and proliferative narratives of a Gabriel García Márquez or a Salman Rushdie, where the magical often complexifies the real, Mir's narrative employs a more symbiotic and accessible blend. Here, the mythical serves not to obscure, but to clarify, illuminating psychological and philosophical truths with a stark, parable-like lucidity. This approach renders the narrative's profound themes more immediately resonant, though it may, for some, come at the expense of the rich historical texture often found in the canon of magical realism. This distinctive approach to magical realism may be understood within the context of South Asian literary traditions more broadly. As scholarship on Urdu literature has noted, the turn toward the magical often allows for "representation of traumatic historical moments that defy rational understanding or emotional comprehension" ("Testimony and the Urdu Troposphere"). In the case of Partition literature, magical realist elements emerge precisely where realism proves inadequate to the task of representing unimaginable violence. Mir extends this logic to the historical trauma of Dogra rule, suggesting that the weaver's magical carpet, like the miraculous endings in Saadat Hasan Manto's stories, becomes a way of "constructing new communities of reading and interpretation in the wake of ruptures" (Mufti qtd. in "Testimony and the Urdu Troposphere").

The novel also participates in a specifically Kashmiri literary genealogy. As the collection *Mad Heart Be Brave* demonstrates, Kashmiri writers, particularly poets like Agha Shahid Ali, have long engaged with questions of loss, exile, and the representation of homeland through sophisticated formal means. Ali's poetry, with its "architecture of nostalgia" and its engagement with "separation's geography," provides a crucial precursor to Mir's prose exploration of these themes ("Mad Heart Be Brave"). Where Ali worked primarily within the lyric and ghazal traditions, Mir adapts these concerns to the novel form, creating a narrative architecture that, as one reviewer notes, "reflects the weaver's loom: threads intersect, repeat, and form intricate patterns" (Qazi). Mir's work thus represents both a continuation and a transformation of Kashmiri literary tradition. It maintains the region's deep engagement with loss and longing while introducing new formal

possibilities derived from global literary modernism and postmodernism. The result is a work that feels simultaneously rooted in local idiom and in conversation with world literature.

The Cyclical Ontology of the Dream

This novel necessarily refrains from offering itself as an answer to a dream, a resolution to desire, or the neat conclusion of a conflict that readers might anticipate. Its final pages do not provide catharsis but rather enact a profound ontological recursion. The story's conclusion is simply another beginning, a dream's genesis. This mirrors the very structure of a life: we enter existence mid-dream, as it were, live through a protracted search for purpose, and often find our end precisely where our dreaming began. The narrative thus rejects linear telos in favour of a mythical, circular logic. This is portrayed in the haunting emblem of the mythical creature, Shraz. Its cycle - rising anew from the last surviving worm after its own death to begin a fresh, eternal quest for the moon - becomes the novel's ultimate metaphor. The moon here is not a static symbol of beauty, but the elusive, life-giving "why," the purpose that perpetually recedes. The protagonist, like Shraz, is not defeated but perpetually reconstituted by his longing. His journey does not culminate in arrival or enlightenment, but in the realization that the search itself, the repetitive, Sisyphean ascent, is the only permanent state.

As one reviewer observes, "Mir resists easy resolutions. The ending remains open, denying the reader a neat conclusion. This refusal is deliberate. The 'knot' of the title remains partly tied, echoing the unresolved nature of Kashmir's own history" (Qazi). The final knot tied is not the last one; it is the first knot of the next tapestry. In this way, Shabir Ahmad Mir does not conclude his tale but seamlessly returns it to the loom, suggesting that within the brutal specificities of history and the vast indifference of the cosmos, the human condition is not one of achieving dreams, but of being forever, inevitably, in dream - a state of perpetual and poignant becoming. This circular structure resonates with broader philosophical reflections on time and narrative. As Frank Kermode argues in *The Sense of an Ending*, human beings impose fictional endings on the continuous flow of experience to make meaning possible (Kermode 35). Mir's novel refuses this consolation, insisting that the ending is always arbitrary, always another beginning in disguise. The dream, like Shraz's moon, perpetually recedes, and it is the pursuit itself, not the capture, that constitutes human existence.

Critical Assessment: Strengths and Limitations

Any comprehensive evaluation of *The Last Knot* must acknowledge both its considerable achievements and its limitations. The novel's synthesis of the mythical and the real distinguishes it from much contemporary fiction, offering a mode of representation adequate to the complexity of its themes. As noted, this approach differs from the elaborate magical realism of Márquez or Rushdie in its relative accessibility and parable-like clarity. The mythical serves to illuminate rather than obscure, rendering philosophical truths with stark immediacy.

However, this approach may come at a cost. The historical setting of the Dogra period, while powerfully evoked through atmosphere and allegory, remains largely allusive. A more detailed exploration of

this socio-political landscape could have provided an even starker counterpoint to the protagonist's metaphysical struggles, grounding the novel's existential angst more concretely in its specific historical moment. The weaver's suffering, while universally resonant, derives from particular historical conditions that the novel sometimes gestures toward rather than fully inhabits. Stylistically, the novel maintains a remarkable, though uniform, poetic depth. Its lyrical tonality is a consistent strength, yet it varies little across characters and situations, with the notable exception of the brilliantly rendered cleft-lipped brothel keeper, whose voice strikes a uniquely dissonant and visceral chord. This consistency, while creating a cohesive poetic atmosphere, may lead some readers to question the narrative plausibility of a carpet weaver's profound command of metaphor and philosophical expression; a suspension of disbelief that the novel actively courts as part of its allegorical fabric. As one critic notes, "The symbolic weight can feel heavy, and the non-linear form may disorient those seeking a more conventional story" (Qazi).

The novel's density presents both an invitation and a barrier. Its refusal of linear narrative, its resistance to easy resolution, and its philosophical weight demand patient, attentive reading. For some readers, this difficulty will be part of the novel's reward; for others, it may prove frustrating. Mir seems to embrace this risk, "turning the reading experience itself into a kind of untying, slow, meticulous, and ultimately rewarding" (Qazi).

Conclusion

The Last Knot stands as a significant achievement in Kashmiri Anglophone literature, contributing to a vital literary tradition forged in the crucible of conflict. It is a work of poignant philosophical inquiry and stark lyrical beauty. In its pages, the political and the existential become inseparable. The brutality of Dogra rule and the vast indifference of the cosmos join to produce a despair that is at once historically specific and universally human. The novel's central metaphor - the knot - proves remarkably fertile. It signifies the weaver's craft, the bonds of oppression, the ties of love, the entanglement of consciousness, and finally the paradoxical condition of human existence itself: we are knots tied in a thread that extends before and after us, patterns of meaning that depend on the very constraints that confine us. The narrator's attempt to weave a carpet that will carry him beyond the Fort's surveillance fails, as it must, but the attempt itself becomes meaningful, a protest against meaninglessness, a knot tied in the face of the void.

In Shabir Ahmad Mir, we encounter not just a chronicler of a people's suffering, but a promising and distinctive creative voice, one who masterfully employs the loom of myth to weave a tale of timeless human entrapment and yearning. His work enters into dialogue with philosophical traditions from Pascal to Foucault, with literary predecessors from Kafka to Beckett, with the specific inheritance of Kashmiri poetry and storytelling. Yet it remains unmistakably his own; a voice that, as one reviewer puts it, "promises to resonate for a long way to come" (Ghoshal). The final irony of the novel may be that its narrator's failure to achieve flight, to escape the Panopticon's gaze, to claim Heemal, or to complete his quest in any conventional sense, does not diminish the power of his story. The carpet remains on the ground, confiscated by the King; the lovers

remain separated; the weaver remains confined. Yet the narrative itself takes flight, carrying the reader across the boundaries that held the protagonist captive. In this sense, the novel enacts the very transcendence its protagonist could not achieve, not by escaping the knots of existence, but by revealing their beauty, their necessity, and their enduring human significance.

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