

I INFLUENCE

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A YEAR after India revoked the semi-autonomous status of Jammu and Kashmir, people in the region are still living under curfews, lockdowns and communications restrictions. | Reuters

MESSAGE

"WE FELL asleep in one world and woke up in another."

You may recognise these words. They are the opening lines of a poem that touched the hearts of millions when it was posted online at a time when much of the world was entering lockdown.

It seemed to tap deep into our psyche, speaking of loss, confusion, new ways of doing things we long held for granted, and ultimately conveys a powerful message: we are not masters of this world – nature is.

Many claimed credit for the poem on social media, but Roving Reporters tracked down the author, Haroon Rashid, to discover he had already been in lockdown for many months, albeit of a different kind, when he first penned the words.

Rashid lives in Jammu and Kashmir, a disputed territory in India, where an unprecedented security lockdown came into force in August last year and continued through to March this year.

Authorities imposed multiple restrictions on residents, including a curfew. It closed schools and shut down the internet.

The 27-year-old makes his living working online and felt the loss of connections with friends and the outside world keenly.

Like many young men since time immemorial, particularly in Kashmir with its rich literary tradition, Rashid turned to poetry.

"We fell asleep in one world, and woke up in another," he wrote in December at the height of the region's security lockdown.

The poem evokes, as he explains it now, the feeling you experience after failure, losing someone, or having to live through a prolonged dark phase. The days and months passed and then, finally, when the security restrictions were about to be lifted, Covid-19 arrived.

He said the prolonged lockdown in Jammu and Kashmir led to widespread hunger and looting by desperate people and criminals. The forced closure of many businesses not considered essential heightened the sense of loss.

Haroon Rashid of Jammu and Kashmir has written poems that have made him a name globally, writes **Fatima Khan**



In trying to describe the charged atmosphere in Jammu and Kashmir, Rashid said: "Exaggeration of natural and created havocs increased mental strain, depression, and a surge in suicides due to uncertainty happening around."

But community initiatives helped to alleviate suffering.

On March 25, two days before South Africa went into lockdown, he updated and posted his poem on Facebook.

It speaks of a world where celebrated places and old panaceas – Paris, New York and Mecca – have lost their potency.

Although his poem was written in December, at the height of the region's security lockdown, it has resonated with people's experiences as they face up to the Covid-19 pandemic. It has been translated into many languages and has inspired cross border charity drives. Rashid has been approached to appear on Oprah Winfrey's Covid Talks for Apple TV+ to chat about his life and his poem.

Anila Khan, of Chicago, US, posted on Rashid's Facebook page on April 6: "You summed it up so beautifully. One night, several years ago, I went to bed with my perfectly healthy 3-year-old daughter and (the) same night she died. I realised, after reading your poem, that all those years since her death, this is exactly what I have been meaning to say; however, since I am not a poet, such as you, never could find the right words. Thank you young man."

Ali MacGraw recited *We Fell Asleep*

Poet's universal theme offers hope in uncertain times



HAROON Rashid became a global name after publishing his poems while living in Jammu and Kashmir.

for the Virtual LemonAid charity, raising funds for Covid-19 relief in New Mexico.

Bollywood film director Zoya Akhtar read it for 'I for India', another Covid-19 charity initiative.

Thousands have posted and reposted the poem, most unaware of the identity of the poet, with a number of people taking credit for the work (some of whom later apologised).

Rashid is now working on an international collaboration, writing with partners from Australia and South

Africa, but was not ready to share details.

He said he never dared imagine his writing would achieve such acclaim. He said he has always been creative and enjoyed sketching as a young boy, when he attended JK Public School. After he had taken his sketching as far as he could, Rashid began writing poetry, drawing on his love for reading.

"Challenges are there in every work," said Rashid, "but wisdom makes us understand that we have to continue putting in efforts no matter what path

we are on in life."

And he believes the world will be a better place once the pandemic has run its course. People would be more grounded, would raise their voices for truth and justice. They would add beauty to their surroundings, he said.

The final version of Rashid's poem follows.

"We fell asleep in one world, and woke up in another."

"Suddenly Disney is out of magic, Paris is no longer romantic,

"New York doesn't stand up anymore, The Chinese wall is no longer a fortress, and Mecca is empty."

"Hugs and kisses suddenly become weapons, and not visiting parents and friends becomes an act of love."

"Suddenly you realise that power, beauty and money are worthless, and can't get you the oxygen you're fighting for."

"The world continues its life and it is beautiful. It only puts humans in cages. I think it's sending us a message."

"You are not necessary. The air, earth, water and sky without you are fine. When you come back, remember that you are my guests. Not my masters."

Khan is an associate editor of Roving Reporters. Visit www.rovingreporters.co.za to read more stories in *The Future We Want* series.

● After the Covid-19 pandemic, will everything return to how it was before – or will we change how we live in the future? Will we realise the need to make this world a better place, both for people and for nature? These are the key questions in a journalism-themed writing competition, *Life After Covid-19 - The Future We Want*. The competition forms part of a broader reporting project on the impact of Covid-19.

"We are encouraging high school children to document their experiences of the pandemic and reflect on how they would like to see the world change for the better," said Roving Reporters director Fred Kockott.

"Reflection is a first step to change, and this project gives learners a voice and an opportunity to have some agency in how their future unfolds."

Schools in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal that wish to register for the competition should contact Kockott on 083 277 8907 or email fredk@rovingreporters.co.za