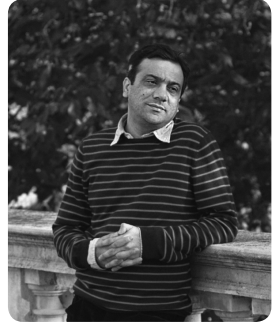


Mirza Waheed

The Collaborator

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Mirza Waheed was born and brought up in Srinagar, Kashmir.

He spent some of his childhood years in the mountains of the valley where his father worked in tourism and at home near the Dal Lake where his family continues to live.

As a teenager, he closely witnessed the peak years of the separatist militant uprising and the brutal military crackdown in Kashmir. During one of the many curfew-bound seasons in Srinagar in the early 1990s, when everyone was restricted indoors by the security forces, he learnt the rudiments of Kashmiri papier-mache art from his grandfather, father and uncle. He earned his first income hand-painting a hundred decorative Easter eggs meant for export to Western markets.

At 17 years old, Waheed attempted to embark on a 'career at sea' as a merchant navy engineer, but abandoned the idea after struggling with Morse code for a few weeks at a training institute in the southern Indian city of Hyderabad.

He eventually went on to study English Literature at the University of Delhi where he read the classics among other texts. He came to admire Homer, Sophocles, Coleridge and Beckett in particular. He then worked as a journalist and editor in the city for four years and came to London in 2001 to join the BBC's Urdu Service, where he now works as an editor.

Waheed briefly attended the Arvon Foundation in 2007. He has written for the Kashmir Observer and the BBC's Urdu and English websites and appeared on BBC radio and television as a commentator.

Waheed has been writing since he was ten and *The Collaborator* is his first novel. He has started work on a second novel, a young girl's love story spanning Kashmir, Delhi and Pakistan.

The Collaborator

Part I

Now and Then . . .

1 *The Valley of Yellow Flowers*

Captain Kadian takes a large swig from his glass tumbler, closes his eyes for a moment, smacks his lips, and says, 'The job's not that hard, you see, you just go down once a week or fifteen days, and the money, the money is not bad at all.' He runs his fingers around the rim of the glass and raises an eyebrow towards me.

'But, but sir, won't it be easier for your men, er, since they know the area very well, and also exactly who fell where . . . ?'

'No, no, no, we don't want any uniforms down there – it's no man's-land, you see. Anything seen walking in a uniform will be fucking dead in less than a minute. And they must know every one of us by face by now. But you, they know you're local, and with so many of you playing fucking tourist guides across the border, they won't really bother.'

'But sir, I'm sure you can . . .'

'As I said, we just need ID cards and weapons, as many as possible,' he raises his voice just enough to tell me who's boss.

The naked, dust-sleeved bulb hanging above us lights up; outside, crickets announce the evening. He leans back in his tall worn-out velvety red chair.

'So we don't want anything to do with the . . . bodies . . . then?'

'Look, they are just dead meat and that's how I prefer them. They keep sneaking in and we keep shooting their guts out of them at first sight. That's it.'

Another swig, longer, louder. Stench in the breath.

'Some of them fucking still manage to escape, probably too many, eh – that's how you have these jerks playing ball in Srinagar and elsewhere – but when they do fall to those machine guns out there, they just drop off the ridge

like dolls, like cardboard fucking soldiers! One after the other, ping, ping . . . I see it all through these.'

He gently taps his massive green binoculars that are lying on the oversized carved walnut desk.

I guess they know I've been there before. Although, it seems such a long, long time ago. Back when we were children, when we were growing up – when we were all here. We used to swim in the shallow green brook that ambles its way across the meadow, and play cricket on the makeshift pitch next to it. It's a small valley, you know, surrounded by mossy docile-looking hills and a long ridge that connects the two opposite hillsides. Behind the hills are the over-reaching mountains, rows and rows of them, that turn scores of shades during the day and become a sad, disquieting dark at night. These undulating rows of peaks, some shining, some white, some brown, like layers of piled-up fabrics, are to the west and hide in their folds the secret tracks into Azad Kashmir, into Pakistan. The pass into the mainland here, into Indian Kashmir, is somewhere near the tapering end of the ridge that runs from the Pakistani side to where the Indian check-posts start: *this* is where most of the action takes place.

Valleys are beautiful.

No one bothered us then, probably no one even noticed. It was like our own private patch; during summer vacations we would play cricket and fool around all day in this secluded playground of ours. You could see army pickets on either side of the valley even then, far off, like outline sketches on a school drawing, but that was all you could see. Anyhow, it's not like the Army wants to send me down only because they know I have been there before; they'd do it anyway.

'Baba was saying they will give me . . . ?' I try to keep the conversation going, not really knowing what to make of this weird proposition from the Captain, and someone inside me badly wants to get to the bright side of a situation that is looking frightfully ominous.

'Five hundred per trip and a small bonus for every ID and weapon you bring back. As I said, the money's good, bloody good.' Fingers flick, again.

The Captain is young, handsome, north Indian. A Punjabi perhaps, or Jat probably. He is fit, wheatish complexion, clean-shaven, short hair with a side parting. Left. His nose and chin shine. His eyes burn. It must be all the drink. He is probably fourteen or fifteen years older than me. I have never asked his first name, it just says Kadian on his uniform tag. He's always nicely turned out – shiny brown belt, shiny steel buckle – and never loses sight of his beastlike

binoculars. The office is a large, minimally decorated wood cabin with a big rusted iron bukhari in the middle that often doubles up as a cooker. There is a long window at the back but it's always covered with thick curtains, military blankets perhaps, so you can't see what's behind the office. There is another door inside, in the far left corner, which probably goes to the bathroom and the store, the two small high windows of which I always see from the outside when I go up the two steps to the veranda. The peon – a bent old man who seems to apply half a bottle of cheap hair oil to his sparse scalp every morning – uses the bukhari to heat up food and make endless cups of tea for himself and the Captain's few visitors. I usually go to meet him in the evening, often a day or two after an encounter, skirmish, battle, whatever they choose to call it. He's always drinking.

And he likes to launch into small speeches about his job and the 'operation', especially when I ask something. 'I see it miniature style, toy size, through these . . . They don't supply them any more, pure German technology, not the plastic Swadeshi shit that every young paramilitary jerk hangs around his neck these days. Anyhow, they are just shadows that drop off my nightly horizon, and the more the merrier, the more, the . . . mm . . . Tell me something, have you ever played a computer game? Well, this is not even half the fun. I don't even get to pull the trigger myself any more. But what to do . . . it's my job,' he mutters as an afterthought and pours himself some more whisky. It stinks. Why does every army man have to drink?

'How many, you ask, right? Okay . . . Let's see, if you have a group of twenty or more crossing over, it's usually preceded by shelling from positions beyond their pickets you see across the valley. Bloody Paki morons, as if we didn't see them do it, we would think it's the fucking chinks. Anyhow, it's obviously cover for your boys to make their run, but our strategy is to wait and let them at least get to the middle of the ruts around the ridge, while we are returning the shelling, and just when they begin to think they are about to make it, the automatics begin to roar. But even then, on an average we only manage to knock down less than half of the group, because, you see, it's very difficult terrain out there, a lot of mounds and ruts, and of course trees, to provide cover. And the bastards will use nothing less than brand-new LMGs to return fire. Sisterfucking rookie show-offs!

'Think of this as employment generation, Kadian style, ha ha.' He tries to joke when I ask a hesitant, barely audible, 'Why me?' conveniently avoiding the fact that I am the only young civilian left in the area to do any kind of job for the Army – or for anyone, for that matter. When everyone fled for their safety – this was when they started shelling us day and night after the Governor's bizarre visit during the crackdown – Baba refused to budge from his seat as headman; he said he needed to look after the village while everyone was away and that he didn't want to sell off his livestock. And he

believed people would surely be back at some point. No one believed *him*, though. I sometimes think he saw a big opportunity in being the sole cattle owner in the area with all the pastures as his exclusive domain. At other times, I think he just wanted to hold on to the fantasy of a still-functioning village. Poor man, my father. Should have known better. He has had to sell every single living thing on four legs we ever owned to the Army at dirt-cheap rates. And most Indians are vegetarians, huh.

When I go down the first time after all these months, years, it is with a sense of both pressing nostalgia and fear. The valley looks like a large green sheet hung tenderly from the surrounding foothills, with a singing, humming rivulet in the middle. It's still the same – a calm, largely uninhabited, solitary place nestled amidst the rings of our hills and mountains.

In my childhood, it was very easy to ignore the Pakistani and Indian check-posts on either side; you forgot about them the moment you stepped on new, untouched, fresh-from-dried-dew grass and ran downhill for a few minutes before making generous boot marks – I liked long 8s and floral designs – all over the place. They were far-off, distant, almost unreal . . . And by the time we took off our clothes to splash about in the low and languid stream we had assumed full ownership of the place and didn't care who was or wasn't peering at us from some ugly check-post out there on the mountainside. After swimming in the chilly water, we would lie down on the thick carpet of grass for ages, looking at the really, really blue sky and conjuring up odd names for clouds that hung low over our valley before drifting to another one across the mountains. I spent a long time down there, perhaps all my childhood. I don't have a lot of other memories from those early days. Ma and Baba probably thought it best to let me spend all my time there, not venture out, stay safe inside the valley. So that I wouldn't clamour to move to the city when I grew up and be lost for ever. In the years of my growing up, many border boys went to Sopore or Srinagar or other towns to study, and many refused to come back. Some of them ended up as bus conductors or worked as waiters in rickety restaurants on the national highway. Their parents' cattle herds dwindled with each passing year and brought poverty, loneliness and ill health. I suppose my parents were scared too. In the years *after* I grew up, some of the boys either became guides and clandestinely scouted city boys across the border, into training camps in Pakistan, or became militants themselves to relieve their parents of their yoke of shepherds' lives and give them proper homes when Kashmir would gain its independence. Many disappeared like that from time to time; I guess those who went to the city were luckier. My friends, *all* my friends, went away too, and God only knows if they will ever come back. Not many do, you see, and those who do, don't live very long here. Because the army people, the protectors of the land, have

decided that there is only one way of dealing with the boys: catch and kill. *Catch and kill*. I therefore ended up staying with my parents and their cattle. I stayed on in the valley, and in the end came to own it all by myself.

I look at the first few corpses and am immediately horrified at the prospects of what my first ever job entails. There are probably six of them ahead of me. Ugly grins, unbelievable, almost inhuman, postures and a grotesque intermingling of broken limbs make me dig my teeth deep, and hard, into my clenched fists. What an elaborate litter! There are bare wounds, holes dark and visceral, and limbless, armless, even headless, torsos. A low moan struggles, screeches inside. Gradually, I approach one of the more intact bodies, gingerly, eyes reduced to hairline slits, and look for a pocket or bag amidst all the dirt and the crusted blood on his clothes. I find the ID card in his back pocket and in some kind of limp involuntary motion throw it into the nylon army rucksack the Captain gave me last week. It's not easy, collecting identity cards and whatever else you can find on dead bodies. Bodies after bodies – some huddled together, others forlorn and lonesome – in various stages of decay. Wretched human remains lie on the green grass like cracked toys. Teeth, shoes. For God knows how long I just cannot remove my eyes from this landscape, heaps of them, big and small, body parts, belongings littered amidst the rubble of legs and arms . . . Macabre, horrid ghouls on either side of the brook watch me from their melancholic black-hole eye sockets. (I guess whoever ended up in the stream was fortunate to be washed away.) Carcasses with indefinable expressions on what remains of their faces – I hope I don't recognize anyone. *This is what we get?* they seem to ask. The smell, the smell, the smell! I cannot begin to describe what it is like the first time. You just stop breathing. *That is it*.

The stench is so powerful that your guts begin to pull your throat down, sort of strangle you from within, if you know what I mean.

On the first day, having touched my first ever corpse, I bathe twice in the evening, with scalding hot water and a copious amount of soap, scrubbing and scratching myself into rashes and red nail slashes all over my chest and arms. I can't eat well, however, owing to the nausea that comes over me for the next few days.

It's not easy, picking stuff off dead people.

'There was a skirmish last night, I'm sure you heard it?'

'Yes, yes, Captain, I did, went on for hours . . .' I answer quickly, nervously, and wait for him to say more.

He doesn't, just watches me with narrowed eyes.

'You want me to check them out . . . ?'

Another evening, another drink-fuelled lecture. I'm beginning to get used to this. That's worrying.

'Well, we have this fucking TV crew coming from Delhi, there might be some foreign ladies as well, I have been told. So we will do something here in the camp, you don't worry about it. The stupid hacks want to film foreign militants – how the fuck do they know I am not lying? I can fucking make any maderchod look like an Afghan. The dead don't speak, remember, and I still have plenty of old photos and clothes. The only thing I can't do is Sudanese, or fucking Arab; for that you have to wait for the real thing, huh ha!'

Captain Kadian usually lightens up a bit, drops his high sturdy shoulders, after a few drinks. More so if I don't ask him too many questions before agreeing (sometimes I like to believe I still retain some choice) on another trip down skeleton lane. I wonder what this thing tastes like. It surely works.

But I do want to ask him if he's ever been down there. And I really wonder sometimes how many there are? Thousands. Two, three, five thousand? No, no, I'm exaggerating. But surely, there must be hundreds and hundreds of them.

'So is this where all the missing go, all the disappeared people? This is where they can all be found, then?' I find myself mustering up the courage to ask him.

'Hmm, one could say that, but remember, this is not the only pass they use to cross the border. This one seems pretty popular, but there are at least ten others as busy as ours, if not more.'

'Why not get rid of all the bodies, sir . . . ? Isn't this, you know, I mean, incriminating . . . ? For me too . . . ?'

'Naah, there's no fucking point, they will just disappear with time. Besides, we don't want to offend people by doing anything that can be seen as *desecration*, you see. Otherwise, all it will take is a couple of cans of kerosene every few weeks or so. These people need burials and that's what we give them – big, big open burials, huh ha . . .'

There are a million of you here, one Indian soldier to every six civilians, you could bury every single one of us alive in due course of time, I would say at a different time, in a different situation, to a cowering pig of this Captain, but for now I can only wish.

I'm beginning to spend more and more time amidst the rotting dead now. The other day, I thought I'd even started talking to my skeletal audience. You know, they look at you with their mid-sentence grins and teeth and you feel someone just said something. Some of them are in a very bad shape, with bits of flesh hanging loose from their faces, necks, chests, arms. Sad dismal demeaned reflections of their former selves. The necks look particularly grotesque. A few of them haven't been touched by vultures and crows at all, so their flesh just gets thinner and thinner, tighter and tauter, like high-strung leather, with each passing day. These are the ones you dread the most, for fear of recognition. What if an acquaintance suddenly turns up? '*Assalam-u-Alaikum*.' Some others seem perfectly calm, as if this were where they wanted to be all along.

'Captain, do you know how many you have down there?' Curiosity finally wins over cowardice – on this fourth, fifth, meeting with my boss after that first, and fateful, call of his at the house – and I really want to put a finger on how many our very own Changez Khan has heaped up in his pyramid down the ridge. In our pristine valley, around the cricket pitch, by the green river.

'Can't say for sure. Who fucking counts . . . ? But let's look at it this way, they started crossing over and back in 1988–89. Okay, let's say in big numbers the year after that, right . . . ? And we are now well into '93, so that means we have more than three years of debris down there. This is one of the biggest sectors and, as you know, very popular with the sneaky bastards.'

'But they don't come all year, do they?' I immediately find myself desperate to keep the numbers low.

'You think so . . . ? Huh! The numbers just decrease marginally during the winters, my dear. Those sissies on TV just read what we send them.'

*

Baba wants to know, I suspect, about how it's going between the Captain Sahib and me – what do I tell him, though, what *do* I tell my poor old stubborn father? That I am the official accountant of the dead now, that I dread every step of my walks in the valley lest I stumble upon one of them, lest I end up carrying their name, *just* the name, to the Captain some day, and say, here's another one for your books, sir – what do I say, Baba?

Ma, I avoid as much as I can, her silence helps, although how long can one 'avoid' one's mother, and how long can she not know, or how long can we – Baba, I – pretend that she doesn't know? Baba, better not talk to me about it, for Ma's sake, better not talk about it.

Months have passed since I was last in the village street, back when everyone left, leaving us all alone in this militarized wilderness. It's not that I haven't meant to spend some time there – but it just hasn't happened. I want to see everything again, to check how it looks, feels, in desertion, in abandonment – and yet I dread doing it. Even now, some weight presses on me as I step out on this late morning when the light is a clear blue and the sun is not yet glaring on my head.

There are trees here, and in their shadows the shadows of people on their daily chores. The breeze is a breathing, talking, real thing; it travels loudly, feeling its way over everything. As I walk towards the shops in the middle, I feel someone is walking behind me. I do not look back. It is always disappointing. The dust on the street has not seen any footprints for ages, apart from the sickly marks of some bird that might have descended to check whatever happened to the talkative grocer who used to throw out crumbs of stale glucose biscuits every morning. The light is all blue, liquid blue, the mountains conspiring to create a luminous corridor for me to look down, I guess.

Leaves lie in abandon here and there, some pale, some brown, some green and some crushed. The wind has created its own order over them. Rustle, murmur, rustle . . . Tiny dance-circles of dust rise and vanish. A few flowers, white, red and purple, rest in their dusty inclines on the edges. Some forest ferns, long subdued under human occupation, have sprouted well on the sides too. They look prosperous in their moist, fresh clumps.

The shutters on Noor Khan's grocery shop look firm and sturdy, the lock resolute. The railing at the front as if waiting for someone.

Sadiq Chechi's Red Cross has grown shades of khaki on it, the sun making it appear ruthless, still. The old green blanket he used as a curtain is folded to one side, a jute string tied around it over and over, as if . . . At the centre, just above the padlock, are two words written in blue: God's Gift. Chechi's parting note.

Asghar Ali's hardware store, three small heaps of clutter in front. Asghar had been emptying the shop of its reservoir of unusable bits and bobs collected from scrap dealers in Sopore. He had at last given up on making a sale of these remaining bits and wanted to restock with new nails and screws. Rust, soot, mud make the heaps look like barren mountains. A brazen growth of grass swerves on the side. As I leave, an old sticker glares from the side of the shop doors: *Inallaha ma'as-sabireen*. God is indeed with those who are patient.

I hear conversations murmuring in front of the three shops. Laughter of children too.

I turn away to go and see the corner of our evening meets. I stand where I used to stand, taking in Hussain on the left, closest to me, Ashfaq opposite me, looking up occasionally, Gul, fidgety, his arm over Mohammed who sets himself free but every now and then pulls Gul back towards him. I keep staring at the footprints, where there should have been footprints. There is a small muddy puddle in the middle of the group. I see myself. Today is the 6th of July. 1993. It is also my birthday, my nineteenth.

After two more rounds of the street and fleeting glances at Gul's house behind those stately poplars, I walk away. The whispers in the air persist. 'Let's go, let's go, let's leave . . . Leave it to Allahtaala.'

At the tipping end of the street, I see old Ramazan Choudhary's wooden slippers, his famous *khraaw*, the one he always wore under his long pyjama and pheran. They sit tidily alongside a clay wall where tiny grasses hang low. I get closer and see the old man's prints on the worn-out wood base. Round clear heel, faded stem like a licked bone, fine digits at the toes. I touch them, nudge the pair into symmetry, and leave.

No one, no one, will ever come back here.

On some days, especially when there's a lull in the *dar-andazi*, in the infiltration attempts and the ensuing mayhem, and he has let go of his heavy metal-green eyes, the Captain opens a blue journal and starts jotting down things here and there. This is also the time when I visit him during daylight hours, like the other visitors – wonder what these men come here for, they are surely not from around here. Seated behind his vast desk, on which the main piece of decoration is an orange and gold papier-mâché tray with rows of neatly lined-up bullets of many shapes and colours, and worn, tired-looking paper clips on a little bed of dust or sand – a miniature combat scene this, too, I wonder? – Captain Kadian looks like the chief accountant of a prosperous bank. Am I his runner, then? His label boy? *Can you please check the name tags whilst I balance the books?* Corpse-land etiquette! One of these days I must finally ask, insist, that he come down to visit where I work. To come and inspect his crops, his harvest of human remains. I so want him to come and see the putrid trench he's turned my valley into.

I have also gradually come to understand how this works. Fairly simple, actually. When they need to, they release a list from time to time about a fierce encounter in so-and-so sector on the border that continued for so many hours, went on till the small hours, and so on and so forth. The list of the dead is then sent to the police and the newspapers. The media are never allowed

in except for delegations sent by the Centre and the Governor of Kashmir. And when they want to show off their catch, they film the bodies which have not been conveyed down into the valley, and store the footage for present or future use. *That's* what we see on TV. Sometimes, especially when the action has spilled out into the bordering villages, or when they have fake-encountered some poor boys in some far-flung area, they will drag the bodies, after their faces are mutilated, and quickly hand them over to the local police, or to scared, do-gooder villagers for mass nameless burials; that is, after they are done with camerawork etc. But when there's no such need they will just kick the corpses around and roll them over into the valley . . . *No one goes there except for carrion birds and animals, and now, me.* I guess I supply the names for the fresh, the latest lists. Ghazi Nasiruddin alias Abu Jindal alias Talha Jaanbaz alias Abu Huraira. Dreaded Lashkar commander.

It doesn't really matter to him what the names are, as long as there is a photo they can show on Doordarshan. All ID cards have Indian, *Kashmiri*, particulars – teacher, college student, carpet weaver, mechanic – detailed aliases for the boys to carry them through security checks and ID parades should they find themselves in the midst of crackdowns or combing operations in the country or the towns. At first I was surprised that they should carry any identification, but then, everyone in Kashmir has to, even the militants. You simply do not exist if you don't have an ID card on you . . . In any case, I feel they are little schoolboy trophies for Captain Kadian, a score he lives by in his murderscape!

By the way, did I mention there's a profusion of tiny yellow flowers growing among the grasses here? If you look from the top on a sunny day, you can see these shiny objects scattered across the lush meadowy patch around the river. These are erstwhile legs and arms and backbones and ribcages surrounded by sparkling swathes of yellow created by the thousands and thousands of flowers all across the valley. In places they have grown in great numbers around the fallen and the decaying. You can see bright yellow outlines of human forms enclosing darkness inside. It makes me cry, it makes me want to run away, to disappear. In some cases the outline has started to become fuzzy now, with the tiny plants encroaching into the space of the ever-shrinking human remains. I don't know the name of the flowers. Some kind of wild daisies perhaps.