

Book Review

Aijazi, Omer. *Atmospheric Violence: Disaster and Repair in Kashmir*. 296pp. University of Pennsylvania Press 2024.

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The name arrived at my lips before it settled fully in my mind. I had just opened an unexpected email from Bloomsbury. Would I be interested, it asked, in reviewing Omer Aijazi's *Atmospheric Violence: Disaster and Repair in Kashmir*? Drawing on ethnographic encounters in the pahars of Pakistan-administered Kashmir and neighbouring northern Pakistan, the book explores how violence exceeds discrete disasters and enters the atmosphere of everyday life, as well as how people make life inhabitable through ordinary practices of care and repair. For a few moments, I remained with the name, Aijazi rather than the invitation. The recognition felt less like remembering someone than being returned to an earlier scene whose significance had not yet finished unfolding.

People often say that the world is small. For those who come from fragmented Jammu and Kashmir, however, smallness has a particular texture. It lives in the intimacy of a place where someone knows your family, your village, your teacher, or a friend of a friend. But it is also a smallness produced by dispersal: by borders, migration and political histories that interrupt familiar landscapes of recognition. Across these dispersals, people continue to find one another. A name heard years ago reappears in my inbox, bringing someone once encountered at the edge of my intellectual life suddenly to its immediate subject.

The world grows smaller still when one enters the academic study of Jammu and Kashmir. The circles narrow: first to those who write about the region, then to those who write from within its fractured histories, and finally to a dispersed community of scholars, writers, and interlocutors whose work travels between universities, mountains, valleys, checkpoints, conferences, and conversations. Within this small intellectual world, nobody is entirely unknown. Recognition often precedes acquaintance. We know names through citations, affiliations, stories, arguments, and the quiet oral archives through which intellectual communities remember themselves.

Perhaps this is why the email did not feel entirely accidental. I do not mean that the book was destined to reach me, at least not in any simple sense. Yet certain encounters acquire the atmosphere of an appointment made elsewhere—by memory, by geography, or by an unfinished conversation. *Atmospheric Violence* came to me in this way: first as a name spoken aloud, then as a recollection, and only afterward as a book awaiting review. The manner of its arrival seemed appropriate for a work concerned with what exceeds the visible event. Aijazi asks us to attend to atmospheres: to what surrounds life without always announcing itself, to violence that cannot be confined to a single occurrence, and to forms of repair that take place before they are recognised as such.

Before I had turned its first page, the book had already drawn me into an atmosphere of my own—one composed of recognition, distance, fragmented homelands, intellectual kinship, and the peculiar routes through which scholars on/ of Jammu and Kashmir continue to arrive in one another's worlds. From this small constellation of the academy, the book promised to take me back towards the pahars. The route into them, however, was not easy. Before I could reach the lives unfolding in the pahars, I had to make my way through a dense thicket of theories, quotations, notes, and citations. I entered slowly. On page 4, Nusrat remembers being in Grade Three during the years of cross-border shelling and making a pact with her friends to drink black ink: if being shot was so likely, they reasoned, why not end life on their own terms? The memory is devastating in its simplicity. Yet almost as soon as Nusrat speaks, her voice enters a crowded conceptual gathering. Christina Sharpe's "weather," radical humanist anthropology, affect theory, Black and Indigenous studies, and Paul Stoller's "between" follow in quick succession (pp. 4–5). Aijazi then offers three theoretical threads—atmosphere, repair work, and flourishing—as a "conceptual weave" for navigating the sensory excess of the pahars (p. 5). The weave, however, initially felt more like a thicket. By

pages 6 and 7, the local mahaul—atmosphere has passed through Ben Anderson, Timothy Cooper, Dora Zhang, Steven Brown, Afro-pessimism, Sharpe’s “weather,” and Indigenous “settler atmospherics.” Each reference may be defensible on its own; it is their accumulation, and the speed at which one intellectual vocabulary succeeds another, that shapes the reading experience. Before I could dwell with Nusrat or inhabit the heaviness of the mountain air, I was repeatedly redirected towards another scholar, citation, or explanatory frame.

My difficulty, then, was not simply a dislike of theory. It concerned the order of encounter. The people of the pahars appeared to be approaching through an already assembled scholarly crowd. Aijazi describes his conceptual weave as an alternative to the exacting map, inspired instead by “wind-kissed branches, fallen leaves, and loose pebbles” (p. 5). But in these opening pages, I felt less like a spirited wayfarer than a traveller repeatedly asked to present her academic credentials before being permitted farther into the mountains.

Beyond this conceptual density lies an ethnography of remote mountain communities in Pakistan-administered Kashmir and neighbouring northern Pakistan, where everyday life bears the overlapping afterlives of cross-border shelling, the 2005 earthquake, the 2010 floods, infrastructural abandonment, and recurring ecological uncertainty. Yet this geography is more internally differentiated than the word “Kashmir” in the book’s title sometimes permits. Aijazi moves between “Pahari people” and “Kashmiris” without dwelling sufficiently on the relationship between them. Pahari may name an attachment to mountainous terrain, a cultural formation, or a linguistic identity; “Kashmiri” carries several histories at once. It can name an ethnolinguistic and cultural formation rooted in the Kashmir Valley whose histories precede the modern princely state; it can also express territorial and political belongings connected to the diverse regions later assembled under Dogra rule and subsequently divided among India, Pakistan, and China. These registers may overlap, but neither the older Valley-centred formation nor the wider political category is timeless, internally uniform, or reducible to the other (Zutshi, 2004; Khandy, 2021). A person may inhabit several of these meanings at once, but their conjunction is historically produced and contested rather than given. The slippage is striking in a work otherwise suspicious of bounded maps: its ethnography gathers lives from pahars whose inhabitants may enter, reshape, or refuse “Kashmiri” as a collective name in different ways.

The book does not tell us how Nusrat herself inhabits these available names. She enters instead through a childhood memory of cross-border shelling and through her insistence that, despite everything, “life finds a way” (p. 4). Her story

does not settle who the people of the pahars are; it opens onto the temporal and affective conditions through which their lives continue. From her words, Aijazi’s central question takes shape: how do people continue not merely to survive, but to refuse, care, repair, and sometimes flourish when violence has become part of the mahaul—the atmosphere of life itself? For Aijazi, disaster is not a bounded event with a clearly identifiable beginning and end. It lingers in bodies, homes, relationships, roads, memories, and interrupted futures. Repair, correspondingly, is not a return to an undamaged past. It resides in the ordinary and often incomplete labour of making life inhabitable.

The book’s form follows this refusal of neat resolution. A two-part introduction gives way to five “scenes” and then an epilogue concerned with heartwork, food, dissident knowledge, and scholarly solidarity, while quotations, questions, photographs, conversations, and landscapes repeatedly interrupt the authority of a single explanatory voice. Yet it is only when the first scene opens that these different forms begin to gather around particular lives, giving the book’s conceptual concerns a human scale.

On page 63, the prose changes temperature. Niaz is the first to step fully into view. His bodily confinement after an injury is entangled with the earthquake, winter isolation, spiritual longing, and the betrayal of a friend. On the coldest days, he cannot easily free his hands from beneath the blankets to hold the Quran or perform namaz; prayer, he tells Aijazi, takes care of his heart (p. 69). When the next scene opens, Parveen, a widowed midwife, moves through the mountains like the ambulance the state has failed to provide. She leaves meals, conversations, and household work whenever someone calls, sometimes able to offer little more than a hand to hold, encouragement, or sips of water (p. 100). The third scene turns towards the elderly Sattar Shah, whose apparent loneliness cannot be understood through social absence alone. His deepest friendship is with Allah, sustained through prayer, poetry, asceticism, and a refusal of the forms of sociality others consider necessary (pp. 109–111). Abrar then unsettles any expectation that suffering must appear dignified or politically agreeable. His irritation, exhaustion, and repeatedly frustrated plans remain “ugly,” without being translated into a reassuring narrative of resilience (pp. 131–133). Finally, Chandni bibi’s quiet laughter and deliberate silences resist Aijazi’s attempts to make her fully knowable. Her account of blindness, home, and the earthquake does not resolve into a stable chronology, its opacity becomes part of what the ethnography must learn to respect (pp. 157–159).

These five people do not appear as representative “cases” assembled to produce a singular “Kashmiri/Pahari” life. Nor are they heroic survivors offered as evidence that adversity necessarily ennobles. They form an unsettled

mosaic of lives in which impairment, widowhood, ageing, frustrated youth, care, anger, faith, and dependency generate distinct ways of inhabiting the pahars. Through them, atmospheric violence ceases to be only a conceptual proposition. It acquires aching limbs, interrupted prayers, difficult journeys, laughter, fatigue, stubbornness, and the small gestures through which life keeps moving. Aijazi, too, begins to enter the scene more fully—not only as the arranger of scholarly conversations but as an embodied and sometimes unsettled interlocutor. “Abrar irritates me; I am sure I also annoy him,” he admits (p. 132). The sentence is striking precisely because it refuses the fiction of effortless ethnographic intimacy. Researcher and interlocutor meet through irritation, unequal mobility, affection, expectation, and disappointment.

My own reading rhythm changed accordingly. I still encountered the citations, but I no longer stopped only because another theoretical voice had intervened. I stopped because Niaz could not lift his hands from beneath a winter blanket to pray, because Parveen carried the needs of a village, and because Sattar Shah’s certainty in Allah opened an unexpected social world. I felt Abrar’s frustration without needing it to become inspirational and learned not to force Chandni bibi’s silences into disclosure. The book began to breathe, and the distance between its world and mine began to narrow. The pahars were not an ethnographic elsewhere to me. I am from Poonch in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), part of the mountainous world through which Aijazi’s protagonists move. I knew its steep paths and wood fires, its material difficulties and social warmth, its prayers, silences, and ways of caring when little else is available. This familiarity neither made our experiences identical nor granted me transparent access to the lives in the book. It did, however, allow recognition to move in both directions: from Aijazi’s pages towards memories of home, and from home back towards the claims of the book.

During the first week of June 2026, while I was still reading, the atmosphere in Pakistan-administered Kashmir/AJK changed. Reports of closed bazaars, protests, dharnas, paramilitary presence, and violence reached me in fragments before internet connectivity faltered and contact with home thinned almost to silence. The book and the news on my screen began to occupy the same room. Distance became waiting: for a message, a familiar voice, some assurance that family was safe. I found myself inhabiting the very affects through which Aijazi’s ethnography moves—fear, uncertainty, frustration, anger, but also care, dua, and sabr.

Unable to send care home, I gave that helplessness another form. In Germany, I prepared a Pahari-style wood-burning stove and set rajma—red beans—to cook slowly over the fire. The memories of my mother, grandmother, aunts,

and the other women of my family returned as living threads connecting me to the pahars and their practices. I was not reenacting deprivation; I was trying to recover a sensory memory of home when home in the present had become almost unreachable. In the Pahari kitchens I remembered, tending a wood fire demanded hard work and “heartwork”, rajma—chawal—red beans and rice—carried women’s labour into the warmth of a meal eaten together, recalling days that, although materially difficult, had also been peaceful. Recreating that practice in another landscape was an embodied adaptation—a labour of love through which care that could not cross a deadened phone line could still be placed into food. As I tended the fire, Aijazi’s concepts moved through my hands: care, repair, and refusal became acts I could perform while political and military arrangements in AJK left me with little else I could do.

Aijazi returned to me here. His achievement lies in making such modest acts legible as more than coping: cooking can become repair, memory a form of care, and prayer a way of holding open a world threatened by fear. Lighting the stove was also a refusal to allow violence to possess every memory of the pahars. Yet my experience returned a question to the book. The silence surrounding home was atmospheric, but it had not emerged from the air. It had been produced—through political decisions, communications controls, armed deployments, and the unequal structures by which AJK is governed. This distinction matters for *Atmospheric Violence*. Atmosphere is a powerful way of apprehending how violence feels and circulates. It becomes less adequate when the institutions organising that violence remain indistinct. Aijazi is not unaware of these structures. He questions the nation-state as the principal adjudicator of life and deliberately turns from “marginality” towards the situated intimacies and movements through which residents make the pahars their own (p. 55). Elsewhere, he explicitly names the “broader colonial dynamics between Pakistan and Kashmir” (p. 133). The clinic through which Parveen moves also reveals a political geography of care: sick Pahari bodies pass from an inadequately staffed civilian facility to a military hospital and, if necessary, onwards to Rawalpindi—“from rural to increasingly urban” and “from civilian to the military” (p. 95). The book therefore contains the materials of a structural argument but seldom follows them far enough to show how Pakistani coloniality is administratively, economically, and militarily reproduced.

The result is a problem of scale. Roads remain rough, clinics depleted, livelihoods precarious, women overburdened by care, and disabled and elderly people isolated; yet the relations that produce and distribute these conditions often recede behind their intimate effects. Underdevelopment can consequently appear as the generic misfortune of mountain peripheries rather than as a

political process with beneficiaries, institutions, budgets, borders, and histories. The micro-worlds Aijazi renders so carefully need not be displaced by a state-centred account. But neither can the micro be severed from the meso- and macro-level arrangements that make some forms of life—and some burdens of repair—more likely than others. My concern, then, is not that Aijazi looks too closely. It is that the closeness is not always allowed to change scale. Atmosphere can name the heaviness in the air, but an ethnography of power must also ask who darkens the sky. This scalar disconnection becomes still more consequential in a book committed to decolonial knowledge and built through extensive conversations with Black and Indigenous thought.

Moreover, the tension is not only scalar; it is also citational. Yet the epilogue, where this tension becomes most visible, is also where Aijazi most openly turns the ethnographic question upon himself. He resists knowledge produced merely to “fill gaps” in the literature or generate new theory (p. 186), insisting instead that knowledge emerges through people, land, community, and the more-than-human (p. 182). Later, he asks why songs, dances, gossip, rumours, markings on trees, disturbed earth, and invasive plants remain less credible than peer-reviewed articles and monographs (p. 203). These are among the book’s most compelling provocations, particularly for an anthropology still struggling to relinquish its authority over what can count as knowledge. Aijazi does not deliver this critique from a position of disciplinary innocence. On page 202, he recalls a colleague asking him, with some exasperation, “Omer, do you even want to be in academia?” Rather than dismissing the question, he hears within it an expectation that the “legitimate academic” must devote intellectual labour to the discipline, while other forms of knowledge remain suspect. He then asks what it means to become an expert in the lives of others within institutions where intellectual work can be recruited into the “military-industrial-academic complex” (p. 202). The question is uncomfortable, and he allows it to remain so. This willingness to disclose uncertainty—to ask whether academia can accommodate the relations he values without disciplining them—is one of the epilogue’s most honest gestures.

Such openness does not entirely resolve the tension within the book’s form. Atmospheric Violence remains saturated by the scholarly apparatus it asks us to question. Even “heartwork”—knowledge that thinks and feels beyond disciplinary containment—arrives through an extended conversation with academic authorities (pp. 178–189). Earlier in the book, the heart is invited to speak, but rarely without a bibliographic escort. In the epilogue, however, citation begins to acquire another quality. Aijazi understands it as desire, accountability, and an attempt to enter intellectual relation with others (p. 212). Citation can indeed perform such kinship. But it can also reproduce

an older division of labour: people in the pahars provide the lives, affects, and stories, while theory—much of it authorised through the metropolitan academy—provides their intelligibility. The problem is not that Black and Indigenous thought originates elsewhere, nor that [Jammu &] Kashmir must be interpreted only through scholarship geographically native to it. Black and Indigenous thought can open necessary relations across histories of violence and unsettle anthropology’s inherited habits. But concepts formed through the specific histories of slavery, antiblackness, Indigenous dispossession, and settler colonialism require sustained translation when brought into the pahars. At times, conceptual affinity moves faster than historical explanation, allowing decolonial affiliation to stand in for a fuller encounter between these traditions and the particular histories of [Jammu and] Kashmir.

Aijazi’s epilogue nevertheless refuses precisely this comfortable division. He asks whether the discipline can be decolonised from within, acknowledges that scholarly certainty may itself be a form of power, and describes not having answers as a possible condition of accountability and relation (pp. 204–208). By the end, even “theory of change” is returned to the ordinary ways people know and love one another (p. 209). His call for dissident knowledge therefore remains unfinished, but not unexamined. Its force lies partly in his willingness to include himself within its contradictions: not as an ethnographer who has escaped the discipline, but as one honest enough to ask what its authority has made possible, what it has damaged, and whether he still wishes to belong to it.

It is perhaps fitting that Aijazi closes not by resolving these tensions but by returning to the question of location. “Who are you as a scholar? What is your location?” he asks repeatedly, only to answer first that he cannot decide, then to wonder whether the question must be asked at all (p. 218). The repetition gradually loosens positionality from the familiar academic ritual of declaring where one stands. Location becomes less a statement offered in advance than something disclosed through encounters—through where one can travel, whose knowledge one carries, what one fails to perceive, and how one responds when refused.

Then the shoe returns. Earlier in the book, while recounting his humanitarian work, Aijazi remembers an elderly man who answered the language of consultation and belated relief by throwing one at him. The moment is not absorbed neatly into confession or converted into a lesson learned. It remains lodged in the ethnography: an interruption, a rebuke, perhaps an insistence that accountability may arrive from outside the scholar’s chosen vocabulary. On the final page, after trying once more to locate himself, Aijazi leaves us with only this: “I think a lot about the shoe” (p. 218).

I finished the book thinking about it too. The shoe seems to resist that kind of scholarly capture. It keeps the

encounter—and the book—unsettled. That unsettledness is among *Atmospheric Violence*'s greatest strengths. Aijazi has written a formally adventurous and deeply affecting ethnography whose photographs, epigraphs, questions, pauses, and changes of voice are not decorative additions but part of its way of knowing. His finest scenes proceed through close attention rather than explanatory conquest. The protagonists retain their humour, irritation, faith, opacity, need, and capacity for relation; they are neither flattened into suffering nor elevated into exemplary resilience. Spirituality, likewise, is permitted to remain ordinary and alive rather than being displayed as cultural evidence for an observing anthropologist. This is a book to be read slowly and sometimes again. It will reward anthropologists, scholars of Jammu and Kashmir, disaster, and humanitarianism, and anyone interested in what ethnographic writing can become when feeling is treated as a mode of attention rather than an obstacle to thought. It also offers something rarer: an ethnography willing to risk tenderness, creative form, disciplinary discomfort, and the incompleteness of its own answers.

I began this review by speaking Aijazi's name aloud. I end less certain of what a reviewer is supposed to pronounce. Is a review a verdict, an encounter, or another scene of accountability? Can disagreement remain a form of care? Can one admire a book while continuing to ask what lies beyond the atmosphere it makes perceptible? When the scholar asks where he stands and the reviewer finds herself asking the same, who is examining whom? And what, after all, are we to do with the shoe?

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