

# The Rap of Kashmir: Hidden Transcripts of Oppositional Resistance

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## Abstract

Music is instrumental in performing an array of roles within the social order that serves as a rallying cry for various protest movements. Art and music are products of the lived experiences of artists and as a form of social activism, it stirs civic consciousness and opens up a dialogue about the current state of affairs in regions under repressive regimes. This research will attempt to understand the role of rap music in functioning as an expression of oppositional resistance against the official narratives of power. This research would employ a qualitative approach and undertake a discourse analysis of the four rap songs *I Protest*, *Dead Eyes*, *Criminal* and *The Time Has Come* to analyse the various ways in which rap becomes a symbol of resistance in Kashmir. For analysis, this research uses the concepts of hidden and public transcripts by James C Scott to understand how the rap music in Kashmir employs hidden transcripts of oppositional resistance to construct alternative identities and to bring forth the daily realities of ordinary civilians of Kashmir.

**Keywords:** Hidden Transcripts; Public Transcripts; Rap Music; Resistance; Violence.

## Introduction

Different researches on understanding resistance and the mechanics of power relations suggest that various subordinate groups use their lived experiences to resist oppressive circumstances. Their resistance finds expression in artistic and cultural mediums that provide a voice to critique the dominant culture. One of such mediums is rap music as it becomes instrumental in providing a collective voice to the marginalised. Rap and hip-hop often become music with the message of resistance that provides a social critique of the power structures of the society. It questions the

hegemonic forces and aims in empowering the voiceless.

The rap music in Kashmir also performs similar functions, where it is used by the youth to make political and social statements regarding the precarious state of Kashmir. The news about Kashmir is often coloured by political and nationalistic biases, where the state of Kashmir is reduced to border disputes, political struggles and regular violent protests. However, the perilous position of the civilians who end up as collateral damage in the power struggle gets ignored in the quest for militant nationalism and the race for media sensationalism. It is in this context that rap music in Kashmir becomes the voice of the suppressed civilians whose plight does not get registered in the mainstream political parlance.

However, unlike large scale protests and revolts that are met with violent state suppression, rap music in Kashmir escapes the state scrutiny by employing anonymous, passive resistance. It becomes a hidden transcript of oppositional resistance as it is not open and active and acts as a 'weapon of the weak' against state-administered violence and terrorist activities in Kashmir. In such a context, rap music becomes a weapon against the public transcripts that take the form of official narratives of Kashmir. Therefore, the employment of rap music as hidden transcripts becomes a form of oppositional resistance by the rappers and its audience against the hegemonic norms and values of the region.

### Hidden Transcripts and Public Transcripts

Music is universally recognised as a form of expression that can impact the collective consciousness and is accessible to both the powerful and the powerless. It becomes an important tool to mark cultural resistance and to give voice to the voiceless. Many scholars suggest that rap music as a form of resistance can be situated in the social contexts in which it emerged. Rap emerged in South Bronx in the 1970s as a response to the urban renewal projects, urban blight and deindustrialisation that pushed the residents to the peripheries of New York city and reduced them as voiceless entities (Molins 118).

Historically, rap functioned as a social commentary for young African Americans and Latinos to protest against the draconian legal measures, lack of public funds for education and community living, and dilapidated housing conditions. This commentary that was created for the marginalised to act as a platform to showcase their subversive thoughts and idioms slowly became a popular global form of protest and cultural resis-

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tance. This led to the creation of a new paradigm, where the 'bottom-up' approach empowered the marginalised to become active and direct participants of passive resistance (Molina 112).

Kashmir as a region has faced subsequent marginalisation and systemic oppression on socio-economic and political fronts over a period of time. Kashmiris have been systemically excluded from the Indian mainland over decades and their marginalisation does not evoke adequate dialogues in the rest of the country. The plight of Kashmir had begun with Partition in 1947 when a Muslim-majority princely state acceded to India. The internal conflicts in Jammu and Kashmir had begun in 1989 and have heightened through the 1990s and early 2000s. The latest abrogation of Article 370 that held a symbolic value to Kashmiris as a guardian of their unique values, further pushed the valley into turmoil (Malik and Mukherjee 1). The constant persecution and oppression faced by the Kashmiris have ensured that only the dominant hegemonic forces will speak on behalf of the citizens, refusing space for Kashmiris to voice out their expressions of resistance.

To carve a space for those in the peripheries of the society, the school of passive resistance challenges the conventional social theories that prioritize overt forms of resistance such as revolutions, riots and revolts. It has broadened the understanding of power relations and the praxis of resistance by including clandestine resistance of the marginalised who cannot afford explicit forms of protest. The theory of passive resistance has developed on the basis of the dichotomy between the powerful and the powerless, the dominant and dominated, the rulers and the subject (Joo 1).

In power laden-settings, the powerless give emphasis to their stories by refusing to live their lives according to the definition of the situations as given by the powerful. This leads to a considerable difference between offstage and onstage protests. As opposed to this, the discourses and protests that happen 'onstage' are referred to as 'public transcripts', which reflects the ordinary power relations between the dominated and the subordinated. However, the public transcripts refuse to show the complete picture as there are hidden transcripts that take place 'offstage', which is often not visible to the dominant power structure. The marginalised feel more comfortable expressing their dissent 'offstage' as they are away from the scrutiny of the powerful. Therefore, in order to understand the nuances of the power structure, the hidden transcripts of resistance by the marginalised must be taken into consideration (Joo 4).

James Scott in his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* states that “organized, large-scale, protest movements pose a threat to the state.” He views these public shows of protests as problematic since those extraordinary moments are “few and far between”. If spaces are organised in a way that the suppressed can freely express their “hidden” thoughts and feelings, then their dissent will make a regular appearance. This is because some aspects of thoughts, behaviours and feelings are highlighted to promote certain definitions of the situation while other aspects are suppressed so that they would not disturb the constructed narratives of power. This suppressed resistance gets expressed in the form of a joke, gesture, or song utilizing the language and idioms of the marginalised (Joo 9).

These hidden transcripts of resistance can be observed in the rap music of Kashmir, where the rap becomes a voice of dissent against the official histories of Kashmir. *I Protest, Criminal, Dead Eyes* and *The Time Has Come* can be seen as examples where the powerless are not dormant. Dominant groups sustain their hegemony by strategically controlling access to public forums and dictating the terms of the debate, as well as the public’s perception of Kashmiris. This is done by governments, media houses and others through the official histories and public narratives.

Various negative stereotypes such as being disloyal, violent and barbaric are associated with the Kashmiris in various public forums. To protest against these negative images, the Kashmiri rappers invert the stereotypical notions by challenging the dominant ideologies. This enables them to draw the attention of the public to alternative narratives that validate the daily realities of the Kashmiris. This is because revolts, revolutions and protests carry a huge cost for Kashmiris whose daily lives are in a perennial precarious state. However, it is wrong to assume that their act of resistance is futile as there lies immense potential in the political terrain between quiescence and revolt.

To understand how rap becomes instrumental in criticizing the dominant ideologies, it becomes important to understand the concept of hidden transcripts. Tricia Rose explains this concept by employing James Scott’s social theory framework of “public” and “hidden” transcripts. She argues that rap challenges the power politics through a series of cloaked speech and “hidden” cultural codes. These “hidden” cultural codes contest the dominance of “public” transcripts that are presented in public forums as a tool to reinforce hegemonic values (Molina 119). These public transcripts are found in the form of governmental policies, legislative rhetoric, and

legal opinions to forcefully silence the voices of marginalisation and persecution of Kashmiris.

For a better understanding of all dimensions of music, it becomes important to contextualise the form and content of musical works in the institutional context to understand the power discourses operating in the composition, performance and reception, the production, exchange and distribution. The political or social character of rap in Kashmir becomes an essential lens to analyse the oppositional resistance that it propagates. The rap in Kashmir is oppositional as it questions the hegemonic forces and resists domination by producing alternative knowledge regarding the Kashmiri 'street reality'. The hidden transcripts of oppositional resistance are foregrounded in *I Protest*, *Dead Eyes*, *Time Has Come*, and *Criminal* to show the subordinate group's resistance against the hegemonic forces.

The cultural forms of subordinate groups are a reflection of their lack of access to powerful channels to express their opposition (Beighey and Unnithan 135). The rap in Kashmir becomes a blue-print for social resistance as they offer alternative interpretations of the events in the region that are misrepresented by the official narratives. Though rap music as a form is not native to India, the global appeal of rap as a music against oppression employed majorly by the youth in marginalised communities as a tool of resistance has made it endearing to the youth of Kashmir. The young rappers use rap as a post-modern practice by drawing on their own 'street reality' to resist oppression under internal colonialism.

For these young rappers, rap as a medium of popular culture becomes a means to explore group identities that would help them to link to larger social forces. Political rap music has been portrayed by various researchers as an oppositional cultural form that provides criticism and resistance to the hegemonic cultural and socio-economic forces. By staying true to the history of political rap that has its root in the atrocities faced by African-Americans, the rap in Kashmir also became a collective voice that explores the group identities of the marginalised civilians.

The politically charged lyrics of the rap aims to bring the atrocities faced by Kashmiris to the attention of the public. The dismal conditions of unemployment, police and state brutality, terrorist activities etc are expressed through rap that use glaring symbols as a form of communication to empower the voiceless segment of the Kashmir society. Emcee Ami and Danish Bhatt in the rap *Dead Eyes* use the symbol of 'dead eyes' as a symbol and hidden transcript to bring forth the collective identity of a

population subjected to un-ending atrocities for a long period. In this rap, the rappers identify themselves with many who lost their eyes owing to the state-sponsored violence and pledges to bring justice to them.

With all my heart I support your cause  
But what about Neelofar and Asiya's loss Dead eyes brother!  
but my heart is alive Like Ifra and Insha  
I know how to survive I am an eyes of Nazrul who lost his vision  
I won't back down till we get success in our mission (29-33).

Similarly, in another rap *I Protest* by M.C. Kash, the lyrics express collective oppositional resistance against the injustices meted out to them on the pretext of protecting them.

We won't go down  
When we bleed  
Alive in the struggle  
Even the graves will speak (29-32).

Through this rap, M.C. Kash voices out the collective hardships that Kashmiris face as a community and testifies to their ability to survive virtually impossible conditions through oppositional resistance. After the release of this rap, it drew a lot of appreciation and became the protest anthem for Kashmiris to mark their collective dissent against the killing of civilians by the state during the 2010 Kashmir unrest. Towards the end of the rap, it names all who were killed that year owing to the civilian unrest. Therefore, it can be said that rap becomes a hidden transcript by which young Kashmiris combat social dislocations especially when their voice is stifled by the government.

Rap in Kashmir becomes the 'weapon of the weak' as it offers 'passive resistance' against the hegemonical forces. It offers a commentary on the precarious state of Kashmir where the state-administered violence as a public transcript does not leave any scope for people's own history or voice to surface. Muazzam Bhatt, a Kashmiri rapper in his rap *Criminal* points out the daily realities of people in Kashmir, where normal life is a distant reality.

I am not the day trying to survive on these rough streets

Brothers getting beaten and

It's not a pretty sight

Guys bleeding out from rough street fights

With the cops right there

And it just goes on

I brush off the dirt

because life goes on

That's life here (19-27).

The physical violence that is inflicted on people also leads to psychological effects as they undergo mental turmoil due to the on-going wars that are waged over the autonomy over Kashmir. This leads to rising aggression in the hearts of Kashmiris against the malfeasance of the state. These physical and psychological effects of violence get reflected as hidden transcripts in the following lines from *Time Has Come* and *Dead Eyes*:

The crimes and violence

The war outside

And the war inside us...

Anger is our voice (19-21).

Those men in uniform are as cold as they come

They will fill your mind with fear

Psych you out hit you up (50-52).

Also, the mainstream media as a public transcript plays an important role in propagating misleading images of Kashmir in the rest of the country. The images and messages that the media houses propagate are strategically controlled by the dominant groups to dictate the public's perception about Kashmir. Often media is used as an instrument by the state to spread confusion and misinformation through reports. Mostly, the report-

ing of Indian media on various terrorist attacks are contradictory, biased and uncorroborated.

In many cases, some films use Kashmir as an indispensable element to propagate militant nationalism among the people. This kind of propaganda is captured in *I Protest*, where the rap song alleges that the media in both Pakistan and India use Kashmir as a trophy that is supposed to be won by hook or crook. In the midst of all this propaganda rhetoric, the real plight of Kashmiris is intentionally forgotten by the media. This reality gets portrayed in these lines in *I Protest*, where the rapper is using the lyrics as hidden transcripts to criticise the sponsored media for hiding the organised genocide committed to further persecute the marginalised community.

These killings ain't random  
It's an organized genocide  
Sponsored media  
Who hide this homicide (25-28).

This stanza from *I Protest* shows how the state uses sponsored media to hide the organised genocide that is rampant in Kashmir. The sponsored media is used by the state to garner public support to make Kashmiris look like a threat. News about Kashmiri citizens turning violent and taking the law into their hands to support the separatist's movements are propagated by the media to float the falsehoods that Kashmiris are 'anti-nationals'. Also, the allegation that Kashmiris pose a cultural and security threat to the rest of the country is propagated by the politicians using the sponsored media. This is done with the motive to garner public support for the discriminatory laws in Kashmir. These public transcripts of Kashmiris being a 'threat' are countered by the hidden transcripts employed by rap music.

Moreover, for better comprehension of how hidden transcripts create oppositional narratives, it is important to understand the official narratives of history that become a public transcript used by the state to relegate Kashmir to the social margins. Rap can be considered as initiating a dialogue about the historic oppression that Kashmir has been subjected to over the periods. Thus, the hidden transcripts in rap provide remarkable oppositional resistance to the official narratives by laying bare the alternative interpretations of history that are not available to the public.

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To trace the historical trajectory of oppression in Kashmir, one needs to go back to that point in history where India being a postcolonial and democratic nation ignored the consent of various princely states in whose name anti colonial movements were fought. After independence, though India tried to adopt equitable and sustainable forms of development in the country, it ended up being a compartmentalised society with hegemonic ideals intact (Kaul 10).

Once-colonized nations adopt internal colonialism by continuing to reinforce many of the socio-economic arrangements and administrative and policing functions that are bequeathed to them by the colonial state. This aspect of history partly explains the increasingly centripetal and rigid form of nationalism that came to dominate the political cultures of newly independent nations, which is vital in understanding the relationship of the Indian state with Kashmir (Kaul 30). This form of militant nationalism was invented in the nineteenth century when for the purpose of display, imperial nations put its civil, ritual and administrative forms as the ethical core of modern citizenship.

These colonial nations emphasised centralised military power to reshape the forms of political collectivity that had prevailed over smaller independent territories. These territories which once were ruled by kings and their feudatories were brought under a centralised authority. Therefore, when the right to self-determination and political governance were demanded by the anti-colonial movements, they rallied for a 'nation' that consists of different communities that were unequal in their relations historically but forcefully united in their struggle for self-rule. This led to many princely states being forcefully annexed into the new nations of Pakistan and India (Junaid 40).

The problem with Kashmir stemmed from the fact that a Muslim majority population was ruled by Hindu maharajas. This was not a standalone case as many princely states in India had 'minority' rulers who developed policies that discriminated against the citizens who did not belong to their religion. In the case of Kashmir, the Dogra rulers catered solely to their Hindu affiliations, which led to Kashmir being deemed as a Hindu state. The Muslim peasants, who were the vast majority in Kashmir were deprived of all benefits and were reduced to a hand to mouth existence. The Kashmiri Pandits (Hindus) who consisted of just five percent of the population, wielded disproportionate power over the Muslims by occupying important offices. On top of that, unpaid labour and crippling taxes ensured that the Muslims in the region would always be inferior to

Kashmiri Pandits(Junaid 50).

During the 1930s and 1940s, various communitarian, regionalist, or pan-nationalist political movements gained prominence in the state and some of these movements stressed on the idea of a Kashmiri collectivity that would give importance to self-determination within the princely state. However, the state also witnessed nationalist movements under the leadership of Indian National Congress or the Muslim League, for independence from the British. On the other hand, many historians blame the British for the current predicament as its policies allowed a state like Jammu and Kashmir to remain independent and not to join with either Pakistan or India. Such an open-ended clause in the constitution led Alastair Lamb, a British historian, to comment that in “one sense the Kashmir problem can be seen as a consequence of the British failure to find a satisfactory method for the integration of the Princely States into the independent India and Pakistan that succeeded the British Raj”(Junaid 77).

This precarious position of Kashmir ushered in many raids against the Indian government with many demanding the need for independence. These militant activities led to a chain of events that destroyed the peace in the Kashmir valley. Kashmiri Pandits who opposed the demand for independence were targeted by the militants and were forced to leave the Valley. This incident led the majority of Indians to believe that Kashmiris were calling for Islamic secessionism, and branded the people especially the Muslims of Kashmir as going against the ethos of the country. The government employed draconian methods to quell the movements, and refused to acknowledge that this uprising might have indigenous roots.

All regimes ruled Kashmiris without taking into consideration their opinion. The UN Charter that allowed the provision for a plebiscite in Kashmir under UN Resolution 47, was ignored by the subsequent governments. These hidden transcripts from *I Protest* by MC Kash protest against the historical violence of plebiscite that ignored the right to self-determination of Kashmiris.

Threads of deceit

Woven around a word of plebiscite

By treacherous puppet politicians

Who have no soul inside (5-8).

The tussle for complete power in Kashmir by Pakistan and India led to the deployment of a large number of Indian armed forces, Border Security Force, and Central Reserve Police Force along the borders. This has turned Kashmir into an armed camp with the suspension of civil liberties and in many crucial arenas, the ratio of military personnel are more than the civilians.

Indian armed forces and agencies position themselves like an occupation army and keep the local population in a hostile state. The killing of every militant would lead to many innocent Kashmiris to be picked up, tortured, or imprisoned on suspicion of being in favour of pro-freedom groups. According to International People's Tribunal's report, human rights groups in the last few years have been investigating cases where large numbers of Kashmiris just disappear with the government offering no explanation for these disappearances (2009).

*I Protest* shows the stark reality of Kashmir that does not get reported anywhere due to the power play of regimes that consider Kashmir to be a trophy to be won.

A Whole Village Gang-Raped,  
 A cry still Lingers  
 These are the Tales From the  
 Dark Side of A Murderous Regime...(57-60)

*Dead Eyes* portrays the human rights violation and the callousness of the legal system and United Nations (UN) in providing justice to the people in Kashmir who are subjected to state brutality.

And My friend was beaten and left with ribs cracked  
 They book small kids under PSA and biased courts have nothing to say  
 UN got no solution for who lost their vision  
 Blood flows in streets of J&K division (8-11)

These lyrics from *Criminal* depicts the precariousness of the life of Kashmiris as they live in fear of their lives every day.

Mom told me listen

Son don't stop praying

You would never know for sure if you see another day end

This world is harsh and cruel (55-58)

*Time Has Come* shows the determination of Kashmiri youth in liberating their state from the draconian rule that does not seek the consent of the common people in Kashmir about the governance of their state.

We beg for mercy dear lord let it rain

We tried to liberate us we tried and we failed

But we gonna keep fighting

Till the last of us die (44-47).

These hidden transcripts of oppositional resistance in *I Protest*, *Dead Eyes*, *Criminal* and *Time has Come* portray a common truth that there exist no Kashmiri families that have not been victims of the waging wars surrounding them. It is estimated that around 70,000 to 100,000 people have been killed in the last 20 years in Kashmir. Those who have been affected physically and psychologically by these on-going conflicts are larger in number. Material remainders of the sufferings of Kashmiris in the form of thousands of gravestones are all over the place.

Various official documents report astonishing numbers of people afflicted with mental illnesses in Kashmir (Wax 2008). When one understands the context of *I Protest*, which was written during the new 'intifada' of summer 2010, the reason behind the increasing cases of mental illness becomes clear as the hospitals in Kashmir were not able to cope with the influx of the dying and the damaged. The local print and electronic media reports daily of human suffering and it has become a routine in the place. This human suffering gets depicted in the following lines of *Dead Eyes*, where the rap song acts as a hidden transcript narrating the ordeal of many generations who have known only state brutality and have been made to grow up in a society that is taught to be suspicious of everything.

Stop exploiting our future generation

My blind eyes won't repent but they do realise

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We crave for peace and justice with these eyes (13-15).

On the other hand, the public transcripts propagated by the state reiterates the rhetoric of Kashmir being beautiful, the same rhetoric that has been available in the public for many centuries. However, this discourse of beauty has erased the Kashmiris of their history that forms the backdrop of the history of violence and makes their struggle for self-determination invalid. In the words of Ananya Kabir, Kashmir has become, a “territory of desire.” Various international human rights organisations have in the past years documented the details of abuses that have been inflicted on the citizens of Kashmir, but the reports have not generated any action in India or the international community (Junaid 76).

This absence of documentation of the violence in Kashmir gets portrayed through the hidden transcripts from *I Protest*, which depicts how the state has erased the history of this violence from its narrative.

My paradise is burning

With troops left loose with ammo

Who murder and rape

Then hide behind a political shadow (9-12).

These lines also convey the failure of Indian postcolonial scholarship as it has become instrumental in this erasure by completely ignoring the history of violence in Kashmir as well as denied its existence. Therefore, in order to emphasise the need for political subjectivity, acts of memorialization of resistance have defined the geography of the daily lives of Kashmiris.

## Conclusion

Rap in Kashmir becomes an attitude and symbol for the agitated youth who refuses to take recourse to violence in Kashmir and acts as a form of political expression against the majoritarian understanding of nationalism. Transcripts of power and resistance are respectively referred to as public and hidden transcripts. To counter the public transcripts of state narratives of history and violence, the rap music in Kashmir employs hidden transcripts of oppositional resistance to construct alternative identities and to bring forth the daily realities of ordinary civilians of Kashmir. The hidden transcripts of oppositional power represent a critique of

power spoken behind the back of the dominant in the face of power. *I protest, Dead Eyes, Time Has Come* and *Criminal* act as a social commentary to propagate the message that the marginalised are not powerless pawns that suffer under the draconian rules of the state but rather are reflective creative agents who are capable of resistance.

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