

OCTOBER 2020

Revisiting Dispossession and Loss in Kashmir



new beginnings, radical possibilities

Published By: Zanaan Wanaan

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Date of Publication: October 2020

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“tul kalam ti lyekh me hukm-e-Azaedi”

pick up your pen and write me the decree of freedom

-unknown

This issue is dedicated to the women of Kashmir.
To us, you embody and exemplify the true spirit of resilience,
in your survival, protest, mourning, remembrance, defiance,
and also, in your silence.

Editor's Note

From the last two decades, much of the feminist energy has, rightfully so, gone into establishing Kashmiri women's capacity for agency. Although Kashmiri women's positions have been shifting from one discursive context to the other, a consensus has emerged within the decolonial feminist scholarship over the powerful ways in which they have resisted the hegemonic structures. Kashmiri women have faced many challenges but, arguably, none more formidable than being denied the ownership of their narratives.

This issue is an addition to the rapidly expanding body of work produced by Kashmiri women. Bringing together twenty women from various disciplines, 'Revisiting Dispossession and Loss in Kashmir' is a discussion on some of the most fundamental aspects of loss, coupled with seemingly mundane facets of unaccountability, injustice and violence. To this end, the sections that follow sketch loss through detailing and revisiting the Jammu massacre, enforced disappearances, domestic violence, memory, kitchen spaces, homelessness, faith, public architecture, childhood, and other important subjects.

Prior to any literary work, ZW released two videos, both in remembrance and celebration of the long history of Kashmiri resistance. In many ways, they allowed us to explicitly state our positionalities, paving ways for solidarity and support from Kashmiris in the valley and across the globe. When we reached out to the contributors, no introductions were needed as people found resonance of their commitment towards Kashmir in our musical works. We are not musicians or singers, but women driven by the poetic essence of the Kashmiri resistance. Hence, the first issue of Zanaan Wanaan commemorates the undying spirit and resilience of Kashmiri women.

The original works here, categorised into six sections, culminates three months of robust effort from a dedicated team and contributors who come from diverse backgrounds. Academics, students, researchers, poets, artists, etc, sharing a consistent concern for speaking about the turmoil in the region with a sense of urgency. This is a remarkable collection of works; each piece is personal and political. It opens with a feature interview of Parveena Ahanger followed by narrative essays, poetry, academic essays, artworks, memoirs, and a fascinating section of fiction stories. It ends with an explainer of the cover art design.

With this, we aim to instil intellectual curiosity and rigour amongst young people, especially women in Kashmir. We have a long walk ahead of us. This is only the beginning.

Mariyeh Mushtaq,
Editor

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For Parveena Ahanger, in Solidarity

Misbah Haqani



Photo Credits: Rafto Foundation/2017

Thinking of women's activism in Kashmir is perhaps unimaginable without Parveena Ahanger, the co-founder of the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP). In the last two decades, her organisation has brought together relatives of the disappeared persons in a manner which allowed numerous others to join in solidarity with their struggles for justice. Parveena Ahanger, lovingly known as *jiji*, has been internationally recognised for her commitment towards human rights, justice and accountability

I went to meet Parveena ji at her residence to talk about her incredibly important work on enforced disappearance, an issue central to the conversations on 'dispossession and loss in Kashmir'. This was not in attempt to romanticise framing women in certain positions concerning their resistance, or even what does and what doesn't constitute resistance, in addition to hearing the same stories of loss repeatedly.

I revisit her testimonies, which, in all likelihood, she has made over and over again, yet her struggle for accountability from the Indian state seems far from over. My emphasis to restate her story is not necessarily to acquaint the reader with the factual narration of the incidents of disappearances but to yet again bring the perpetrators under question-whose inhumane crimes continue to remain unaccounted for. I also assume a certain level of familiarity and understanding of the phenomenon of EDs on part of the reader.

In countless retellings and sit-in protests, Parveena ji, along with other women, reinstates remembrance, a refusal to let go of the memories of atrocities inflicted upon her. It is almost as if the 'repetition' of these processes is a protest in itself, a defiance against the institutional erasure of enforced disappearances. We begin by speaking candidly about ourselves. I introduce myself in terms of what I do, she does so by recalling:

I began this work after I realised that there were a lot of other people whose loved ones were missing as well. I came across them when I was seeking answers about my son, Javaid, in police stations, courts, hospitals, roads, any place where I was led to. I asked these families to meet at my home since many of them came from far-flung areas. My house became a meeting point for all these people. We would sit together, discuss and plan the search of the disappeared men... After a while, we started going to public places like parks and roadsides etc, to protest because at my home no one could see us. During this time, I felt that the loss of other families is even greater than mine. *baakiyan henz dag wuchith gayi mye panin dag mashith* (after witnessing the pain of others, I forgot my own).

My son was picked up by the Indian armed forces on 18th Aug 1990 during the night raid and cordon when they were looking for a JKLF militant whose name was also Javaid. As they were searching through the locality, they were calling his name again and again. My son was asleep but when he heard these voices 'Javaid! Javaid!' he got scared and jumped out of the window to the backyard. And then four armed men jumped over and pinned him down. After that, I cannot bring myself to describe what must have happened next.

This is not just my story, there are so many women who have suffered the same fate. They are my family now. Some of them live alone, others have been abandoned by even their own children. Who will take care of them? They need clothes, food, medicines. I have made a promise with God, that as long as I am alive, I will stand by them. They look up to me. They talk to me because they feel that no one else will listen to their stories. I cannot break this relationship with these victims. I do not consider myself a leader, I am a victim myself.

I have been to many countries and universities. People often ask me how they can contribute to the movement... I tell everyone that we don't need money. Just read, write and share our stories. For young people like you, I keep praying, *khuda deeno tohi te sui hemath yus me dichin* (may God bestow resilience upon you, as He did upon me). The fight is long, but we have to keep going.

I do not offer any commentary of my own. I write this piece in deep solidarity with the women, men and children affected by EDs, with an acknowledgement that our society has failed to address this issue as thoughtfully as it should.

Halfway through the interview, I was visibly uncomfortable of 'forcing' her to narrate her story again. But Parveena ji dismissed my reluctance to ask follow-up questions, "This is also work", she said. "I have to repeat my story".

NARRATIVE ESSAYS



Between Redressal and Survival: Domestic Violence in Kashmir

Arshie Qureshi

My house was burnt in a ‘counter-insurgency operation’ ...that felt like a crack in my backbone. We [now] live in a rented home. My neighbours hear my screams every other day when my husband beats me... but who do I tell it to? The ones who turned my house into ashes?

36-year-old Jabeena’s quote from a long conversation remarkably sums up the experience of living under a military occupation and dealing with violence in an intimate relationship. She has been living in an abusive marriage for a decade. Her neighbours and relatives, aware of her ordeal, have offered intervention through multiple meetings at her marital home in South Kashmir’s Shopian. These local dispute resolution committees had asked her husband to transfer the possession of their two-storeyed house to Jabeena. She says that she was relieved at this decision for it gave her reassurance of not being forced out of the house. However, before her husband could carry out the paperwork, the house was razed to the ground in an encounter in 2018.

To Jabeena, possession of the house was a form of reparation of the marital abuse and discord. But what happens when houses are deliberately burnt down by Indian forces who do not engage in a drawn-out gun fights with the suspected militants seeking refuge there?

The crisis of state violence in Kashmir is far from new. The nature of violence and escalation may have changed over the years, but its consequences are devastating for the locals. Kashmiri women continue to bear the brunt of this violence on many ends. Ironically, their welfare is used as a justification for India’s ‘developmental’ agendas in the region, particularly in the Parliament sessions for the abrogation of Article 370 in August last year. Arguments were made for Kashmiri women’s empowerment under the guise of property rights which the state claimed were discriminatory against women marrying non-residents of the state. However, even preliminary analysis of this claim based on facts and ground reality, debunked this myth. The definition of ‘welfare and security’ by the Indian state in Kashmir stands against all universal, ethical and moral codes.

In August this year, the valley completed a year of siege and disrupted communication. Restrictions on mobility, collapse of local businesses due to frequent shutdowns and rising

poverty, among other consequences of the lockdown have had a profoundly negative impact on the social relationships of Kashmiri populace. There might be a link between familial discords and the political turmoil in the valley that needs to be understood and examined taking into account day to day experiences of people. Although this assertion remains largely under theorized, what is increasingly clear is the paradox of acquiring justice from hostile state institutions like the J&K Police.

Jabeena, for instance, harbours no illusion of accountability from a system which disenfranchised her even more than she already was. She breaks into tears as she narrates her journey to the house and the pain of witnessing its demolition. Jabeena stresses that she had no source of income and her husband deprived her of basic financial security.

While battling for survival, she says, she put together money to furnish the house. “I would save whatever little amount I received from relatives from time to time as gifts (locally referred to as *Mubarak*)... Rupee by rupee, I gathered the money to get curtains, carpet, crockery...my husband did not even spend a penny and instead questioned me, and accused me of having affairs with men who would buy me these things. I never bothered.... I found a respite in cleaning the walls of the house, windowpanes, and rugs. It was my territory and my comfort, my space.” recalls Jabeena. Exerting control over the house perhaps provided a semblance of belonging and safety- something which domestic violence victims rarely get.

In 2018, her house was burnt down by the Indian Army. Three days after the tragic incident, she visited the site. She recalls how she picked up the burnt curtains which dissolved into ashes in her hands.

This forced her and her husband to move into a relative’s place. Things between him and Jabeena went from bad to worse with the additional burden of homelessness.

Although the law which protects women from domestic violence has been applicable in Jammu and Kashmir since 2010, along with section 498 A of IPC which makes cruelty by husband punishable; in a conflict zone like Kashmir laws and penal codes are an uncharted territory particularly when it comes to the protection and enabling of women’s rights.

In addition, defined gender norms and roles, incidents of everyday violence, heightened state surveillance, restricted mobility etc. renders women and men further vulnerable and disrupts access to basic services and livelihood avenues.

Jabeena feels uprooted from her social group; particularly, her neighbours whom she would meet and speak to on an everyday basis. Her privacy also stands compromised and whenever anyone hears her story, they suggest her to file an FIR.

Jabeena admits to maintaining silence over the issue of domestic violence against her after her house was burnt down. Earlier, she had the ownership of her home as a form of relief. After the incident, she says, resorting to silence felt safer. “Who would I report to? I still feel tremors in body when I see armed forces-police as well the army” she says.

“How do I walk into an establishment of these [people] who did not know me yet took away all that I had? What happens when I tell them that my husband beats me? Will he meet the same fate as my house?” she asks.

Although the loss of a home and acts of domestic violence may seem as disjoint, occurring in different spheres but in Jabeena’s case (like many other Kashmiri women) the two spheres collide as the trauma is reoccurring and impacts all aspects of her life. Being subjected to enforced homelessness has irrevocably altered her approach and perspective to what constitutes justice. She emphasizes that her life and experiences were intimately linked to the house and now to its memory.

Jabeena recalls her husband’s hostile behaviour towards her- with a plate in his hand in the kitchen of her burnt down house, aimed at hitting her, and this memory merges with the images of police and military approaching her house to plant the IED Blast. Jabeena’s hopes of respite were demolished along with the house. When she recalls the interiors of the house, she breaks down and cries endlessly.

Jabeena’s story typifies the nuanced violence that bodies of Kashmiri women are subjected to. Her experience calls for understanding the changing positionality of women in conflict zones. She does not seek help. She doesn’t not describe herself to be dependent, victim or as somebody who is unwillingly silenced. She explains the decision of not reporting domestic violence as her ‘survival strategy’ and stresses that this decision was informed by the experiences that altered her life in an unimaginable way.

Similarly, Nuzhat, a 33-year-old woman from Sopore, living in an abusive marriage decided never to report domestic violence to the police or courts. She says “...what if he [the husband] is taken under frivolous charges?” She recalls getting beaten up by her husband on August 03 last year. After this incident, she left home and informed her family about it. One of

her family members informed a local police official. During this time all communication lines were blocked in the region. Although no action was taken against Nuzhat's husband as no formal complaint was filed but the thought that he could be detained gave her sleepless nights. She wanted him to stop the violence against her but not at the cost of him being victimized by the state.

She had heard of men being detained and sent to jails outside Kashmir around that time. She complained of getting frequent panic attacks thinking about her husband's welfare. She would often wonder what if the police had detained him just like the other men or what if he had left home to meet her, would the police or army have nabbed him? She says she continuously prayed for his safety during those days.

"I used to cry inconsolably...had I brought him unnecessary scrutiny? Would they have done anything to harm him? Will I not be able to see him? All these questions in my mind were killing me," says Nuzhat.

As a child and a teenage, Nuzhat has witnessed men from her family being punished by the forces on the basis of mere suspicion. Her paternal uncle was detained on flimsy grounds. After allegedly stealing jewellery from a neighbour's home, he was picked up by the police and his whereabouts were unknown to the family for months. He had been lodged in Tihar and was finally released after a few months. It had lasting impact on his life and family, including Nuzhat.

He was never able to resume his education. He failed at business because of severe psychological impact of the violence that he continues to bear till date. Nuzhat is witness to the life of his uncle being ruined because of one incident of reporting to police and never wants to replicate the horror in anyone's life, even if it is her abuser.

Nuzhat is back to living with her husband and satisfied knowing that her family dines together at night, as one unit and they see each other every day- which she describes a luxury for a number of families in Kashmir.

For both Jabeena and Nuzhat, being subjected to state violence subsides their concerns of domestic abuse and marital discord. In both the cases, their survival strategy is formulated by their instinct of protecting their families from the state institutions. Here, the idea of safety emerges as one surrounding notions of collective familial welfare rather than individual empowerment

‘Holocaust of the East, Not Mentioned in Books’

Ather Zia

Forced Erasures

In the old decrepit neighbourhood of Bat'maalyun in Srinagar, mired in the innards of an interdistrict transport hub, a bunch of homes shared a common courtyard. Here amongst the many playing children, a great grandmother would often be found sitting and babbling to herself. As the years increased so did the darkness of her stories. She spoke of glistening swords dripping with blood, slashed necks, stabbing, wounds, and cries of help. As if watching over a grisly scene, she would lament the bodies of those killed. People thought she had gone senile. Other than having some relations in Azad Kashmir and Pakistan, nothing was known about her. She had been married into the family kind enough to accept the poor orphaned girl from Jammu as their daughter in law. Her kin would often chide her for the “horror stories” that scared kids. Her memories were perceived as fictions of an ebbing mind. In reality, for half a century the lady had kept a tight grip on traumatic memories that age was slowly prying out of her. Not that it was common knowledge but she was a survivor of the Jammu pogrom. Even though one of the most brutal pogroms of the modern century, it has been successfully hidden in clear sight by the hegemons occupying the region for seven decades.

The Indian apparatus has manufactured the obfuscation and ignorance around the pogrom to engineer, by hook or crook, Kashmir's future with India. This, while covering up the Hindu fundamentalist militancy and ethnonationalism that lay at the core of the new India. A nation which was eyeing the secularist mantle on the emerging post-colonial stage. The magnitude of the slaughter of Muslims on a mass scale in Jammu between August and November 1947 was a holocaust. Yet, the reported numbers of those who were killed or escaped to Azad Kashmir and Pakistan were mired in debates for decades. A report published in The Times, London, 10 August 1948 mentions “2,37,000 Muslims were systematically exterminated – unless they escaped to Pakistan along the border – by the forces of the Dogra State headed by the Maharaja in person and aided by Hindus and Sikhs.”[1] A common estimate of casualties that lies between 200,000 and 300,000.[2]

The Dogra despot ruling the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, unrelated to Indo-Pak claims, had long been facing challenges from his subjects. There was a strong movement

demanding a change to constitutional monarchy and in the Western region of Poonch, a brewing insurrection which later took shape as the Azad (Independent) Kashmir Regular Forces to create an Independent state. Even though the king suppressed the revolt brutally but the rebels successfully liberated part of the region declaring the Azad (Independent) Kashmir provisional government on October 24, 1947. From August 1947 onwards, Hindu fanatics, aided and abetted by royal government forces, started looting and burning down village after village inhabited by Muslim communities - killing, raping, and abducting their women. The ruler was himself seen distributing arms to the Hindu militia. The pogrom ended in the ethnic cleansing of Muslims from the Jammu province. According to the census of 1941, in Jammu Muslims who had been a majority at 61% were reduced to a minority status at 38%. The Dogra ruler oversaw the pogrom to recapture his hegemony, but in the end, he relegated it to the next occupier -- India and fled in the night as only a weak tyrant can. The extermination of the majority of the Muslim population would work in India's favor by tipping the demographic balance towards Hindus, in case the UN-mandated plebiscite was held. India had killed many birds with one stone.

The Jammu pogrom was shoved under the carpet. It served the policy of nation-making that India had engineered. Sidelining Jammu pogrom as minor riots and reducing it as part of partition violence, India was free to create the narrative about saving Kashmiris, cast the Poonch uprising as an invasion and not a revolt, make Pakistan appear as the sole aggressor and also tide over the discrepancies of the Maharaja's signing of the treaty of accession with India. India successfully maintained complete silence on the violence of its own military while making the violence by the militia from the North West Frontier Provinces hyper-visible, casting them as "primitive hordes," which is not to exonerate them of their atrocities.

The Jammu pogrom not only exterminated the Muslim community from their homeland but also their forced departure from history books. In the competing accounts of the rival nations' exaggerations and judgments about the violence have become the hallmark to the detriment of the human cost involved. In the Indian narratives, histories, renditions and stories, the pogrom is often recorded in passing and rendered in a manner that favours India as a saviour of Kashmiri people. The violence is often uncritically analyzed through the lens of "Indo-Pak" partition violence when a simple unmotivated analysis proves that this was more than just a spontaneous conflagration or a simple communal riot. It had all the features of concerted planning by the Dogra monarchy, their royal allies, the Hindu supremacist RSS militia, and the Sikhs with inbuilt spontaneity that is part of such exterminations.

A survivor of the pogrom, Dr. Khalida Ghousia Akhtar, a mere 10-year-old in 1947, calls it a holocaust of the east, not mentioned in books. The haunting question generated by such an omission and erasure is how does a full-fledged pogrom become a passing footnote in history? What forces manufacture and impose silence over people who have not only been wounded but continue to bleed in plain sight? And how do people stay silent, or do they ever?

Raw Wounds

An octogenarian, Amanullah Khan Naqshbandi, recounts his terror-filled experience of the pogrom as an 8-year-old. Communal strife had long been a feature of Muslim and Dogra Hindu life in Jammu, but it worsened as events around the creation of India and Pakistan cast their shadow on the region. The news of attacks on Muslims had begun increasing post-August 1947, and the prospect of migrating to Pakistan became real. The local Muslim leaders at the behest of royal authorities asked the community to gather at a public ground from where they would be transported to Sialkot. The first convoy was to leave on November 5. Amanullah, along with his mother and sisters, went in the first batch which mostly consisted of women and children. The men sent their families ahead to safety and intended to join them later. The Muslims genuinely believed that they were being given safe passage to Pakistan.

Amanullah recalls boarding the bus with his family. On the outskirts, the bus veered from the road stopping in the wilderness. The attackers lying in wait fell upon the convoy. Amanullah's mother tried to protect him but found it futile. She urged him to run: "Aman, jump into the canal" she shouted. Amanullah ran. Looking back, he saw blood spurting from his mother's head. Fatally wounded but even then, she kept shouting for him to run. Too scared to dive into the canal, Amanullah hesitated until a woman pulled him to safety on the other side. Amanullah recalls her as his "angel lady." Seventeen members of Amanullah's family alone including his mother were killed.

Such stories are strewn on both sides of the LoC. Privately mourned and grieved. Even if territories are conquered and public commemorations discouraged, people's memories remain unconquerable.

One of the most visible tragic stories of the pogrom belongs to none other than Chowdhary Gulam Abbas the leader of the Muslim conference, a movement against the Dogra regime. Chowdhary's family members were not only killed but also abducted. Dr. Khalida Ghousia Akhtar, is the niece of Chowdhary Abbas, a survivor, she now lives in California. Dr. Akhtar

has seen the tragedy that befell her uncle from close quarters. Jailed by the Dogra regime, Chowdhary's teenage daughter was abducted by an Indian army, also allegedly an RSS affiliate.[3]The girl, when later retrieved, had been married to her abductor.

The beloved poet, Rasa Javadani's family from Bhaderwah also bore the wounds of the pogrom silently. Known as a poet laureate popular for his songs of loss and love, very few knew about Javadani raising his sister's daughter Tahira Sultana as his own. Javadani's sister had been a 17-year-old new mother when her husband Umar-u-Din, a Professor of Persian in Jammu was killed in the pogrom. In an investigative feature, journalist Bilal Handoo pieces together the life of a young professor talking to his daughter Tahira Sultana about the letters he had written to his wife. Each missive is a historic document that allows a peek into the very heart of the pogrom. In moments reflecting eternal love, the young husband would mention his wait for the sweater his wife was knitting for him; which he never got to wear.[4]A deeply religious man with unwavering faith in God, the professor's letters give voice to the growing fear in the Muslim community, he states: "Jammu's mood is murderous." His letters become a countdown to the inching pogrom as he speaks of curfews, people fleeing, the apathy of Sheikh Abdullah, and the bloodthirsty heavily armed Dogra army. The good professor soon realizes that he cannot return home and decides to go to Sialkot. A witness told the family that the professor was last seen guiding a group of panicked women on how to save themselves. Ironically, he was stabbed in the back by his own student and his body was thrown into corpses that had piled in Samba town that day.

A tragic figure that surfaces in many oral and several written narratives are that of a girl named Suraiya. Proving that institutional archives are always at the mercy of people's memory, Suraiya's existence rises like a phoenix, a testament to the pogrom and its aftermath. In an essay, Anuradha Bhasin, a journalist, and activist from Jammu recounts the beginnings of her own political consciousness with the figure of Suraiya. Bhasin recalls: "Bright flowery printed salwar kameez on her slightly plump frame, black Bata school shoes, and plaited, oiled jet-black hair that ended in bloodred, thick nylon ribbons, dilated pupils, slurring lips slightly frothy, twigs in hand—this image of Suraiya is one of the most defining ones from my childhood in Jammu." Known in the locality as Suraiya Pagaal(crazy), she was the living face of the Jammu pogrom. Suraiya had seen her entire family being burnt alive; with her and her mother the only survivors. Bhasin adds: "After that, she had lost her mental balance. While my generation was growing up, Suraiya's story was not unique; there were many such around us, whose faces spoke of the bloodied streets of Jammu. It was easy to stumble on these narratives

in a neighbourhood that had once had a huge Muslim population, one that had thinned drastically in October-November 1947.” Qazi Zaid, a Kashmiri journalist also writes about Suraiya, who with time had become a fixture not just with the people of Jammu but also from the valley who would go for Darbar move.”[5]

In 2003 Ved Bhasin, a veteran journalist gave an open testimony of the Jammu pogrom in a public gathering mapping how the nexus between the Dogra ruler, RSS, and the Indian government produced a perfect genocidal crime – one that was committed and omitted from memory. In recent years, the resurrection of the people’s history in face of institutional erasure signals the coming of age of “history” consciousness in the Kashmiri people. Kashmiris are increasingly culling their native history from the hegemonic narratives that favour India’s imperial project in Kashmir. In the context of the Jammu pogrom, academic research by native scholars has always been done in some measure, and often to cull it from the obfuscation of partition narrative.[7]

Reclaiming Memory

In the last 70 years, the Indian narrative has dominated the explanations of the Kashmir dispute and the events of 1947 and after. The Indian mainstream narrative around Kashmir’s contested accession starts without blinking an eye, and seamlessly jumps from the “dilemma” of the Hindu Dogra despot about whether to join Pakistan or India or to stay Independent to “Pathan tribesmen aided by Pakistan” and then to Indian army “presented as heroic” rushing to save “a divided Kashmir for India.”[8]Period.

The invisibility of the Jammu pogrom is deliberately woven into Indian politics. The historiography supporting the nation-making was fine-tuned to cast India as the saviour of Kashmir and in this the Kashmiri client-politicians of the time were complicit. After the pogrom, Sheikh Abdullah and Jawahar Lal Nehru together brushed aside the pogrom as mere “tragic events” in Jammu. Sheikh Abdullah went to the extent of blaming the victims for inviting the terror because they sided with Pakistan. On the other hand, to her credit, in the aftermath, Sheikh's wife Begum Akbar Jahan took up the mantle of rehabilitating the women survivors. Sheikh Abdullah in due course did express some regret if not remorse when the Hindu fanatic heat was fully turned on him. He began to realize the duplicitous policy India was playing but it was too little too late. As Kashmiris like to say, he had by then sold his soul to the devil. India deposed and disposed of him, like used yarn soon after.

Today even as history consciousness has grown in Kashmiris and is finding expression, the exacting Indian occupation is mounting new technologies of erasure. Post-August 5th, 2019, the Indian government is not only violating Kashmir's territorial sovereignty and domicile laws but also its language and history. Included in the array of enforced changes that the direct rule from Delhi has imposed, are new public holidays marking the despot Maharaja Hari Singh's birthday and October 26, the day the Indian army annexed Kashmir. Both of these days are markers of subjugation, occupation, and humiliation for Kashmiris. These rulings add salt to the wounds of Kashmiris; they become painful reminders of the settler-colonial policies they are facing.

In face of such imperial erasures, the memory becomes an urgent duty. The pogrom must be "reclaimed," if only to save it from erasure. It is not reclamation for sadistic reliving of the genocidal murder and mayhem but to affirm that the memory and martyrdom of those killed and who survived. To reclaim the pogrom means to restore the humanity of the people made invisible by death and humiliation. At the same time, it entails understanding that without resurrecting the event of this catastrophic magnitude in its proper historical context there can be no true understanding of Kashmiri resistance and how to dismantle the disingenuous Indian narrative and its military occupation. And to make sure no one's perceived as fictions of an ebbing mind.

[1] There is some confusion about the newspaper not being published on the date which occurs in some accounts as 10 October 1948 as mentioned by Christopher Snedden. Ilyas Chattha clarifies saying the report about the 1947 Jammu events was in The Times issue of 10 August 1948.

[2] See Anuradha Bhasin Jamwal, *Prejudice in Paradise, Communalism Combat*, Vol 11, 2005; Ilyas Chattha, *Partition, and Locality: Violence, Migration, and Development in Gujranwala and Sialkot 1947-1961*. OUP Catalogue, 2011. Christopher Snedden, *Kashmir: The Unwritten History*, Harper Collins India, 2011; Arjun Appadurai & Arien Mack *India's world: The politics of creativity in a globalized society*. New Delhi: Rain Tree (Rupa), 2012; Iffat Rashid, *Theatrics of a 'Violent State' or 'State of Violence': Mapping Histories and Memories of Partition in Jammu and Kashmir*, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 43:2, 2020

[3]Vijayalakshmi Balakrishnan. Growing Up and Away: Narratives of Indian Childhoods: Memory, History, Identity. OUP. 2011

[4]Bilal Handoo. 1947: The Last Letter. Kashmir Life. 2016 <https://kashmirlife.net/1947-the-last-letter-123112/>

[5]Zaid Qazi, JammuMassacre@70: The frenzy of Suraiya, and the silence of history, <https://freepresskashmir.news/2017/11/05/jammumassacre70-the-frenzy-of-suraiya-and-the-silence-of-history/>

[7]Sheikh Showkat Hussain, Kashmir Profiles, Dar al Kotob Ilmiyah, Kashmir, 2017

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Cooking in Kashmir: The Story of How to Make Yakhni in Our Kitchen

Misbah Reshi

Living alone in Delhi with my father, my mother did not get to spend too much time with her mother-in-law (my grandmother). In the recollection of her memories with my grandmother, one that she recalls often is from a late evening in the June of 1994 when my parents were visiting their home in Srinagar.

My mother's *poph-hash* (husband's aunt), lovingly called *Poph-taeth*, was visiting their home.



Known as an extremely strict woman, the *naushe* (daughters-in-law) were always on their toes in her presence. My mother was not used to life in *warryuv* (in-laws' home) and especially the one- as she mentions specifically to the annoyance of my father, that was in downtown Srinagar. *Poph-taeth* entered the *baithak* (living room) and asked my mother to make Yakhni (a curd-based mutton dish) for my grandfather.

My grandfather, the headmaster of Islamia High School, was an intelligent but strict man. He was extremely particular about the food he

ate, and even the slightest mistake in measurement led him to leaving the food untouched. My mother entered the kitchen reluctantly, fearing the taunts that lay ahead if she fell short of the expectations. She knew how to make Yakhni, but her anxiety was palpable. My grandmother, one who was always looking out for her daughters-in-law, immediately came to her rescue and entered the kitchen. She stood next to her and told her, "*wael, be havey*" (Come, I will show you).

All the utensils were stocked in a pile outside the cabinets. They had been emptied out the day before by army officials during a search operation. My grandmother picked up a *deechwaer* (copper vessel) from the pile and put it on the gas stove. She put one kg of mutton with four to five cups of water, enough for the mutton to be completely immersed in water.

To the right of the stove, a blue shelf held all the spices she needed. She took four black cardamoms, one teaspoon ground fennel seeds, two bay leaves, two small green cardamoms, and a little bit of salt to add to the vessel. She asked my mother to look over the vessel and keep the flame on till the meat got tender.

She walked to the fridge and took out a *zambutdoud waer* (clay pot) which held around one kilo of curd. My father's youngest brother was usually the one put on duty to bring the curd from our local *ghoor* (dairy farmer). Much like *kandar waan* (bakery), women from my family were not allowed to go to the *ghoor* (curd shop).

While some spaces were inaccessible to women from before, most were made so post militarisation in Kashmir in the early 1990s. According to my father, grandmother loved going to Jama Masjid. She was in adulation of Mirwaiz Maulvi Farooq, and every Friday used to go to the Masjid only for his *waaz-e-shareef* (religious sermons). When he died, she cried for days- the valley mourned collectively. She eventually stopped going to her favourite place- first out of grief and then due to the growing masculinisation of the public spaces. As militarisation increased, and Indian armed forces occupied streets and spaces- she, much like other women in Kashmir, was confined to the home.

Zambutdoud as chhu dyun dun waryah, my grandmother ordered. My mother followed the instructions and took the wooden hand blender and started blending the curd till it was smooth



and there were no lumps. My grandmother picked up another *deechwaer* (copper vessel) from the pile, put it on the gas stove, poured the whisked curd in it. She turned the gas on and asked my mother to stir the curd till it reduces to half. Once reduced, she poured the cooked mutton along with its stock in the vessel. Just then, they both heard the *azaan* (call to prayer) and knew it was time for *khofatan* (Salat-Al-Isha).

While my grandmother prayed, my mother julienned three red onions. In a small pan, she put four tablespoons of ghee and fried the onions till they were golden brown and crisp. Returning to the kitchen after the fifteen minutes, my grandmother turned the gas, on which the mutton

was simmering, off. They had to wait for the ghee, along with the onions, to reach room temperature before they could add it to the main dish.

In the meantime, my grandmother directed my mother to get the dried mint leaves from the cupboard on the right side of the *baithak*. This small cupboard was out of sight from the main entry- it was where my grandmother kept her favourite crockery. Kashmiris, specifically women, have a great love for their crockery- it is a topic of conversation and competition between families and friends. For my grandmother, the importance of guests was directly proportional to the crockery in which they were served, unlike the age-old Kashmiri hierarchy of determining worth on the basis of the food offered (serving tea and kebab to the most important and tea and biscuits to the unimportant).

My mother had packed the dried mint leaves after the leaves had been lying out in the sun on a tray for a few days and stored them in the cupboard dedicated to crockery. In Kashmir, one rarely uses store bought mint leaves. It is common to grow mint leaves in the backyard, a must in all kitchen gardens. The leaves are plucked and dried till they can be used in Yakhni (at least that is the only purpose I have seen it serve in my kitchen).

That week, my grandmother couldn't bring herself to open that cupboard. Three days prior to the day of this story, a militant had attacked an army bunker on the road outside my house and escaped. The army officials were angry at the attack, but more so at the fact that he managed to escape.

It was routine for young boys to be sent to shrines as soon as news of an attack or suspected crackdown broke. Since Khaankah-e-Maula was close to my house, my grandmother used to send all her four sons to the shrine, fearing that they might be taken away, booked under false charges, subjected to torture, or undergo an 'enforced disappearance'. That day was no different- as soon as my family heard about the attack, all the young boys ran to the shrine.

The army entered our home angrier than usual. They thought the militant might have taken refuge in our home, and searched fiercely for him. When they could not find him, despite the elders of my family telling them that the militant might have crossed over to the other side of the lane, the army started looking for arms and ammunition. It was evident that our house was facing the wrath of their masculine egos, and the kitchen was one of its victims. With their big boots, big egos, and big guns, they began their search (read: vandalism). They dug into our stock of rice grains and upturned it, opened all our cupboards, and threw everything on the

floor. They stepped on my uncle's university books and the religious books we had in the room. My grandfather, an extremely religious man who didn't even allow family members to enter his room without *wudhu* - sat helplessly while they searched every corner of his room. Despite his disability, he was forced to stand so they could frisk him. My grandmother pleaded with them to be gentle and careful, but in vain. Soon, realising the futility of this exercise and running out of bluster, they left.

The house was a mess- boxes of spices upturned, utensils strewn around, books half torn and dirtied. My grandmother began tidying up, and in doing so her favourite crockery caught her attention. It lay broken on the *baithak*. She had saved it in a box at the back of the cupboard. Unable to bear the loss of her most prized possessions, she left everything as it was and went to her room.

Consequently, entering the kitchen was painful for her. It reminded her of the humiliation of being powerless in a space that was hers. It reminded her of the memories collected over years, shattered in seconds. It reminded her of the spaces that she explored when the army didn't occupy them.

Knowing her pain, my mother silently went to the cupboard, which was still in disarray, and took out the box of dried mint leaves. Once the ghee reached room temperature, my mother added it along with the fried onions in the curd and mutton mixture along with crushed dry mint leaves. Leaving the flame simmering, she cleaned the used utensils and shut the gas off in five minutes, knowing that the *Yakhni* was ready.

My grandmother took out a portion for my grandfather in a *kaenz* (copper bowl), where she had already put the boiled rice, and asked my mother to take it to him. In that small act of entering her kitchen and cooking, my grandmother broke an age-old stereotype. Despite continued external violation, she ensured that this space, her space, continued to be one of bonding, of camaraderie and companionship, a refuge against the violent realities of Kashmir. It was her act of resistance against all the forces that stood against her, and against all women in Kashmir.

Loss, Longing and Survival: Women Family Members of the Disappeared in Kashmir

Natasha Rather

A few years back as I was travelling with Sakina (name changed), the wife of a man who was subjected to enforced disappearance in the early 1990s from a remote area in North Kashmir. With her, I had conversations about life, the ever-evolving political situation in Kashmir– one of the most common topics of discussion when Kashmiris are together. We talked about how Kashmiris were mistreated and how justice was elusive. When I asked her how she looked at her own life and her struggles, she said that it had been an extremely challenging journey that had still not ended for her. She spoke of how she wanted a good life for her three kids who had suffered from a traumatic childhood.

I grew up in the 1990s in Srinagar and like many other people my age, I regularly witnessed violence perpetrated by the Indian armed forces. However, within a protected environment, my experiences were limited. By the time I was out of school, the conflict in Kashmir seemed to be a serious but fancy topic of discussion, especially, about the mourning and suffering women who were the indirect victims of violence. They bore the brunt of the men folk being killed, detained, tortured, disappeared or maimed.

Around the mid-2000s, when a lecturer in my college asked for suggestions for a topic to be discussed during class, I said ‘half-widows.’ After all, every newspaper and magazine was writing about these women; who were struggling on many levels. We discussed these women as victims and sufferers and went on with our lives, a routine in so many academic spaces.

Years later, my work in the development sector and with human rights organizations in Kashmir took me to some of the most remote corners of the valley and it made me realize that there was more to the lives of these women than being mere ‘victims.’ Every meeting and every conversation with women whose course of lives had been gravely disturbed and, in some cases, completely changed owing to the dense militarization here, brought to the fore many stories of their brave struggle for survival and an undying spirit of resistance. Women family members of the disappeared and their struggle for truth despite the absolute impunity to the Indian armed forces was admirable and every meeting with Sakina made me increasingly believe in the resolve of Kashmiri women to resist in multiple ways.

There are about 8000 persons in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) who were subjected to enforced/involuntary disappearances. No disappeared person has ever re-surfaced and while the government of India vehemently denies these numbers, it acknowledges the disappearance of some 4008 persons who they claim crossed the LOC to get arms training in Pakistan and never returned. There is no official documentation on this. The government does not have a record of how many ‘half widows’ there are in J&K. However, Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) and Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society (JKCCS) estimated that there were about 1500 ‘half-widows’ in the region. There are over 7000 mass graves across J&K which are unmarked, which present a possibility that many of the disappeared may be buried in these graves. The government refuses to carry out forensic examination of these graves, despite the recommendations of the now dissolved State Human Rights Commission, leaving these families to endlessly wait for truth.

But what did this unending wait mean for a woman in Kashmir whose husband disappeared? Most of the disappearances in J&K took place in the rural districts where people faced educational and economic disadvantages, especially in the early nineties. Women living in rural settings in Kashmir enjoy far less privileges than women living in the city and this meant that women family members of the forcibly disappeared men faced additional disadvantages. These women were, as a general rule, raised to be demure, to conform to social norms that dictate how they should present themselves and to mostly confine themselves to the boundaries of their home with very few exceptions, a situation for women that became worse especially after the dense militarization in the early 1990s that led to widespread incidents of systematic sexual violence against women.

So this woman, wife of a disappeared man, suddenly, constantly and inevitably found herself in highly precarious and exploitative situations on the long road to justice where she was visible to everyone as the half-widow. She was compelled to step outside of her protected environment to look for the whereabouts of her husband and in trying to fend for her family. The process of getting an FIR registered by the local police after the disappearance was an extremely challenging process and she was ill-equipped to deal with her situation. The search for her husband in police stations, detention and torture centers and army camps - spaces guarded heavily by Indian armed forces personnel exposed her to the risk of sexual violence.

They were in direct confrontation with the state that completely disregarded their struggle. There were no answers from the state that encouraged silence and forgetting. The agonizing search for the whereabouts of the husband only brought disappointment as there are no legal and administrative remedies against enforced disappearances. In addition to the lack of any redressal mechanism, she also dealt with traumatized family members. Many of these women who joined the APDP at some point were part of the monthly protests where they found themselves speaking ineloquently. They were not even prepared to talk to other women from the city and yet they continued to attend these gatherings.

Where the State failed to bring the perpetrators to justice, the society stepped in. In their struggle for demanding to know the whereabouts of their disappeared family members, relatives and the people from the neighbourhood joined hands. Many families of the disappeared who needed financial help were offered support. In fact, the term ‘half widow’ was coined and popularized to draw attention to the plight of these women who were suffering on multiple levels. She could not get remarried, many of them did not want to. Some did, and started their lives afresh.

In our society as I have realized, much value is placed on women who silently endure and the one’s that assert their rights are less agreeable. Therefore, when the woman, who was much disappointed by the justice system, asserted for herself and her children the right to inheritance from her disappeared husband’s family, she met with disappointment again. Sakina, at one point, was forced to live with her children in a 64 square feet room, left to fend for herself because her husband’s family did not want her or her children in their lives. It did not matter that she was in that particular situation for no fault of hers. Her husband most probably happened to be at the wrong place and at the wrong time when he was disappeared by the Indian military personnel.

Women are often identified by the roles that they play in the society. We are wives, sisters, mothers, and daughters. As women, we are expected to conform to certain ideals of what is acceptable in society. . Anything above and beyond that, amounts to moral corruption. When the half widow refuses to accept this label as her only identity, she becomes a subject of criticism most often from people immediately surrounding her. It takes her an enormous amount of courage to claim an alternate identity.

Therefore, I cannot write of the struggle of Kashmiri women without talking of their resistance. Kashmir women are fighting an extremely repressive regime while navigating highly restrictive social spaces. There is a very limited space for legitimacy of what women can do or say. Despite that, there is a brave spirit of resistance. Throughout my work with women in Kashmir, be it the family members of the disappeared or the women survivors of the mass rape in Kunan Poshpora, I have realized that women are exceptionally resolute. These women have invested in hope and I write this at the risk of sounding clichéd. Despite all odds, Sakina, after she was abandoned by her family learned new skills and got on to her feet to ensure that her children get the education that will enable them to create a better life while continuing to fight for justice. These women have fought against forgetting and that is their biggest resistance. It is imperative and long overdue that the world looks at them as inspirational for their everyday ordinary acts of survival.

POETRY



Driving without a lasan in Kashmir

Ather Zia

the law has much blood on its talons. it's especially ethical if you don't have a lasan. between background checks and grease-money, the lasan, leaking from the law's stained teeth, is what you need, get it maybe never.

anyways, it's a contrivance, a measure of know-how over a vehicle to transport people in metal boxes when you already carry them in your heart, like your boy who died of a bullet that grazed your chest and entered his.

in Kashmir when you drive without a lasan you drive on the right side of life.

i sleep to dreams of being a young, irascible driver from Maisuma, the invincible artery, throwing stones at paramilitary his happiest past-time (being with a Neruda or a Said is not always the best you can dream), fed on a staple

diet of an adoring mother's curses. I am terribly in love and sore from heartache – without a lasan but that is my last worry – probably till I have no money to bribe policemen who catch me every time I stop like a stone unwarranted

outside my beloved's house, not that she cares. i drive singing to old Bollywood songs and cursing India in the same breath. Wishing every bunker melting away like i believe, without license.

Ather Zia, 2013

حقدار سُنڊ حق

مریم کشمیری

کوٽ تام روزِ کوشرُ تَتِه کني عزابسيٰ منز
یتِه پاتِه گاڏِ ارمان تَریشي هُند چُه آبسيٰ منز

وَأرثِ یه سَارسيٰ پُوزِ حق چُهس نِه واش کُرَنس
نتِه وُنتِه آیه بُلِي کتِه ارڙجاءِ کبابِ سيٰ منز

زانتِه یه سیود تِه سادَے گِرھس اُپَرِي وعدَے
کتِه باتِه سَتِي تهاووتِه آزاد خوابسيٰ منز

مستورئي هُند حال بنتِ هوا چِه پامال
گهرُ یتِه کران چهلورِ پار روزتِه نقابسيٰ منز

کأتیا گُلابِ نرگنِ بیبهِ باسمین تِه سُنبل
بُرُ گے پھولنہ برونڙھے گرند چهنه حسابسيٰ منز

گے کأتِي کاروانے شُر بُڙ تِه بیبهِ جوانے
زُهرِي گے کأتِي خانے ونِه کپا جوابسيٰ منز

مریم کران زاری رَیسِ منگانِ یاری
اسي سارني سمنه تهاو شاملِ ثوابسيٰ منز

Haqdaar Sund Haq

Maryam Kashmiri

Kot taam rozi Kashur tith kaen azaabsi menz
Ith paeth gaadi arman treshi hund chu aabsi menz

Waaris yi saarsi poaz, haq chus ni waash kadnas
Natti wann ti aayi bel kath adjya kabaabsi menz

Zaeneth yi seud ti saadai kerhaas apaez waadai
Kathi baathi seth thaovoth azaad khwabsi menz

Mastoorni hund haal bint-e-hawa cha pamaal
Ghar ith karaaan chi lolpaar ruezthi naqaabsi menz

Kaetya golaab, nargis beyi Yasmeeen tai sombal
Barr gai pholni breunthi greand cha ni hisaabsi menz

Gai kaet kaarwaanai sheur bed bayyi jawaanai
Tcher gai kaet khaanai wanni kya jawaabsi menz

Maryam karaan zaeri rabbas mangaan yaari
Asi saarni semeth thaav shaamil sawaabsi menz

بہ وِنتہ زانہ گس

نسیم شفاء

بہ پُچس باغی تہ کُنڑی دُپھی دِڑ دامنہ تھپہ مے
بہ گھڑس بالی تہ پُڑ لونچہ لوم بُتھی پھری واؤن

مے دڑوو تھکھ تہ سہ کنہ پل ژول کھور تلہ نیرتہ
مے دزایہ تھپہ سو نیچ گاسہ کُڑے نیہ آبن

وکھ تہ ژول ڈھالہ دوان بتہ روزس سفری
بہ کنڈین، واو دکن، پلہ در دس بیہ گاسہ کریچن

چھس نہ نکھ دور ووں کھوڑان مارتہ تراون
مے یمَن رَسہ رَسہ کُڑ گیت تہ بُرم دامنس

باغہ واڑ شیچہ مے ز وولہ تاز گولابو پیٹھی پکھ
بالہ وڑھ سونتہ شحج گراے ہواوچ مے ونان

وولہ ولے پان بہ چانس دُیونی پانس
میانہ کھور تلہ چہ زمینہ چھ ارمان ٹلن نا مے قدم

یاربلی یپ چھ تھیکان میون جگر اولنین

میانہ بر تلی چھ ژلان سَمیہ صدم ژھاتی ژھاتی

کالہ ژگرس چھے گژھان میانی مٹل پھرنے گلہ زیو
والہ واشن چھ ژھینان گنژ یہ وژو میانی وچھتھ

بس اکے باس تہ ایحساس بہ چھس لہ وان اندری
دور دُنی یاه رود مے ژرژان ژھاین پوت پوت

Be Wanith Zaani Kas

Naseem Shafaie

Be paches baeg te kaend dhapi dech daamni tham mya
Be khaches baali te puche loanchi lomum buth phaer waavan

Mya dicaav thakh ti su kanni pal chol khori tali neereth
Mya dichai thap sou nech ghasi kreti nee aaban

Wakh te chol tchaali divan bete ruzes safri
Bi kanden waavi dakan pali dari das beyyi ghaasi krechen
Ches ni nakhi doori wun khotchaan maareth traavan
Mya yiman rassi rassi ker ghed ti borem daamnas

Bhaagi wech shesh mya zi woli taazi golabo peth pakh
Baali wech sonti shehej graai hawhech mya Wanaan
Wali walai paan bi cheenes dedwan paanas
Myani khori talchi zameeni chu arman dalan na mya kadam
Yaari bael yup chu thekaan myoon jigar aawlyanen

Myaani barri tali chu chalaan samyi sadam chayi chayi
Kaale chekras chay ghatchaan myani misl pehrnai galli zev

Waale waashan chi tchenaan ghand yi wudav mean wusheth
Bas akoi baas ti ehssas bi chus lalli waan andrae
Daur e duniya rued mya tchere tchan chaayan poat poat

ACADEMIC ESSAYS



Gender, Faith and Politics: Locating Shia Women in Discussions on Kashmir

Ifsha Zehra

Abstract

How does a centuries-old incident find relevance in the contemporary context of Kashmir? How might public gatherings in protests and ritual interventions open different ways in the otherwise securitized and militarised public setting? How do they impact the long-term consciousness of everyday violence? Based on semi-structured interviews of three Shia women, this essay examines these questions through the intertwined politics of faith, gender, and politics in the context of Kashmir. Through the commemoration of significant historical events in Shia Islam, women find respite from multiple restrictions that their bodies are subjected to. The essay posits that in a militarized conflict, faith and ritual practices become subversive, enable mobility, and present a potential for agency. I argue that Shia women's participation in these ritual practices has a feminist as well as political formulation. The essay also draws comparisons between Shia religious assemblies and political assemblies in Kashmir and explores the themes of the politics of public mourning, witnessing, and visibility. This examination is foregrounded in the Shia Muharram processions and the protests by the families of disappeared persons. I formulate these as sites of counter-narratives, visual production, performance, and counter-memory, and analyze whether these assemblies have a bearing on one another.

Keywords

Anthropology, Shia Women, Kashmir, Politics, Religion, Culture, Mourning, Feminist Theory, Visual Studies



Figure 1. Shia women mourning in a Muharram *majlis*. Photograph taken by the author, 2020.

On August 29, 2020, the tenth day of Muharram (the first month of the Islamic calendar), religious processions of Shia mourners in Kashmir were subjected to disproportionate violence by the Indian state forces. The mourners, including Shia women, were injured. Many people were arbitrarily detained and criminalized for violating a ban on religious processions, and for exhibiting sentiments of self-determination. Many Shia mourners received pellet injuries and for pelting stones at the armed forces (Ganai, 2020). The procession taken out on the Day of Ashura (10th day of Muharram) has been banned by the state since the early nineties, in the fear of Shia mourners' political affirmations to the movement of self-determination. This was not the first incident of this kind: the use of force and violence on public gatherings in Kashmir has been ongoing for decades.ⁱ However, this incident, an otherwise routine practice of state violence in the world's most militarized region,ⁱⁱ sparked conversations about the Shia religious identity and its interconnection with Kashmiri political identity, which has long been seen as distinct.ⁱⁱⁱ Shia men and women were seen responding to this violence by invoking religious slogans and seeking strength from their faith. The religious practice was, both, a cause for their marginalization, and the means of resisting it.

Despite the centrality of religion to the politics of identity and resistance, it remains rather unexplored and under-theorized in the case of Shia Muslims, and specifically, Shia women of Kashmir. A decolonial-feminist understanding necessitates a shift from such exclusive discourses to plurality. This essay seeks to, first, pose a question to a lack of critical work of this intersection of gender, politics, and religion. Second, it attempts to examine the narrative underpinning the faith of Kashmiri Shia women amidst an intersectional marginalized

identity. I seek to unpack some of these questions in the essay: In the context of oppression and loss, how are faith practices of Shia women important? How do these uniquely Shia practices become agential for women? Third, it attempts to draw connections between the political gatherings against the Indian state and the Shia religious gathering as ways of embodied participation in counter-memory production. Through this interconnection, I observe in both these sites, the practice of mourning, formulation of the counter-public, the use of visibility, and the scope of creating counter-narratives.

A vast body of work has examined and reinstated the historicity of these religious events, a lot of which remains contested even within different schools of thought in Islam. However, dwelling deeper into those discussions is beyond the scope of this essay. My primary interest lies in situating the interconnection of the political context of Kashmir with the religious lives of Shia women and vice-versa. My understanding of Shia women's faith practices is informed by my own experiences and observations of growing up as, and around, Shia women in Kashmir. These experiences have been shaped by a heightened awareness of the political, gendered, religious marginalization from my lived experiences as well as through observations of other Shia women, in community gatherings, and through media framing. In this essay, I borrow from scholars in decolonial-feminist studies as well critical visual studies to unpack some of the questions aforementioned. I want to emphasize that this is an introductory examination of these questions which remain understudied in the Kashmiri scholarship. For this ethnographic study, I interviewed three Kashmiri Shia women--- Shahzada (73), Masooma (26), and Sadiya (20) [names changed]. All three are practicing believers of the Shia faith and have suffered first-hand state violence. I attempt to unfold some of the questions through analyzing the narratives as experienced by these women in their subjectivities, and also unpack the meanings they assign to their experiences.

Shia Faith, Evolving Practices, and Ritual Intercession

Shia is an Arabic word for 'party', as Shias claim allegiance to Ali ibn Abi Talib (Shiite Ali) and *Imam(s)* (his descendants), and *Ahl-al-Bayt* (their family members) (Tabatabai, 1977). A difference in the *fiqh* (religious jurisprudence) from the majoritarian Sunni Islam has been the cause of persecution over the fourteen centuries of the Shia existence. In certain periods, this persecution became so atrocious that the concept of *taqiya* or assimilation was developed by Shia Muslims to protect themselves from being identifiable in the face of adversity (D'Souza, 2012). In Kashmir too, this practice was observed by Shias for safeguarding their life, particularly after the downfall of the Chaks (the last Kashmiri native rulers), in the period of Mughal and Afghan rule in Kashmir. The persecution of Shias led them to interact discretely in society and inhabit mostly with other Shias. This alienation is one of the reasons for the conjectures, stereotypes, and even fascination with Shia Muslims by the Sunni majority in the region. Perhaps, it is this alienation that has led to Shia faith practices being a subject of aversion in the larger discourse on Kashmir. This Shia alienation coincides with the overarching framework of violence perpetuated in Kashmir by various violent regimes in the last five hundred years. Hence, any discussion on Kashmiri Shia Muslims needs to situate their intersecting subject positioning arising from their religious, political as well as ethnonational identity.

In this context, I am interested in locating this examination in the lived realities of Shia women whose religious lives form a major part of their identity, actions, and life choices. They find themselves uniquely and disadvantageously placed in the socio-political matrix on account of their ethnonational, political, social, gendered as well as a religious identity. They are encumbered by gendered marginalization in the form of cultural repression as well as by state control in an armed conflict. Being a part of a minority community, their actions become highly monitored and regulated, a phenomenon widely present in minority communities across South Asia. Additionally, they also have to navigate the panoptic militaristic gaze.

For Shia women, there is an emphasis on religious education in *maktab/darsgah* (religious school), to read Quran, to become familiarised with the tenets of Islam, the lives of the Prophet, and his family members, to learn distinct codes of conduct of piety and modesty. Besides the religious knowledge, Shia believers learn the vocabulary of loss, early on, as they learn about the struggles of the Prophet and his family. So much so that they call themselves *azadaar* (mourners). There is an emphasis on *shahadat* (martyrdom) of the Imams, of *taqlid* (learning through imitation), *mazloom* (victim), *maqal* (place of death), *zulm* (oppression), and *zorwar* (oppressor). This vocabulary is enhanced through language, devotional maneuvering, and rituals. What is interesting about this self-framing of loss by Shia is that it comes very close to the self-framing of Kashmiris at large.



Figure 1. Women performing the ritual of chest-beating. Photograph taken by the author, 2020.

So what about the faith practices of Kashmiri Shia women makes it a site for critical examination? The framework provided by Saba Mahmood in *Politics of Piety* (2005) is crucial in untangling this question. Mahmood (2005), in her ethnographic monograph, proposes a shift from a secular feminist understanding of agency and sets new pathways in decolonial feminist theory as well as cultural anthropology. She foregrounds ritual practice of the ‘non-western other’ and counters the savior liberal feminist discourses rooted in the insularity of the western framework through her exploration of practices and self-understanding of Muslim women (in

Egypt). Her work guides my approach to this essay. I argue that women's ritual practices have agential possibilities not only in the religious spheres but in the political and social realm as well. The assertion of religious identity through these practices should be seen as ethical practices of legitimate subjects. In this next section, I discuss some of these faith-based ritual practices.

Faith-based rituals are ever-evolving and contextual. James C. Livingston (2001, p. 98), describes them as an "agreed-on and formalized pattern of ceremonial movements and verbal expressions carried out in a sacred context." For Shia women, these ritual practices happen daily, monthly, and yearly; some are situational and often follow cyclical or repetitive patterns. These rituals are often colored with sensibilities of loss, life, health, happiness, wealth, stability, justice, and the afterlife. The liturgical calendar of days that Shias remember (often of birth and death of important figures for Shia belief), forms an important part of the lives of Shia women. The public rituals often happen in gatherings led by men, and women take physical, and even, metaphorical, marginal positions (D'Souza, 2012). Women have their rituals too: these practices mostly take place within homes but in the months of *Muharram* and *Safar* (second month in the Islamic calendar), they take women into public spaces, in *Imambargahs* (place of worship for Shia Muslims), in *the majlis* (gathering), many of which are often held at the homes of other people. These gatherings are not only sites of the religious congregation but also of socializing and interaction.

Shia rituals, particularly the ones practiced by women have evolved in the past few decades. In my interaction with Shahzada, a 73-year-old Shia woman, she helps me build the arc of the evolution of these ritual practices. She describes her childhood where she would participate in *the majlis* (religious gathering) which would begin with a sermon by a religious leader (a man), followed by *marsiya* (lyrical lamentation). Religious interpretation and women's role in religion was told by men. *Zanaan Majlis* (women's religious gatherings) were unheard of. In the last decade, there has been a shift in these rituals as women practice and interpret religion themselves, in the gatherings exclusively for women. These *majlis* (gatherings) are often dedicated to important women figures in Shia Islam like Fatimah Zahra, Bibi Zainab, or even four-year-old Bibi Sakina^{iv}. Often in these gatherings, women seek spiritual intercession and divine intervention to bear personal and (or) collective loss. These sites become synonymous with hope as women make *dua-e-khaer* (prayer) and offer *niyaz* (petition) to get their wishes fulfilled. Their participation in these gatherings allows women to leave their domestic spheres at ease, meet other community members and in these practices, they find a sense of respite from the multiple restrictions imposed by the state as well as by the local patriarchy. One of the most compelling sites of women circumventing the double jeopardy is the public mourning processions which happen annually in designated places in Kashmir. These sites are not only interesting because of their subversive gender potential but also because of their political connotations in the public sphere.

Kashmir and Karbala: Of Counter-Public, Counter-Memory, and Counter-Visuality

Shia believers identify as mourners; their grief is public, visual, and works towards preserving memory. This is because of the defining moment in Shia history- the Battle of Karbala. The tragedy of Karbala (south of present-day Baghdad), can be outlined as a narrative of the oppressor versus the oppressed, of truth against falsehood, and subversion over allegiance. In 680 A.D, Imam Hussain, the grandson of Prophet Mohammad, was called upon by the people of Kufa who were under the tyranny of the Umayyad leadership of Yazid. In the battle of Karbala, seventy-two odd men were faced with thousands of Umayyad soldiers. A predictable outcome of this tragic incident was the death of all the seventy-two men, and the incarceration of women and children accompanying the fighting men (Tabatabai, 1977). Shia faith emphasizes the remembrance of oppression and makes known the narrative of suffering and tyranny in Karbala.

Across the world, the commemoration of Karbala is not simply restricted to the religious realm. It is relational to the socio-political context in which the believers are located. For example, in the context of Tehran, Gustav (1972, p. 119) argues, it provides “an idiom for the communication of conflicting claims over resources and power particularly under conditions of social change.” The meanings associated with Karbala are particularly augmented in marginal communities. Kashmir as a site of political dispossession and occupation stands as a testament to this augmentation. Here, this symbolic offering of Karbala provides metaphors and meaning to the long-drawn struggle against oppression by the Indian state. It is almost prophetic to the famous Shia phrase, “every day is *Ashura*, every land is Karbala;” Kashmir epitomizes this violence and loss.

While there are many ways to approach the relevance of Karbala in the Kashmiri context, I want to focus on the public act of mourning and publicizing grief as practices of both the Shia faith as well as the people of Kashmir.

Mourning and funeral processions are sites of targeted violence in Kashmir. This is because these processions are taken out in the aftermath of the killings of rebels as well as civilians. This gathering is a political formulation that demands the attention of the world and stands in opposition to the state narratives of normalcy in the region. It challenges the state's dictation of the bodies that deserve to live. For the state, the Kashmiri population is expendable, and even in their death, it decides which bodies can be grieved. This challenge to “grievability” (Butler, 2010) is also posed by Shia believers who have persisted in ascertaining their right to grieve [the martyrs of Karbala], even when it has been a subject of disputation in the majoritarian Sunni discourse which prohibits prolonged mourning.

In Kashmir, people participate in public gatherings to enhance their resistance movement and to make heard and make visible the brutal repression of the Indian state. Much like the public gatherings in Shia processions which rely on these narratives of the oppressor and the oppressed. Visuality is centered around the (in)visibility of the people's rejection of the enforced union with the Indian state. These are exhibited in the form of protests, image

circulation on social media, through photographic documentation, graffiti on the public walls, and mourning in funeral sites. These not only perpetuate visibility, but are integral to the formulation of counter-memory, and can be seen as a work of documentation through embodiment. This has been part of a collective (counter) archival work passed on by not only professional practitioners but by people themselves.

This embodied participation happens not only through protest participation, marches, etc. but also through collective invisibility in the forms of shutdowns, lockdowns. This is complemented with the hyperawareness of the viewers of these actions and to invoke the viewers to think of ways in which militarization and colonization have reduced the population to a colonial entity.

This vehement spectacle of oppression is aimed at resisting forgetting the numerous incidents of violence in the 'optic regime' (Misri 2014, p.137). These practices attempt to subvert censorship, reprisal, surveillance. The public visibility of resistance and the state tactics of control are crucial to formulating the visual culture in the region. Nicholas Mirzoeff's (2011) framing of visual culture is of relevance here. He argues that visual culture is not simply the total amount of what has been made to be seen but is the relation between what is visible and the names that we give to what is seen. It also involves what is invisible or kept out of sight. This politics of visibility/invisibility is also striking as it brings to the public, the otherwise private act of mourning (Malik, 2018).

Similarly, in Muharram processions, there is a concerted effort towards visibility through signs and symbols invoking the message of Karbala. Most processions are led by an *alam* (the emblematic crest), flags, banners, with inscribed initials with names of the martyrs. The basis of these processions is not simply remembrance but the interpellation of a global audience. The efforts of the Shia community over generations to preserve the legacy of Karbala have been sustained and produced, through alternative historiography, oral narration, a re-enactment of the tragedy of Karbala through 'repetitive acts' (Butler, 1993). In both cases, the visual spectacle through the embodiment of brutal violence, of death, of incarceration is intended to provoke action, to set off mobilization, to build counter-memory.

Engendering Public Mourning

Public mourning in Kashmir- for martyrs of Karbala or fellow Kashmiris- is a political act. It entails accessing public spaces; unlike most parts of the world, the 'public' in Kashmir has additional connotations. It is dominated by the strategic positioning of military camps, bunkers, checkpoints, to monitor, restrict and surveil its inhabitants. This sets the 'inequality of movements' (Junaid, 2016) in the public sphere and maintains state control in the region. However, through publicizing grief, Kashmiris have vehemently resisted this control. In this, Kashmiri women have been active participants as well. Traditionally, women's public visibility, especially as mourners, was limited to quotidian settings. In the last decade, with the increasing state violence, women have been active participants in funeral processions. This public act of mourning has further aided the self-determination movement by highlighting the tangible and material impact of militarisation. However, mourning rituals in public have been

long associated with Shia believers, including Shia women. Do these Shia practices have any bearing on the larger framework of public mourning in Kashmir? Does the political public mourning legitimize Shia faith practices for the majority population? Does women's participation in publicizing grief have subversive potential in a patriarchal setting? These are some of the questions I intend to explore in this section. I will take two sites for locating these questions: the women's gathering against enforced disappearances, and the Shia Muharram procession.



Figure 3. Woman breaking down into tears in a congregation. Photograph taken by the author, 2020.

In the last three decades, the exacerbated violence amidst the increasing militarisation has been responded with people's resistance. One of the most significant movements in fuelling the public presence and awareness of the disproportionate violence has been the movement against enforced disappearance by organizations like the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons^v, an activist group of family members of the disappeared persons. This movement, started by Parveena Ahanger and Parvez Imroz in 1994, is the oldest human rights movement in the region. The collective has been successful in drawing attention to the phenomenon of enforced disappearance, in which more than 8,000 cases have been documented by the group.^{vi} One of the ways it has done so is by conducting public protests consistently for the past three decades. In these protests, family members, mostly mothers, and wives of the victims gather in the public sphere and publicly grieve the loss of their loved ones and demand accountability.

This formulation of the counter-public can be attributed to the families as well as activists and journalists in the region. These protests are particularly significant in the presence of the “scopic regime” (Feldman, 1997) which makes any visibility of its crimes against humanity, difficult. A ‘scopic regime’ as defined by Allen Feldman, is an ensemble of practices and discourses that establish the truth claims, typicality, and credibility of visual acts and objects and politically correct modes of seeing” (1997, p. 7). The work of APDP extends beyond counter-memory work but also resists the control of the state of what is visible, what is known, and what is erased (or disappeared).

“Yeh tamasha nahin hai...Yeh maatam sahi hai!”

(This is not a performance!... This mourning is real!) (Parveena Ahanger, qtd. in Misri 2014 , p. 137)

The co-founder of the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons, Parveen Ahanger, responds to a man who calls their protest a ‘*tamasha*’ (a show). Misri (2014), in her book, draws the connection between the ‘maatam’ of the APDP members to the Shia mourning practices. She argues that the ‘vocabulary of *maatam*, confers genuiness” to this gathering. These protest gatherings have publicized mourning. The other gathering(s) that stand as examples of mourning in the public domain is the Shia mourning processions. These monthly protests by the act of repetition, in the presence of a media galore, create a long-standing effect on the local and global community. The act of disappearance through these repetitions appears in the public gaze and prevents forgetfulness. The remembrance of Karbala even 1400 years from its occurrence stands as testimony to this practice of ‘resisting disappearance’ (Zia, 2019). The commemoration of the events in Karbala over the years, despite repressive regimes, has stood the test of time, and if I may say, of memory. ‘

Shia Muharram processions operate in similar ways in public settings. These are symbolic funeral processions in remembrance of the martyrs of Karbala. These gatherings narrate events as they happened in Karbala, on the same day, through lyrical elegies, chest-beating (*doug’e*), passion plays, mourning hymns, etc. These lamentations are remembrances of the atrocities that the Prophet's family was subjected to. Themes of *zulm* (tyranny), thirst, powerlessness, captivity, sacrifice, resistance, loss of childhood are addressed in these gatherings.

In Kashmir, mourning as a practice becomes subversive as the state often responds with lethal force. This has been seen in the funeral processions of militants or brutal civilian killings where gatherings have been dispersed by the use of violence. This has been similar to the political-religious mourning in Muharram, where Shia gathering has been met with reprisal and violence from the state forces. This politics of mourning hence is a "reclamation that signifies a contest for political power" Malik (2018, p. 64) and brings out the aspiration for resistance politics. With the onset of the pandemic, such funeral processions have been completely banned in Kashmir. The state has mandated that the slain people be buried far away from their native

place. One of the motifs in the Shia processions is the remembrance of how the bodies of the martyrs were mutilated by Yazid's forces. The denial of a proper burial or funeral ceremony invokes similar sentiments in Kashmir.

In Muharram, Shia identity is also politicized vis-a-vis oppression of the Shia community around the world- from Kashmir to Palestine, Pakistan, Iraq, there is a collective sense of community enabled by the mobilization in Muharram. This consciousness is drawn from the major persecutions of Shias in Kashmir, a reclamation of the otherwise threatened minority. Shia processions are often met with violence around South Asia by hardliner majoritarian groups, and in Kashmir, by the state forces, almost replicating the message carried out in the processions of *zulm* (tyranny) against the besieged minority. For Shia devotees "the spiritual world becomes one with the physical through this focal parable" (Hegland, 1998, p. 251). Similarly, the APDP protests invoke this sense of global community with other contexts where enforced disappearances are a norm. In fact, the group is modeled over the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo of Argentina and bears congruity with Saturday Mothers of Turkey; a similar collective of family members of the disappeared. Across the world, Shia Muslims and victims of enforced disappearances are united by the work of remembering. It also draws strength from abundance and numbers, the larger the participation, the bigger the impact, and the more difficult it is to forget, Karbala, and Kashmir.



Figure 4. A group of young girls waiting for the majlis to begin. Photograph taken by the author, 2020.

Of significance to this work of remembering is the act of witnessing. Public visibility in protests and Muharram processions is not only a performance and a spectacle to invoke public awareness but is as much an act in witnessing. Who is the audience of this exposition? What does this act of looking create? What relations in this spatio-temporal setting emerge from this relationship? Perhaps, the answer to these questions circumscribes more questions. This display of public grief nudges the audience to think: who are these people? Why are they in the public sphere? What are they seeking? And with the repetitive public appearance, these

questions are either answered, or, the presence of grieving groups is normalized beyond the inquisitiveness of the audience. Either way, it frames a conscious/subconscious awareness of this public act. Through recitations, sloganeering, visual displays, and other public activities both the gatherings (of APDP and Shia mourners) layout the means of public presence and sustain resilience. The display of grief in this public setting compels people to pay attention and can create an entry point for people to think of their relations with these public assemblies. It creates a possibility of what Ariella Azoulay (2008) calls a “civil contract” which makes visible conditions of violence, and also paves new ways of re-telling the narratives which people already know, or, are aware of. The sites of APDP protests which demonstrate publicly the enforced disappearances in the region give repetitive reminders of the violence of the state: the Shia mourners actively remind us of Karbala. Both parties challenge the normative framing as well as the normalization of this ever-increasing condition(s) of conflict, which makes possible the phenomena such as enforced disappearances. These sites of struggle, memory, remembrance, protest, open up not only conversations about the larger structures of violence but also the quotidian ways in which it has shaped the lives of these families.

The intersection of the political overtones of oppression and the Shia act of mourning not only has similarities but they interact with one another. The example of Parveena Ahanger’s description of their protest site as *matam* mourning affirms this. Another way in which these two interact can be derived from an account put forth by Masooma. A young Shia journalist, Masooma narrates multiple instances in her work where she could draw a stark resemblance between the events in Karbala and the ones in Kashmir. She describes one particular incident, vivid in her memory, where she had gone to cover multiple funerals of civilians and militants in Pulwama, in 2017. She remembers the incident as the unfolding of ‘real Karbala’ in front of her eyes:

That day people were on the streets as many militants and civilians had been martyred in indiscriminate firing... When we went to the ground, there was a sea of people, attending the funeral of a slain militant. Her sister was crying there like hell, saying ‘bayo, bayo’ (brother, brother) and her father could not walk as he had lost his only son.

She associates this with the martyrdom of Ali Akbar, the young son of Imam Hussain, who was martyred by Yazid’s forces. Masooma then goes on to describe another funeral she attended that day:

In one village there were four funerals. Usually, when someone is martyred, there is *matam* (mourning), but in the house, there was a body lying on the lawn without the usual number of attendees... there were so many funerals, where would people go? In every home there was a slain body, it felt like real Karbala. A brother, a son, a husband, everyone had died in that incident. It felt like even the sky was crying...

As she is narrating this incident, she is reminded of a *nouha* (lyrical lamentation):

khushnaseebi hai jo de baap ko beta kaandha,
baap ka laashey jawaan, haaye uthana nahin acha

fortunate is the one whose son shoulders his coffin

a father' carrying a young one's body is a travesty

This ritual of mourning is an act of remembrance by association. To Masooma, Ali Akbar epitomizes the rebels martyred by the state in their fight for the freedom of Kashmir. It becomes a "hidden transcript" to fight the oppressor of the time, synonymous with Yazid (Scott, 1990, p. 6). For her, Muharram processions bear resemblance to the funeral processions that are carried out when militants are killed. The arrival of *Zuljanah*, the horse, comes bearing the news of the death of Imam Hussain. It is replicated on the morning of *Ashura* (the day of Imam Hussain's martyrdom), when women gather around it, remembering the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, and touching the horse as a symbol of remembrance, invoking divine intercession for their adversities. Similarly, in many funeral processions, women gather around the body of a slain militant in large numbers. Much like the Muharram processions, some women jockey for strategic positions, well veiled behind the curtains for a view of the funeral.

By performing mourning rituals and by publicizing grief, Shia women and the APDP members contest against their subordinate positionality in gendered militarised settings. Both have developed practices in their liminal context. These practices have a scope for these women to assign their meanings, of self-enhancement as well as community enhancement, and of formulating ways of asserting agency. These rituals and forms of protest are not simply passive recipients in a context of political dispossession and overarching control but are 'participants in constructions of meaning' (Hegeland, 2003)

Enhanced Agency, Mobility and Resistance through Faith Practices

In framing the tragedy of Karbala, with women's narrative at the center, one can observe that they played an active role in the event, made important decisions, and were the carriers of this narrative to the world. Zainab took charge of narrating the events of Karbala; what she did and how she upheld Islam, forms an important part of elegies and narrations for Shia believers.



Figure 5. Woman delivering a sermon about the struggles of Bibi Zainab. Photograph taken by the author, 2020.

Zainab holds the role of a witness of some of the key events of Karbala and a narrator, in the court of Yazid where she explains the reasons for revolution and the testimonies against the oppressors in their court in Kufa and Damascus. She addresses Syrians directly in her verbal assaults against Yazid and his forces, refusing to cower to the oppressor. Her speech, key to the awakening of the Muslim world, is memorialized as that of courage and valor, virtues that were traditionally attributed to men. Her speech stirred unrest against Yazid forcing him to release the prisoners of war. She demanded the heads of the martyrs be returned and commanded the martyrs' burial in Karbala. This event is an exemplification of speaking truth to power, and becomes, as D'souza (2012) notes, 'an alternative battlefield, a path of courageous action sanctioned to women.' She initiated the lamentations and mourning rituals that are practiced by Shia Muslims to this day. She is, indeed, the savior of Islam as per the Shia discourse and an inspiration for many believing women.

In the violence unleashed on the Shia mourners in Muharram processions in the outskirts of Srinagar, Sadiya's eighteen-year-old brother was subjected to arbitrary detention under the UAPA (Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act^{vii}). In a household with only women, Sadiya faced imminent fear of nightly raids, especially after the evening *Azaan* (call to prayer). Twenty-year-old Sadiya would confront the police personnel when they would come to interrogate the family. She narrates how she derived her strength by thinking about "Jenab-e-Zainab" (Lady Zainab) whose eighteen brothers were martyred in Karbala:

The tyranny of my brother's arrest is nothing in front of Karbala. In the *Majlis*, I would break down thinking of Jenab-e- Zainab, all her brothers were martyred. At least, my brother has been imprisoned for only two months, and is alive... I'm proud of my brother that in Moula Hussain's *majlis* they charged him with the Act, even though he is innocent. Even if he is martyred in the name of Moula, we won't be sad.

Zainab becomes a powerful force in the face of oppression which has transformational power for any believer.

After her brother's arrest on the Fifth Muharram, Sadiya was unable to go about her daily activities. The thought of her brother's condition would pain her and the only respite would come from participation in *majlis* and submission to Moula Abbas who was the flag bearer in the Battle of Karbala. Her brother was arrested while carrying Moula Abbas' flag and now she relies on his commendation to God.

In Kashmir, where there is no justice or redressal mechanism, the only guarantee is justice in the hereafter (the day of judgment). This belief empowers women to stand firm in their fight against occupational injustice(s). In situations where voicing one's struggle is non-viable, religious spaces (physical and metaphorical) become alternative and transformative. It enables the believers to bear the loss or trauma from various oppressions. Scott (1985) frames these practices as the 'weapons of the weak because the traditional ways of political assertion in the form of direct expressions, eg, organizing, mobilizing, campaigning, etc are luxuries that Kashmiri women cannot afford. These "weapons" aid in the resistance against the power which

is key in understanding the forms in which their agency is exerted. Resistance to the military occupation, hence, is not an end but a means to enable long-term change through evolving practices and long-drawn experiences. Women's resistance in funeral processions or religious processions is not a consistent movement but is rather manifested in covert and obscure forms within a limited framework of a militarised setting, as pointed out by Comaroff (1985). Through alternative practices and collectivization through these practices, their agency is enhanced. Mostly, because these practices enable them to enter the masculine and militarized space. It ushers women to arenas that were earlier unexplored - provides a chance for action and opportunity but within a socio-religious structure. In Kashmir, the practices associated with mourning have allowed collective control for women and individual unbinding as well. Women's agencies are deeply intertwined with their subjectivities, both constantly evolving.

One of the most significant ways in which this agency is manifested is through women's mobility and access to public spaces. Much like political assertion, mobility without reason and necessity is a luxury for women in Kashmir. An all-pervasive fear of sexual violence, amplified by a militarised setting, takes precedent in determining the mobility of women in Kashmir. Easy access to public spaces poses a threat to their security as well as their reputation. This is exemplified by Masooma's understanding of Muharram:

...[in Muharram] we walk the streets, in the night...Nobody dares to stare at you ...despite the crowd, there is no uncomfortable touch. Even if you enter men's majlis [gathering], they will think it is a mistake. Even my Dad urges me to leave home, saying 'the *juloos* (procession) has arrived,"... Maybe on other days he will not say this.

This mobility leads me to think about the bodies of Kashmiri women who are not subjected to various forms (militarized, social, etc.) of restrictions. Outram (1989) associates bodies as a political resource. It is a site of oppression and resistance as well, a rejection of oppression, and a self-inscription of symbols of resistance (Hegland, 1998). In the Kashmiri scholarship, the body has been theorized in various ways. For instance, Batool. et al (2013) examine the body as a witness—'bearing of wounds' in the case of the mass rape of Kunan Poshpora, in the form of a sexualized/desexualized body, but rarely has the Kashmiri body been discussed as a metaphor for mourning. The act of chest-beating or *doug'e*, offers possibilities of nuanced engagement with the concept of embodiment through a feminist lens. *Doug'e dyun* or chest-beating in these gatherings affirms this ownership of the bodies of Shia women- they decide the meaning and adherence of these actions. The stronger the rhythmic beating, the more *josh* or passion is invoked- toeing the line of the discourse on the gendered body. It is a political act of resisting a majoritarian religious belief, a political suppression by the state, and also a challenge to the patriarchal dogma. Women's participation in a funeral procession can be seen through a similar lens.

Debunking the Narratives of an Apolitical Shia

In the early nineties, Shahzada remembers hearing slogans "*azaedi gayi*" (freedom has been achieved) many a times in a small Shia residential pocket in Srinagar. Her family was a strong proponent of *Tehreek* (freedom movement) and would often be woken up in the nightly raids by the Indian forces. In many of these "*chap'e*" (raids), the men would be frisked and women

sometimes would stay indoors to protect their homes, guide the armed personnel to different rooms, and at the same time keep an eye on their actions. Shahzada had a strong heart or as she says *dil dor'e*, and would protect valuables in the house by hiding them from the armed personnel. Many times, her sons would be detained for a few days. In one instance, they were taken to one of the most infamous detention centers in Srinagar for more than nine days. She promised to sacrifice a lamb as *niyaz* (religious offering) if her sons would return safely. In those long days of their detention, she would recite *Naad-e-Ali* (a prayer invoking Hazrat Ali's intercession). After nine long days, her sons were back but there was an imminent fear of detention and violence. Her son was associated with a Shia militant outfit, had left Kashmir for education, and eventually had to settle down outside of Kashmir; coming back would pose risk to his life. Shahzada had to make many sacrifices for the *Tehreek* (freedom movement), separation from her son was one of them.

In 2019, as Kashmir was incommunicado^{viii}, she could not speak with her sons for a long time and was able to do so once she was outside Kashmir. Days later, her youngest son passed away. Shahzada, who used to keep a diary for *marsiya*, says she forgot everything after the death of her son, except one verse:

Mye bronh choun marun gasiha jaano,

Wath ba god'e qabri mye saawo...

O, myaani nawjawaano

your death before mine, would it be gracious?

Get up, first, put me to sleep in my grave

O, my young son

She found solace in this couplet from a *marsiya* (lyrical lamentation) which eulogizes the sacrifice of Hussain's son in Karbala. Shahzada is among many Shia women who have borne the ramifications of the militarized conflict in Kashmir and have actively resisted it in these covert forms.

However, there is a perception by many in Kashmir that Shia are apolitical and indifferent to the cause of self-determination. This is often cited and aggravated by Indian votaries and Indian media to perpetuate a sectarian divide in the region. In one of the articles by an Indian journalist (Iyer-Mitra, 2019), he describes Kashmiri Shia to be 'cop friendly' and calls the resistance movement as a 'Sunni majoritarian agenda.' Hence, perpetuating a notion that Shia owes their allegiance to the Indian state, a claim refuted by Shia, and exemplified by accounts of women in the essay.

Shias in Kashmir have actively participated in the struggle against various regimes in Kashmir (Maqbool, 2020). Kashmiri Shia have and continue to assert their political views strongly. Part of the reason, for this narrative of an apolitical Shia, Masooma believes is the marginalization of both economic and social, which impeded strong representation from the

community. She gives her example, saying that she was one of the first Shia women who was a journalist. At work, her co-workers would often use slurs like “*khod’e*” while joking around or would sometimes take jibes at her that Shia community was not doing much for the freedom struggle. But contrary to these perceptions, Masooma understands her position differently. When asked, what does it mean to be Shia? , Masooma remarks:

To be Shia is to carry the message of Karbala forward and to not bow down to any kind of atrocities.

Conclusion

As noted from Masooma’s anecdote, religion and faith are integral to Shia women’s understanding of Kashmir and its concomitant issues. It provides them with a sense of legitimacy and a vocabulary for loss and martyrdom. While some meanings in ritual practices may adhere to rigid patriarchal norms, it presents hope to women in the face of oppression and presents a scope of self-expression. These practices enable relief not just through divine intervention but also in the company of other women. Despite its inconsistencies and limitations, these practices enable a subversive political formulation for women.

This essay is a preliminary discussion on the subject of Shia Kashmiri women’s subjectivities. Overall, a case was made for establishing connections between the tragedy of Karbala and the conflict in Kashmir, Shia women’s capacity of embodied resistance through religious practices, and the impact on public consciousness of public visibility. In the essay, I evaluate the intersectionality of women’s social and political lives to understand how women make their own choices to participate in these rituals and to appropriate their meanings to it. I see the participation in Shia processions, APDP protests, and funeral processions as sites of community formation. This becomes critical in the context of Kashmir where there is not much scope to exercise the freedom of assembly. Not only political gatherings, but all gatherings are situated in the ambit of the spatial and scopic control that governs all mobilities and movements in Kashmir. In many ways, these practices enhance self-expression and build counter-narratives and are inter-connected through their framing of grief, loss, and oppression. These flourishing practices hint at the strengthening of political identity and offer a possibility of shifting a rigidly gendered paradigm.

Notes

i. The Indian subcontinent end of colonial rule was marked by its partition into two nation states, India and Pakistan. Kashmir was one of the independent princely states with a peculiar make up: a Hindu ruler with a Muslim population. The UN intervention called for a referendum to decide the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to either India or Pakistan, which was never granted to the citizens of Kashmir, sparking the sentiments of self-determination in the valley. The subversive sentiments of the Kashmiri population have been met with brute force by the Indian state.

- ii. Indian Administered Kashmir has an estimated 7, 00,000 armed forces making it the most militarized zone in the world.
- iii. Shias in Kashmir have often been framed as alienated from the larger political movement in Kashmir. This narrative has been aggrandized by the Indian state and has designated the Shia community to be apolitical. Shias, however, have always been assertive about their political identity. They were active in the resistance movement against the Dogra regime and continue to be integral to these political assertions until the day.
- iv. Fatimah Zahra is the daughter of Prophet Mohammad, Bibi Zainab is Fatimah Zahra's daughter and Bibi Sakina is the four-year-old child of Imam Hussain, the heroic martyr of Karbala. All these women hold high status in Shia Islam.
- v. Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons is a collective of families subjected to enforced disappearances in Kashmir. It was founded in 1994 by Parveena Ahanger whose son was also disappeared and human rights lawyer, Parvez Imroz.
- vi. See JKCCS (2015).
- vii. Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act is the amended arbitrary counter-terror law in the Indian constitution that puts the onus of innocence on the accused.
- viii. On August 5, 2019, the Government of India revoked semi-autonomous status to Jammu and Kashmir to make it a part of the Indian union. To quell any form of resistance, the Indian state laid a siege on the people of Kashmir to prevent any form of dissent and the entire region was put under a communications blockade. This was one of the longest communications blockades in the world.

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Conflict, Space, & Public Architecture: Tracing Transformations of Loss through Bridges in Kashmir

Mariyeh Mushtaq

Bridges are repositories of embodied trauma and loss in Kashmir. This article assesses the strange phenomenon of bridge-burning during the 1990s. Kadal¹ is presented as a personified object- a stationary witness to people's immobility, hardships and resistance. Tracing the history of two bridges in North Kashmir's Sopore-Kupwara stretch, the essay revisits the incidents through oral testimonies of locals in the North Kashmiri villages of Yaroo-Khouhn. The bridge which connects these two villages was reopened in 2016 after being razed in 1993



Figure 1. Hadishah Kadal, Sopore/2020

There is both a horror and a fascination at something so apparently permanent as a building, something that one expects to outlast many a human span, meeting an untimely end.

-Robert Bevan (2007) *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War*

The destruction of bridges during the 1990s was simply ignored as a consequence of the political turmoil and the military occupation of the region. They have been rendered as collateral damage, a 'predominant term for legitimate violence against architecture and civilians during war' (Herscher, 2008, p. 36). However, the people who were affected by this destruction experienced it otherwise: as a devastatingly dehumanising incident; 'an unsanctionable targeting of civic spaces (ibid.) under the backdrop of political conflict. The complexities of this conflict, a critical aspect of the scholarship in this area, are difficult to address as a whole and therefore, were not considered at length in this essay. This question has by and large been touched upon in the recent research, although, no consensus has emerged on what these 'complexities' comprise of.

¹ Bridge. Kashmiri to English translation

Burning bridges is an act of dehumanisation of people bound by its use for their mobility and commute. It is a repercussion of the conflict which finds little mention in our archives. Therefore, I start with a basic question. Why has bridge-burning been pushed to oblivion? During the 1990s, there was a rise of armed insurgency in the region, a movement which had immense public support. The Indian armed forces, in an attempt to crush the insurgency, unleashed brutal violence on combatants as well as non-combatants, including, the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war². Many incidents of transgressions took place on the part of armed rebels as well. While the former has been thoroughly documented, researched and theorized in the context of Kashmir and also within the broader discussions on militarization and violence around the globe, the latter continues to remain a contested subject. Although, a consensus has largely been made that the decade was a period of extreme tension and violence.

Bridges are a part of the material culture of people. In circumstances such as a deliberate demolition of the bridge, do the people simply comply with the act or do they resist it- starting initially from a feeling of anguish and outrage over the sundering, to the inter-generational disconnect Kashmiris in these villages have borne.

My interest in writing this essay was sparked by frequent visits to Yaroo village where my mother grew up and my relatives continue to live to this day. It is located in North Kashmir's Kupwara district, 70 kilometres from the Srinagar city. I adopt a phenomenological approach towards 'subjective experiences' of the locals because my aim was not necessarily to find out the evidential facts about the events but the ways in which these were perceived and/or experienced by these people. In other words, the information gathered was from the perspective of the research participants (Lester, 1999). The essay proceeds by invoking oral testimonies of locals for 'remembering remains an item of central concern on contemporary agendas' (Casey, 2000, p. 2) particularly within the transdisciplinary study of public memory. There is also an important element of collectivity in remembering as Phillips notes:

...the systemic study of collective memories can be traced to the work of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s. Halbwachs, following Durkheim's notions of collective conscience, contends that all acts of memory are inherently social-literally that to remember is to act as part of the collective, In turn our collectivity is deeply intertwined with our capacity for and enactment of remembrance (2004, p.1).

I found this argument particular relevant to Kashmir; 'remembering' as an act of collective resistance, especially, the counter-memories that challenge the hegemonic narratives. For Kashmiri people, remembering is 'fundamental weapon...while propaganda is strengthened by the state' (Malik, 2019, p. 107).

In researching for this essay, I also employ the use of autoethnographic analytical approach to make sense of this wider material, cultural and political meanings of experiences associated with the brunt bridges. Growing up, I had been familiarized with the difficulties of being disconnected and the unspoken unease around the sundered Yaroo bridge. I was fascinated by

² On the human rights abuses in the region, please see "Rape in Kashmir: A Crime of War" (PDF). Human Rights Watch. 1993. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/INDIA935.PDF> Last Assessed 23 Oct 2020

the ‘mundaneness’ of this particular hardship for the villagers. My younger self would often associate this with the ‘lack of development’ in the area, the notion of development understood in a western European context (see Portes, 1973). According to the oral testimonies of locals, the torching of bridges was an extremely common phenomenon during the 1990s. Here, I revisit these intrusive acts almost three decades later.

Herscher (2008) formulated the ‘warchitecture’ theory based on the catastrophic destruction of public architecture in Sarajevo, Bosnia & Herzegovina during early-mid 1990s. “Blurring the conceptual border between ‘war’ and ‘architecture,’ the term provides a tool to critique dominant accounts of wartime architectural destruction and to bring the interpretive protocols of architecture to bear upon that destruction” (ibid. 35). Although, in the given context, this theory does not offer ample explanations of the motives and the unique nature of the destruction. Therefore, as suggested earlier, I move to the autoethnographic analysis of the gathered data.

Trauma, Hardships and Violence: *Kadal* as a stationary witness



Figure 2. Remains of the old Yaroo Bridge/2020



Figure 3. Newly reconstructed Yaroo bridge/2020

Hadishah Kadal (Figure.1) in Sopore on the river Jhelum was burnt down completely during the *Tehreek*³ and was reconstructed a few years later according to the testimonies of locals. When I enquired about who burnt it, I sensed an eerie reluctance in the responses, “we can’t say that... they came and lit it on fire during the night... at 1 am... so we can’t say who burnt it. Maybe it was the military, maybe someone else”, said one of the interviewees. The destruction of bridges constituted violence against the architecture as well as those who used it on an everyday basis. The bridges became a physical apparatus of separation overnight. The two localities, Hadishah and Khanqah, connected by the bridge were disconnected after the bridge was set on fire around midnight. The original bridge of Yaroo (Figure.2) was constructed in 1977 on *Nalle Maver*. It was partially burnt in 1993. The reconstruction of Yaroo bridge took over a decade, finally opening for public use in 2016 (Figure.3).

The sundered bridges have also proven lethal in some cases. One particular incident which exemplifies this assertion is the accident of seven-year-old boy from the neighbouring village of Babgund which took place seven years ago. The boy fell from the ravaged bridge, into the

³ Movement. Urdu to English translation.

river and hit the rocks underneath, leaving him in coma for over two months. The reconstruction of the bridge was sped up after the incident due to public outrage.

These bridges were not necessarily architectural or aesthetic marvels, but ‘the effort and human endurance needed to build these structures... colour our perception to such an extent that we believe them all to be masterpieces’ (Bennett, 1997, p. 6). Almost all the bridges that were burnt in the 90s were made of Deodar wood as opposed to the more recent bridges made up of steel, iron and concrete.

The testimonies of local residents, which I present here in a narrative form, point to the intertwined nature of the *Kadal* with the everyday lives of people. I do not employ the use of theoretical analysis for the testimonies, allowing the narratives of the locals to explain the experiences on their own. Rafeeqa, a 43-year-old woman from Yaroo village recalls:

our *Kadal* was made up by big logs of wood which the men erected on their own with little machinery. They would sing ‘*manki ti birki, kanan gayi sadaav*’ to keep each other’s morale up whilst pulling the levers and the ropes... I am not sure what those words meant; I don’t remember the meaning, but I remember that as kids we used to watch in amusement.

The erasure of public convenience coupled with a form of silencing of these narratives makes a strong case of inquiry into this subject. Under this backdrop, it is also important to think critically about the fragility of architecture in Kashmir especially if ‘their massiveness and solidity almost literally enforces [their] futurity’ (Casey, 2004, p. 17). Perhaps a comparative case study of the arsons could be carried out to understand the phenomenon of ‘enforced homelessness’ as perpetrated by the Indian forces as a ‘concerted strategy to discourage the masses from protesting against grave human rights abuses in the region’ and dissuade providing shelter, garner hostilities for the armed militants (Mushtaq, 2020).

Although the locals warily admit that the bridges were destroyed by armed militants, exploring this question in detail is beyond the scope of this essay. Although it is clear that in all the cases, the bridges were burnt with ‘a desire to wipe out the enemy’s capacity to fight’ (Bevan, 2006, p. 8), particularly, by rendering them partially immobile.

In this context, *Kadal* stands a witness to the ways in which armed conflict structurally reconfigured the living environments of Kashmiri people. As Shabnam recalls:

Many times, when [people] would hear that the bridge was lit on fire.... They would come from the neighbouring villages and watch it raze into the river. They often cried helplessly because they knew their life was going to be even more difficult now. Local villagers, especially the old, sick and children, were the worst sufferers. When a sick person had to be taken to the hos

Women had to carry their belongings on their heads... how much would the boat take... sometimes people had to cross the river on their own.

While the hardships of travelling on a ‘bridge-less’ road are obvious, Shabnam’s retrospective description brings forth the intimate stories that get lost within the larger imaginations of these

violent events. Similarly, Gulzar, Rafeeqa's brother and a 54-year-old resident of Yaroo describes the frequency of the bridge-burning incidents:

all the bridges from this area were burnt, *pohurpeth kadal*, *youins kadal*, *koultur kadal*, even our small *gotaar kadal* was pressure blasted in 1997... they did it so that the army is unable to move freely through these areas... if the locals raised concerns, they'd say that this is necessary for our safety, we can't sleep at night thinking the army might come

In her description of the events, Rafeeqa often personified the *Kadal*, speaking of it as one of the villagers struggling to survive. I found her explanations particularly fascinating as they stemmed from a merger of her 'individual' and 'social' memory (Casey, 2004, p. 21). She noted:

Many times, when it [bridge] was lit on fire, the villagers put it out. It was like the bridge would save itself... when it was finally burnt it was as if it was tired of fighting. After its demolished, people tried to fix it using wooden logs etc but it wasn't effective...

Finally, the people started using *naav*⁴ to cross the rivers... then the boatman would drop people back and forth the river of the *nalle*⁵... the fares were in kind for the locals and cash for the non-locals. As kids we would steal handful of rice just to get a ride in the *naav*."

Army on Foot: People's Encounters with the Military

The loot and plunder by the Indian armed forces in the region has been meticulously documented. A simple conversation with people of Yaroo suggests the extent to which incidents of plunder surfaces in peoples memory as an everyday reality. Shabnam and Rafeeqa recall:

...oh! they had spread so much terror in this area. They were *zaelim*⁶. This is what they did, it was the norm... the army was the *gunde*⁷ of the area, they did and [still] do what they want to do

The army from the camps controlled the movement of the boats by strictly regulating the opening and closing times. They would lock the boats on the shore at 5 pm and would open them for public use at 8/9 am in the morning... people had to travel accordingly... When the bridges were burnt, they [army] had to walk on foot... they would beat anyone who came their way- young and old. The young army men would take their belongings on foot while moving to the other camp, but they would force the local men to carry their things for them. These local men were used as human shields as well.

⁴ Small Boat. Kashmiri to English translation

⁵ River tributary. Kashmiri to English translation

⁶ Tyrant. Kashmiri to English translation

⁷ Hooligans. Kashmiri to English translation

...during those days it was common to hear that some man was taken for *begaar*⁸... these men would then be beaten up in the camp and then released, sometimes after days.

On their way to the camps, the army would ransack our gardens and orchards. They'd steal the vegetables, fruits and spices... anything that they found on their way... they were like *djinn* they'd not leave anything for the villagers.

Sometimes the army would do identification parade of people... they'd make men stand in a line... no one was spared of a beating if nothing at least they would slap.

Bridging the Gaps: Politics of Memory and Silence

Bridge-burnings were not isolated incidents but an interlaced reality of the conflict in Kashmir. Notably, the question of oblivion that was raised at the beginning of the essay still remains in place. Within the decolonial literature on Kashmir, memory surfaces as an incredibly important element of resistance (see for instance, Malik, 2019). The main argument in this essay is that people's memory offers an alternative lens to the dominant discourses of history.

These trends of segregation and silence manifest themselves in the lack of research and documentation of this bizarrely common phenomenon of bridge-burning. Irrespective of their agendas and strategies, the campaigns of conquest by 'unknown gunmen' rendered the locals in a state of prolonged despair and needs to be critically enquired and framed within the larger context of conflict.

This essay prioritized people's experiences but other explanations with regards to bridge-burning that centre around the motives of the insurgents are certainly possible. While the monocausal explanations can be limiting in their scope, here it allows people's subjectivities to exist independently-without fitting into strict structures of predefined frameworks.

Torching the bridges was carried out to abolish, or at the very least limit, their expedience; so that they no longer enable the movement of (army) vehicles. However, the people were the worst sufferers of these demolitions. Which is why I conclude by arguing that the militant transgressions during the 1990s make a case for an empirical study on their own. But perhaps more than anything, this essay attempted to indicate that north Kashmiri people's banal and everyday experiences of trauma and violence do not find enough mention in the critical scholarship on Kashmir. This gap remains for the scholars, researchers and theorists to bridge.

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⁸ Forced and unpaid labour. Kashmiri to English translation. (See Lone, 2012)

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Pursuing the Right to Truth: Women's Resistance and the Fight against Impunity

Madeeha Majid

This essay provides a comparative analysis of human rights violations in The Gambia and Kashmir with a focus on enforced disappearances. By analysing international conventions and redressal mechanisms on EDs, it examines the possibility of acquiring justice and accountability from hostile systems. The essay also brings forth the means of resistance undertaken by women in both Gambia and Kashmir against structural impunity in their pursuit of truth and justice.



Figure 1. Family members of disappeared persons in protest in Kashmir. [AP/Dar Yasin]



Figure 2. Families of the victim protest in Gambia. [Jason Florio/TNH]

Introduction

What is common between a woman from The Gambia and a woman from Kashmir? Apart from the invariable gender hierarchies and disparities existing everywhere, what unites women from across continents is the quest for justice?

Situated in West Africa, The Republic of Gambia witnessed a ghastly period of dictatorship from 1994 onwards, which was marked by a large scale and systemic violations of fundamental rights, witch-hunts, extra-judicial killings, torture, sexual and gender-based violence and enforced disappearances.⁹ It was only after the end of the oppressive regime, that a *Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations* Commission (TRRC, 2017) was set up to investigate and establish an impartial historical record of the violations and human rights abuses committed during the decades of the bloody reign of the dictator-Yahya Jammeh.¹⁰ On the other hand, Kashmir, albeit under a *de-jure* democracy, has also seen dark periods of oppression (only amplified since 5th August 2019) where thousands of lives have been and are continuing to be

⁹ See, Human Rights Council, [Report of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances on its mission to the Gambia](#), A/HRC/39/46/Add. 1 (27 August 2018); Human Rights Watch, [World Report 2017](#).

¹⁰ [The Truth Reconciliation and Reparations Commission Act, 2017](#), Preamble.

lost to state excesses and brutality. One of the goriest as well as well-documented of these human rights abuses is enforced disappearances.¹¹

Alongside, the physical, social, economic and psychological impacts of the violations on every person living in these regions, it is to consider that, facing the dual burden of patriarchy and occupation, it is women who are most disproportionately and adversely affected by conflict and violence everywhere in the world.¹² Whereas more recorded data of a systemic onslaught of sexual violence and exploitation is found in the Gambia, both there and Kashmir, women have been at the receiving end, suffering the unrecognised consequences of enforced disappearances on their life and livelihood. With this knowledge, the essay briefly highlights the means of resistance undertaken by women against impunity, in the context of enforced disappearance in the Gambia and Kashmir, which are aimed at pursuing truth and justice.

Enforced Disappearance and the Right to Truth: A Cloak of Impunity under International Law?

Brought to the fore during the Holocaust, Enforced Disappearance is prohibited under a constellation of human rights treaties and conventions.¹³ Notably, one of the most significant instruments dealing with the prohibition of Enforced Disappearance is the *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances* (2006), signed by over 98 countries.¹⁴ The Convention identifies Enforced Disappearance as a crime, a violation of a host of human rights, and often occurring alongside other human rights abuses such as torture, arbitrary detention, extra-judicial killings, etc.¹⁵ Enforced disappearance is also recognised as a continuing crime,¹⁶ where victims and families of victims, have the right to truth, right to a remedy (consisting of reparations and the right to justice) and the right to a

¹¹ See, UN Human Rights Council, OHCHR, Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Kashmir: Developments in the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir from June 2016 to April 2018, and General Human Rights Concerns in Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan (14 June 2018).

¹² In this essay, the definition of “women” is as developed by the Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women, which is broader than gender and sex, and intersects with other factors, including “sexual orientation and gender identity.”

¹³ See International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, 2716 UNTS 3 (20 December 2006); UN Declaration on the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance (18 December 1992), ACHR, Customary IHL, Rule 98.

¹⁴ <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/MTDSG/Volume%20I/Chapter%20IV/IV-16.en.pdf>.

¹⁵ International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, Article 2.

¹⁶ Situation in the Republic of Burundi, Case No. ICC-01/17-X-9-US-Exp, Decision Pursuant to Article 15 of the Rome Statute on the Authorization of an Investigation in the Republic of Burundi, 25 October 2015, para. 121; Human Rights Committee, Communication No. 107/1981, Quinteros v. Uruguay, 21 July 1983, para. 14; Case of Velásquez-Rodríguez v Honduras, IACtHR Series C No. 4, 29 July 1988, paras 155 and 181; Case of Goiburú et al. v. Peru, IACtHR Series C No. 153, 22 September 2006, para. 81; Case of Heliodoro Portugal v. Panama, IACtHR Series C No. 186, 12 August 2008, paras 34-35, 106-107; Case of El-Masri v. The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia App no 39630/09, (ECtHR, 13 December 2012), para. 240; Case of Varnava and Others v. Turkey App no 16064/90, 16065/90, 16066/90, 16068/90, 16070/90, 16071/90, 16072/90 and 16073/90, (ECtHR, 18 September 2009), para. 148. Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

guarantee of non-recurrence of the crime, under international law.¹⁷ Importantly, the Convention gives broad scope to the term victim,¹⁸ emphasizing a gendered approach to any remedy prescribed under law.¹⁹ In Kashmir, this would mean recognising “half-widows” as victims of enforced disappearance, reinforcing their *right to know the truth* and to *live with dignity*.

Under the Convention, the *right to truth* is elaborated as under:

*The right to the truth in relation to enforced disappearances means the right to know about the progress and results of an investigation, the fate or the whereabouts of the disappeared persons, and the circumstances of the disappearances, and the identity of the perpetrator(s). The right to know the truth about the fate and the whereabouts includes, when the disappeared person is found to be dead, the right of the family to have the remains of their loved one returned to them, and to dispose of those remains according to their own tradition, religion or culture.*²⁰

Even though sufficiently wide in its scope, the Convention, like other relevant human rights instruments, hasn't been signed and/or ratified by concerned states, defying any actual impact or change on ground. The Gambia signed the Convention only in 2017 (and subsequently ratified in 2018), whereas India has signed the Convention in 2007, but not yet ratified it.²¹ As state consent forms the bedrock of international relations and international law, this simply means that many states cannot be held internationally responsible for their actions violating the mandate of the Convention. Regardless, as mentioned above, enforced disappearances often occur in conjunction with other human rights violations, which are prohibited under the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)*, a treaty to which India is a party, imposing obligations on the State to ensure the protection of individuals and to punish and prosecute perpetrators in their domestic courts.²² Moreover, as the situation in Kashmir has often been categorised as an international armed conflict, the protective regimes of both human rights and humanitarian law obligate India to ensure safeguarding the rights of people at all times.²³

¹⁷ Sub-Comm'n on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, Question of the Impunity of Perpetrators of Human Rights (Civil and Political), Para 18, *delivered to the Commission on Human Rights*, U.N. Doc. E/CN.4/Sub.2/1997/20/Rev.1 (26 June, 1997).

¹⁸ Article 24 of the convention defines the victim as “the disappeared person and any individual who has suffered harm as the direct result of an enforced disappearance. Case of Blake v. Guatemala, IACtHR (24 January 1998), Series C No. 36, para. 97.

¹⁹ Report of The Committee On Enforced Disappearances On Its Third Session (29 October – 9 November, 2012), Para 15; Preliminary observations of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances at the conclusion of its visit to Sri Lanka (9-18 November 2015); Committee on Enforced Disappearances considers report of Colombia.

²⁰ General Comment on the Right to the Truth in Relation to Enforced Disappearances, Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, Principle 4.

²¹ <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/MTDSG/Volume%20I/Chapter%20IV/IV-16.en.pdf>.

²² ICCPR, Article 7, 9.

²³ <http://www.rulac.org/browse/conflicts/international-armed-conflict-between-pakistan-and-india>; <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/kashmir/intl-law.htm>.

Clearly, as the prohibition against Enforced Disappearance and Torture is codified in many international instruments (including the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*), many argue that it is now part of customary international law, making consent irrelevant for states to be held responsible for such internationally wrongful acts.²⁴ Although such a proposition seems favourable, it is not an easy task in practice, requiring concerted international will and action. Adding to this, unlike Latin America, where the *Inter-American Court of Human Rights* has dealt with many cases of Enforced Disappearance, the shortcomings of the *African Court of Human Rights*, and the absence of a regional human rights court/governing body in Asia, leaves less avenues for the victims of these crimes to avail justice. Thus, what ensues, in most cases, is a thick blanket of impunity shielding perpetrators (mostly state officials and authorities) from any sort of accountability.

In this sense, international criminal law opens a small window (if not an entire door), where some semblance of accountability and justice can be achieved. Earlier categorised as ‘other inhumane act’ under Crimes Against Humanity,²⁵ the International Criminal Court Statute (*Rome Statute*), lists Enforced Disappearance as a separate crime under Crimes Against Humanity, which can result in individual criminal responsibility, meaning that the perpetrators (state officials/security forces) can be held criminally responsible for these crimes.²⁶ However, to come under the ambit of Crimes Against Humanity, additional contextual thresholds [(i) as part of a widespread or systematic attack ii) directed against any civilian population, iii) with knowledge of the attack] have to be fulfilled to be charged under this grave crime. Even though, enforced disappearance has never been specifically tried under international criminal law, it has been held that an individual who only commits one enforced disappearance can be charged with the crime against humanity, granted it fulfils the requisite conditions of Crimes Against Humanity (that “there is a link with the widespread or systematic attack against a civilian population.”)²⁷

Considering that international criminal law warrants States to “be willing and able” to prosecute domestically, it is unlikely that the party (herein the state and its officials) perpetuating the crime would prosecute and punish itself. Obviously then, countries like the USA, Israel and India are not a party to the International Criminal Court.²⁸ More so, India has vehemently opposed the International Criminal Court and specifically objected to the inclusion of enforced disappearances in the Rome Statute.²⁹ Yet again, this translates to lesser and lesser

²⁴ *Goiburú et al. v. Paraguay*, IACtHR (22 September 2006), Para 84 (“...the corresponding obligation to investigate . . . [has] acquired the character of *jus cogens*”).

²⁵ See, ICTY, *Prosecutor v. Kupreskic et al*, Judgment, IT-95–16-T, TC, 14 January 2000, para. 566.

²⁶ *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*, Article 7.

²⁷ *Prosecutor v. Tadic*, Case No. IT-94-1, Trial Chamber, 7 May 1997, Para 649.

²⁸ See, https://asp.icc-cpi.int/en_menus/asp/states%20parties/pages/the%20states%20parties%20to%20the%20rome%20statute.aspx.

²⁹ See Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, *United Nations Diplomatic Conference of Plenipotentiaries on the Establishment of an International Criminal Court*: Official Records, Vol. II, p. 148 para 47 (June 15-17, 1998).

accountability mechanisms for the crime. Nevertheless, considered customary in nature, many countries have also incorporated Crimes Against Humanity into national legislations, utilising the powers of Universal jurisdiction, to prosecute any perpetrator of Crimes Against Humanity in their national courts.³⁰ The Gambia also has a Draft International Criminal Bill on its way which aims to criminalise Crime Against Humanity in the Gambia. Furthermore, countries (mostly within the EU) such as France, Germany and Sweden have embarked on exercising universal jurisdiction to prosecute war criminals (such as in the Syrian or ISIS context), bringing the perpetrators to book within their national criminal justice system.³¹ Thus, instead of taking the Human Rights route (which deals with state responsibility), criminal justice (or individual responsibility) has offered an alternative, and perhaps a more effective channel/platform for victims of international crimes to tell their stories and avail some form of redress.

Resist to Exist: Pursuing the Right to Truth through Women's Resistance

And when I screamed that I was dying he said:

"No, it's fun."

*And to people wondering why am I saying this so vividly and
so loud it's because it's time that we hear this. It's time that we
all get uncomfortable,*

because comfort has been very disastrous.'

-Toufah Jallow³²

After many decades of silences and impunity, countless women came forward to speak about their experiences, including before the TRRC,³³ revealing the horrors of the Jammeh regime.³⁴ These revelations are set to lay the foundation for the prosecution of international crimes in the

³⁰ To know more about Universal Jurisdiction, See, <https://trialinternational.org/topics-post/universal-jurisdiction/>.

³¹ See, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/23/world/middleeast/syria-germany-war-crimes-trial.html>;
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/10/20/qa-first-cracks-impunity-syria-iraq#Q14>;
<https://www.mei.edu/publications/road-justice-syria-goes-through-europe>.

³² Fatou Network, 2019, available at, <https://www.humanium.org/en/gambian-women-are-speaking-out/>.

³³ International Center for Transitional Justice, 'Women's Experiences of Dictatorship in the Gambia: A Submission by Women from Sintet, Janjanbureh, and Basse to the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission' (December 2019), p. 6; Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women, 'Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention Fourth and fifth periodic reports of States parties due in 2010: Gambia' (13 December 2013), CEDAW/C/GMB/CO/4-5, paras 34-35; The Gambia Bureau of Statistics, 'The Gambia: Demographic and Health Survey 2013' (September 2014), p. 229. See also, Aneked, 'Truth, Reconciliation & Reparations Commission (TRRC) Digest Edition 9' (14-31 October 2019).

³⁴ International Center for Transitional Justice, 'Women's Experiences of Dictatorship in the Gambia: A Submission by Women from Sintet, Janjanbureh, and Basse to the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission' (December 2019), pp. 5-6; L Hunt, 'The Gambia's 'MeToo' year breaks silence on rape' (The New Humanitarian, 5 February 2020).

Gambia.³⁵ Parallel to this, organisations such as the ANEKED (African Network against Extra-judicial Killings and Enforced Disappearances), led by young African human rights activists, also started actively documenting the process.³⁶ Recognizing that there is a duty to remember, ANEKED termed their endeavour a memorialisation project, in honour of the sufferings and injustices borne by the victims fighting impunity in the region.³⁷

Similarly, in Kashmir, a well-known, local non-profit organisation-Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP), has also massively contributed to preserving memory and archiving the truth of victims and their families.³⁸ Born out of the struggle of a grieving mother, *Ms. Parveena Ahanger*, whose son was forcibly disappeared in the 1990s, the work of APDP has led to the documentation of many cases of enforced disappearances in Kashmir.³⁹ Naturally, Ms. Ahanger's story and work has become a symbol of hope and resilience in Kashmir, enabling a larger movement of visible public action against state violence. In this endeavour, in 2019, APDP also published a report on the victims of pellet injuries, titled, “*My World is Dark’ – State Violence and Pellet Firing Shotgun Victims from the 2016 Uprising in Kashmir.*”⁴⁰

Conclusion

‘I started as a crazy grieving mother. Today I have the support of students from all over the world. Hundreds of students from all over come to help me – to make our voice heard. Initially, some members were doubtful but slowly we have overcome fears and are able to see the importance of this force and support.’

-Parveena Ahanger, APDP⁴¹

The fight for justice is a long drawn out battle. Everyday crimes such as enforced disappearance, rob children of their childhood, women of their dignity and families of their truth. What is remarkable still, is the courage and relentless struggle of common people against forgetfulness, bringing a visible ray of hope. In this, whether before investigative mechanisms, or as an organised collective action, women and women-led movements have played a pivotal role, bringing a layered understanding of agency and victimhood to the debate.

³⁵ See, <http://www.trrc.gm/updates/>.

³⁶ See, <https://www.aneked.org/archives>.

³⁷ See, <https://www.aneked.org/aneked>.

³⁸ General Comment on the Right to the Truth in Relation to Enforced Disappearances, Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, Principle 3.

³⁹ Ms. Parveena Ahanger is the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize Nominee, 2017 Rafto Human Rights Awardee and recognised by the BBC as a 100 of the world's most inspiring and influential women.

⁴⁰ See, “*My World is Dark’ – State Violence and Pellet Firing Shotgun Victims from the 2016 Uprising in Kashmir.*”

⁴¹ See, <https://apdpkashmir.com/a-provisional-biography-of-the-association-of-parents-of-disappeared-persons-kashmir/>.

Whereas in the Gambia, a changed regime and the TRRC is a promising reform and relief to some extent, in Kashmir, especially after August 2019, increased militarisation, and the abrogation of the (already defunct) state human rights bodies, have removed any facade of accountability, making state impunity a norm in the region. In such a scenario, the work of movements like ANEKED, and APDP, in seeking and archiving truth, becomes even more crucial and relevant in the fight against impunity and the pursuit of justice.

Our Memory is a Weapon

Language is our first memory. *Mouj.*
And mother, our first home. *Kasheer.*

Mad heart-

They have built a wall,
Around our vale.
Stripped her green bare.
Taken off her veil.

Wail. Wai.

There is a mad woman, roaming around

ghanta ghar,
naked

(With the emperor's clothes),
Who only speaks of God,
To God,
the truth, which must now be proven,
the truth, which must not be spoken of

In Jannat,

Our grief,
does not fit, in a Papier-Mâché box,
But they insist-
To take a piece of paradise,
To make pieces of paradise.

And declare peace.

Calling it theirs,
From their fields,
Come marching Enemies,
Armed with rainbow colored bombs,
From their fields,
Come looters, building eco-friendly dams,
From their fields,
Come terrorizers with a (violent) vocabulary-
LOC, accession, AFSPA, integration.

From their fields-
Where nothing grows as freely as hate.
Where demons sermonize and criminals parade.

Where Each God,
Is a stone,
Each stone is a temple,
And each temple
stones their hearts.

While our bodies are turned into graveyards.

Shaheed.
Be Brave.

It is, like this, when old lovers meet at the banks of Lakes-

Dal and Nigeeen,
And look each other in the eye,
(how have you been?)

In exile. At home.

Sighing.
Haye.

Calling.
Myon.

Zuv, Jaan, Badan.

That we see the morning light.

Do not forget.
Our Love is a memory.

Always Remember-
Our Memory is a weapon.

ART AND VISUALS



Stills from My Memory

Barooja Bazaz

It was an unusual summer morning, but everything was locked down, all communication barred, all streets filled with men in uniform and we were waiting at our doors as the siege was laid upon us! This state of fear became our new normal and we had no idea we would be living like this for many months to come. We were surrounded by mountains and military and through this illustration, I have tried to show that. A glimpse of our life post August 5. I remember, I used to look at the same empty streets and other people, peeping through the windows of their homes, waiting! Waiting for everything to end. I would wonder where I could flee to, and what I would take with me. And in the end, I decided to take the memories of my beloved land with me. I tried to make an impression of every house and every mountain in my memory for I didn't know, and I still don't know how long I will be able to call my home, My Home!



“Ghar’e Wand’hai Ghar’e Saasa”⁴²

Ansab Jehan

In Kashmir, a lifetime of savings is spent in building a house. Along with money, people also invest their emotions in the process. Apart from being shelters, these houses are also keepers of memory. This piece draws attention to the attack on residential properties in Kashmir through disproportionate use of force. These houses which are later called ‘collateral’ embody the loss inflicted by years of militarization in the valley.

The situation in Kashmir is such that it has integrated entire households into the conflict, from members to the buildings. The practice of blowing up houses in vicinities of an encounter site has become a common practice. This bombing and burning down of houses, which often does not involve a single household, has rendered many families homeless. Other than the loss of material property, this leads to emotional and psychological distress as well.

This transgression can be seen as a strategy of deterrence, to instil fear among people by putting them through a collective punishment. It is an attack on the identities of the people and is aimed at breaking their will.

What is most startling about this gross violation, other than its occurrence itself, is the lack of accountability, which results in no provisions for compensations for the ‘collateral damage’.

The metaphorical wounds inflicted on the houses are varied. While some are razed to the ground, others carry markers of visible damage. The humans are left with a plethora of abrasions to tend to.

This violation, however, is not new. It is a practice which was carried out in the 90’s on a mass scale as well. In its current form, it manifests as scrutinised numbers, which can only be calculated by those who inflict the very injury.

⁴² *Home, I offer a thousand houses.* (a Kashmiri proverb). Kashmiri to English translation.

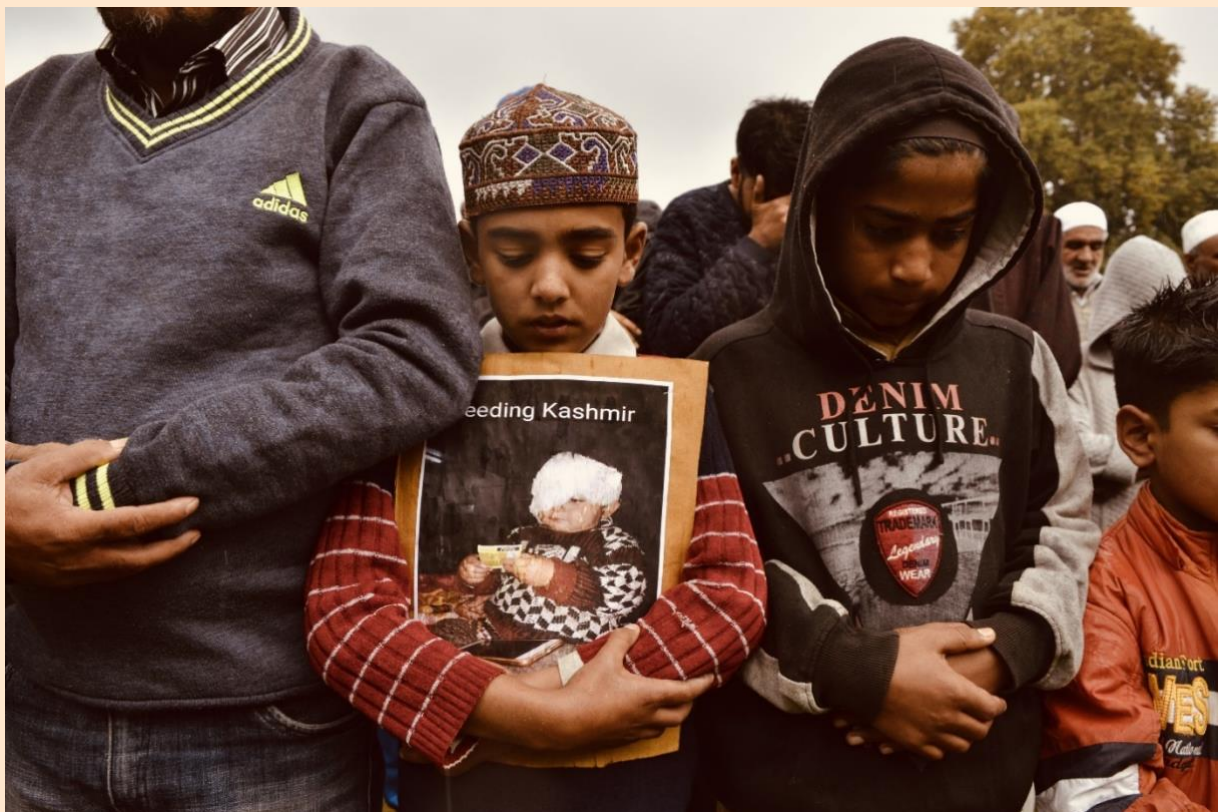


‘Born in a Curfew:’ Childhood in Kashmir

Masrat Zahra and Zara Bakshi

“Youngest son of Haleema was born in a curfew. Sweat drips from her neck. Baby loves the perfume. I mean look for sure, her whole world is a conflict where machine guns roar and she can’t stop it. So, she holds him tight. Never far from her sight. Prays five times a day. Let her children be safe. May they see the light of the day... Let her children be safe.”

-MC Kash



In Kashmir, generations of children have grown up amidst politically charged surroundings and anxieties of survival. It is often said in jest, colloquially, that a Kashmiri child holds more nuance in the tip of their little finger than an adult in the Indian mainland. The minds of children are impacted by their environment and the people that surround them. Philosophers have even said that children are born into the world as *blank slates*. As they grow older these impressionable minds both acquire from and adapt to their surroundings.



This photo-essay examines the various ways in which children of the valley navigate their (extra)ordinary childhoods. Ranging from the schools begin closed for months altogether, to the heavy military presence in their vicinities, losses that Kashmiri children bear have been integrated into their social fibre, the language of violence is internalised, and it seeps into what they see and say every day- *halaat kharab* (tense situation), firing, encounters etc.



A rather startling example of this imposition of violence was when a 3-year-old toddler who became the lone witness to the brutal killing of his grandfather by armed personnel as per his family members. In a video that surfaced-on social media, the child was heard describing the incident, “*unko police wale ne goli mari, wo mar gaya...police wale ne thak thak kia...thak thak thak thak thak.*” (He was shot by the policeman, he died, the policeman did- *imitates gunshots*).



The subjection to loss and violence amid heightened militarization has been made an integral part of the life in Kashmir. So, when the loss is ongoing and omnipresent in the environment, what kind of social beings does it produce? Do children in Kashmir stop playing because concertina wires cover the playground? Have children stopped learning due to continuous shut down of schools over the years?



Childhood doesn't cease to exist in conflict but is forced to adapt a varied demeanour. The photos above depict this through the most visible markers in children's lives amidst militarisation in Kashmir.

"I have a vivid memory of what I have begun to recall as 'boots on a mattress'. When I was very young, about 5-6 years old I woke up to an army man in my parent's bedroom where I used to sleep on the floor, on a mattress. He was going through my father's cupboard which was directly above my bedding. I don't know if the emotions attached to it are something that I developed over time or whether they emerged that very day but I felt violated and paranoid. I have felt paranoid ever since. I think paranoia is an inherent gift that Kashmir gives to its children." –Excerpt from Shahnaz's Diary

Quite often these experiences lead to feelings which get embodied as behavioural patterns. The excerpt from Shahnaz's diary highlights the fact that such instances not only form associations of discomfort for children but also shape lifelong perceptions as adults.

Kashmiri children witness transgressions under the unnatural circumstances of militarization. In this photograph, a young boy is seen standing beside the accompanying adult who is getting inspected. These instances of scrutiny aren't rare and have become a source of humiliation and anxiety for both adults as



well as children. In addition to this, there is an ominous gaze which heightens the vulnerabilities of Kashmiri people. However, children aren't mere witnesses to such transgressions in Kashmir. Their bodies are sites upon which various degrees of violations occur as well. 18 month old Hiba Nisar became Kashmir's youngest pellet victim in 2018. 17 year-old Tufail Mattoo's killing became the catalyst to the 2010 uprising.



“Ten-year-old Azaan (name changed)...was picked up when he was playing cricket at a playground near his home. Azaan was first beaten and then bundled inside a police vehicle – along with a few other boys. Inside the police vehicle, as per Azaan, the policeman pointed a gun at his chest and told him that he will shoot him. Azaan was beaten and verbally abused by the policemen inside the station. He was only let off after elders from his area, including his

family – approached the police station the next day and pleaded for the innocence of Azaan, who is just 10-year-old.” -Annual Human Rights Review 2019 JKCCS



Children are resilient beings- they scratch their knees, cry a little and then get distracted in the next moment. But when this resilience is put to unending tests, does it break their spirit?

In Kashmir countless children are made a party to violent clashes, they return to encounter sites- to broken buildings, ashes, dust and their belongings gone. Witnessing their demolished homes is a memory encapsulated by these pictures. This event is yet again accompanied by the helplessness of the adults who are also recovering from this ongoing trauma.



Perhaps the most obvious repercussion of the conflict in recent times is the setback on educational institutions in the valley. Learning among children is majorly hindered due to the continuous shutting down of schools. In the picture here a young girl can be seen writing a letter (*darkhwast*) in Kashmiri. The growth and development of young children is not only affected in terms of their education but also their social life-their play is affected, and they remain isolated, separated from friends for long periods.



“It is funny how initially I used to pray for one more hartal which would mean a day off but soon we started feeling like prisoners in our own land. I missed my friends, I was at home for three months and how much time can a teenager with angst spend with their family or watch T.V? Trust me not a lot. I started spending time more and more on my own and grew quieter....”
—Excerpt from Shahnaz’s diary



Growing up, these children are forced to be at par with a world that does not halt due to such militaristic and political impediments. They have to circumvent situations which obstruct a healthy ‘normal’ lifestyle. They continue to function in high stress, under-resourced conditions.

This has severe consequences on the mental health of the children in Kashmir. However, any conversation about engaging with worsening mental health cannot happen in absence of the socio-political and material conditions. Militarization is an everyday reality of children's lives in Kashmir and any discussion about child-rights is incomplete without taking this into account. Although the pictures in this essay follow the singular lens of militarism, the aim here is to make a case for demilitarization of the region for children’s psychosocial wellbeing.

MEMOIRS



Laments from an Occupied Home

Essar Batool

*'Karbala pe'th nanwor peach'sai shaam,
laji'sai ba'abo waen thae'h'sai, shahraen
pheer pheer'*

*(I have walked from Karbala to Syria
barefoot. I am tired now, O father, of
having been taken from city to city)*

- A couplet from a *Kaeshur marsiya* describing the lament of Lady Zainab addressed to her father Imam Ali.

The snow crunched under our winter boots and the *Chillai Kalan* wind bit our noses, as we held on to the *pheran* sleeve of our father, making our way to the *Imambare*. The cry of lament was one of urgency; the air laden with grief, the *marsiya* an invitation to spend the night of *Ashura* in prayers and mourning. My earliest memories of Muharram are of the nights of *Ashura* which then mostly coincided with the harsh winter period. It reminds me of the *kangir* that my mother carried between her feet in the car, and of her emptying all utensils of food and water telling us that no food will be cooked till *Sham-e-Gareeban*[1] is over. The rituals of grief have remained the same over the years, only the seasons have changed and our need to hold on to our father has ceased to be.

On the 10th night of Muharram, only the sick and immobile stay home. Everyone else heads out to the *Imambaras* for a night-long collective mourning ceremony in honour of the martyrs of Karbala. Inside, men and women sit in their places, separated by a beautiful wooden *panjri*, through the pattern of which children try to

spot their fathers throughout the night. Mothers hold sleepy children close to their chest as they cry over Ali Asgar, the six-month-old martyr of Karbala. The *Majlis* starts with an *aalim* stressing on the values of Karbala, of the need to turn towards Allah and stay steadfast on the path of Islam following the example of Imam Hussain a.s and his companions. The *zaakir* takes up the thread and begins reciting a *marsiya*, elegies detailing the hardships that befell the family of the Prophet (pbuh). The men join in a chorus and the women, in a low voice, among themselves. Tears, sobs and grief envelope the night as mourners reject any comfort for the doomed night.

Occasionally in winter nights, a cup of *nun chai* is served, the *pyale* almost overflowing, along with a warm *chochwor* or *kulche*, an offering for the mourners. I have always felt the warmth of the tea warming up my body as someone calls the *Azan e Ali Akbar*, the last call to prayer by the son of Imam Hussain on the dawn of the 10th day of Muharram. The warmth is almost immediately replaced by a chill by the knowledge that the night has ended just like it did for the martyrs of Karbala, who wouldn't hear another call for prayer. The wails are the most painful at this point as people live the moment that marked the beginning of a brutal onslaught on the Prophet's family.

1990's. '*Ya Abbas! Ya Abbas*'.

The powerful invocation of Imam Hussain's half brother's name rips apart the silent night to shreds. The name is symbolic of loyalty, courage, love and sacrifice. Every *majlis* culminates with these chants before a *dua* is said. That night, the chants emanating from an old mud house filled

with mourners came to an abrupt halt as olive uniform clad soldiers barged into the house. *'Kon hai abass? Kahan chupaya hai? Batao kyun bula rahe the usko?'* a clueless soldier asks my father as his men beat the mourners to a pulp. Thirty years later, the story is one of my father's favourites, and he laughs every time he tells us how they helplessly tried to explain to the soldiers who Abbas was and why they were screaming his name in the middle of the night. Laughing, as she always does, whenever my father tells a story, my mother quips in and tells me how after their marriage, my father had been picked up with other men by the Indian armed forces. They were taken to a deserted house that belonged to a *pandit* and now served as a makeshift investigation/torture centre. My mother's smile disappears as she recalls the night she spent crying, a new bride wondering if her husband would ever come back. My father came back, covered in bruises after being beaten all night in a cramped room filled with men who were picked up from their homes during a cordon. *'Trath peynakh. Naev gaer phetravhas'*, my mom curses the army men for destroying the brand new golden wristed watch my mother had gifted my father.

These stories of loss, grief and everyday humiliation were kept from us. They only made their way into conversations once we were old enough to experience some of these on our own. Up until then, the stories were wrapped carefully in a deliberate silence, an attempt perhaps to spare us the horrifying details of humiliation a Kashmiri faced. Maybe our parents didn't know that we had clear memories of the nights when soldiers would trot right into our house, in the middle of the night, inquiring about our

father's identity in his own home. The prized document in any Kashmiri household, my father's identity card would save him almost always from disappearing into the dark unknown.

.....

As long back as I can see, I have been struggling to navigate and get hold of the multiple identities that make up my existence. As a Kashmiri Shia woman, it took me some time to understand how these identities are distinct and yet, intricately connected, how they can clash and yet, co-exist. I thought of them as exclusive as I experienced each identity in varying forms at different times. Growing up, the identity that stood out acutely, apart from that of being a woman, was that of belonging to a school of thought where belief and faith surpassed everything else. The first thing a child born in a Shia family tastes is *khaak e karbala*, the soil from the sacred land, and then mourning becomes an inseparable part of a Shia's existence. For us the two months of Muharram and Safar mean nothing but mourning, no marriages are conducted, and no happiness celebrated as we mourn for the Prophet's family. Mourning is a very evident and expressive part of our identity. It can be an uncomfortable experience growing up because people do not know about this essential part of your identity. Back in school, I remember a dear friend, who, while sharing my lunch told me that her grandmother had cautioned her against eating with a Shia. *'I don't care what she thinks. She is old and doesn't know what she's saying'*, she said as she stuffed mouthfuls of rice from my lunch into her mouth. She was one of the exceptions; mostly there were more hurtful questions about myths that should not exist in this

age. When you are asked whether or not you pray or if you spit into your food before eating, you seem to drift away, you feel like you are the ‘other’, someone who doesn’t belong to ‘their’ identity. Often at home, we would talk about who had faced the most stupid sounding questions and would eventually end up laughing while that lingering sadness tugged at our hearts.

For a long time, a shadow of doubt followed my identity; the feeling of not belonging to my identity of being a Kashmiri evaporated as I got the glimpse of the bigger picture, of my home where the *alam* of Hussain and Abbas flew high and underneath it stood men with guns, occupiers of my land, just as they stood outside mosques and *khankahs*. The illusion of being the ‘other’ crumbled under the weight of breathing the same oppression filled air as everyone else did. For too long, the month of Muharram had been kept under the wraps of being apolitical, even as it remains one of the most political acts in the history of humankind. To separate Karbala from the politics of occupied lands is a disservice to the memory of martyrs, to reduce it to mourning with no action is of no consequence. Memories of Karbala evoke mourning and the mourning, in turn, manifests itself as an ideology. The understanding of Karbala in the context of the politics of our home is what has driven a clearer understanding of occupation and resistance as a response, home.

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‘zillat ki zindagi se izzat ki mout behtar’

(A death with dignity is better than a life of humiliation)

2017/18.

The elegies recited at Muharram processions are no longer limited to Karbala. The processions reverberate with *nawah* written for Kashmir. An extended understanding of Karbala and the message it entails has returned into the public sphere of mourning and into our political consciousness. A sea of mourners, clad in black, beat their chests as they recall the sacrifice of Imam Hussain, alongside a picture of the militant commander Burhan Wani, a defiant, bold political statement. It is courageous, knowing the repercussions that follow a declaration of political sentiments in Kashmir. It is also an answer to questions about where the allegiances of the Kashmiri Shias lie. This has been, in part, due to the state narrative that pitches Kashmiri *Shias* against the *Sunnis* as being opposed to the resistance movement in Kashmir and in part due to the ignorance about the part played by the Shia community in the movement right from the start. Our relationship with pro-*Azadi* politics is not a newfound sentiment but an old affair only renewed with fresh energy.

Shias have been part of every resistance movement right from the movement against Dogras to the resistance against Indian occupation. The only thing that has now changed is the shaping of the private sentiment into a more collective public one. On a balmy autumn evening, I sat listening to Ghulam Ali Gulzar sahib, a local historian, who resides in the old locality of Hassanabad in Srinagar. My father had offered to take me to talk to him about Shia history in relation to the resistance movement in Kashmir. *‘Emis waentav soun role tehreeki manz’*, said my father as they exchanged knowing smiles at the ignorance

of a person who knew nothing about her own history. The conversation extended over hours Gulzar sahib mesmerized me with stories and facts about how Shia leaders had been involved historically in the Plebiscite Front, in pro-Pakistan politics and also in an armed struggle against Indian rule in the early days of the armed resistance. *'Hizbul Momineen is what the outfit was called. It was an all Shia group'*, he smiled at my visible reaction of surprise and continued. *'There were many other boys who fought with other popular groups. I know of Shia doctors who treated injured fighters and of numerous families that sheltered them. Our involvement in the tehreek was equal'*. Some years later, as I drove in a vehicle for work, the driver confided that he was a former militant. He confirmed what Gulzar Sahib had said about the involvement of Shias in the armed rebellion. As we passed through Saida Kadal, he would point out former commanders, now sitting in shops handing out groceries to customers. *'We fought like brothers. There have been numerous times that we took refuge in Shia houses where we were always treated equally like family, fed*

'kalim'a go hai wadov shahe-madeenas ye'im sar dyut manz karbala. Mael hae'tchen baed'babin ummat beyi zindae thovun la ilaah'

(O you who recite thekalima, let us mourn the king of Madina who gave his head in the desert of Karbala; he who did the people of his grandfather a great service and helped keep alive the essence of Islam) -A couplet from a Kaeshur nawah.

and kept warm'. The look of longing in his eyes when he talked about his experiences explained that there had been no differences between them, not at that point in history at least and that they fought for a common cause united by a single identity.

I asked Gulzar sahab about the reason Shias felt disconnected from the movement now, he said what my father later confirmed. The changes in the geopolitics of the subcontinent forced the community into silence. As the sectarian killings in Pakistan of Shias started gaining hold, the hopes of Kashmiri Shias died a silent death. Another cause that many elderly people of my community attribute to a lull in the involvement of Shias in resistance politics with the community slipping into illiteracy and backwardness, retribution by the state for the support to the *tehreek*. An even worse fallout was the erasure of the history of Shias that followed and the divide between the two communities that the state planned and initiated.

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September 2019

Reeling under a communication blackout in the jail that is Kashmir, we awaited the month of Muharram with the same zeal and vigour as always. In August 2019, as the Indian state abrogated Article 370, it put Kashmiris under strict lockdown, with no access to any basic facility, including communication and healthcare. The feeling of losing our home became more real with each passing day; I saw my otherwise composed father getting restless just the way he would in the 90's when the army men knocked on our door in the night. As the month of Muharram approached, the

majalis began with their usual lessons on Islam and Karbala followed by *marsiya* and the *dua* that now also included a prayer for freedom. The Shia clergy had been detained, and those who were not, had been warned not to use the pulpit for making political statements. The pulpit was revolutionized; it was speaking truth to power. A cleric, Aijaz Rizvi, from downtown Srinagar was detained under the draconian Public Safety Act after he refused to comply with these orders. He reiterated what we are taught from our childhood, '*We follow Imam Hussain a.s, we do not obfuscate the truth. Our pulpits will not be silenced*'. In the days that followed, we heard police vehicles announcing curfews ahead of procession days, warning of strict action against people defying orders. The month was spent defying these orders as processions were taken out, slogans of *Azadi* raised, and the mourners beaten and jailed. The roadside stalls, where sharbat is handed out to mourners, became political statements as they raised banners for Kashmir and against the Indian occupation. I remember vividly struggling to breathe as the pepper gas filled the air, and the cries of '*Ya Hussain*' became louder as the mourners took out a procession and were tear-gassed, fleeing through the fields. I could hear my mother curse the occupiers, praying for the safety of the young men who were given shelter by people in their homes. The mourning now is symbolic of the past, and nothing much has changed. Even though we have been witness to violence, being a part of these mourning rituals every year owing to bans on major processions through Srinagar city, the coming together of the Shia and Sunni communities during Muharram has

ensured an increasingly violent response from the state.

Over the past few years, the distinction between identities has started to dilute, and they are merging towards a common identity of opposing oppression. The more I grow the more I realize how intricately the identity of being a Shia is connected with the identity of being a Kashmiri and how they are inseparable. A question often raised is if it is really necessary for the identity of being a Shia to be prominent alongside the sentiment of resistance. I believe it is; it is important to dismantle a narrative that pits us against each other, that demeans our existence as one single entity.

This year, as mourning processions were taken out, the action from the state was brutal. Pellet guns were used against young mourners which led to the loss of eyesight for many mourners. And yet, it is not a new phenomenon. For years, hundreds of young men have lost their eyes to pellet guns as they protested against the Indian state. The political overtones of the processions were bound to scare the state into establishing the norm for dealing with any political gathering in Kashmir. Online, there were attempts to colour the incident sectarian but the collective response by Shias and Sunnis rejected these attempts. An occupying state doesn't consider sects other than for their own benefit, our identities mean nothing to them except for cards that can be played, to further their own narratives. And yet, our identities have dismantled these narratives bit by bit over years.

Nothing says loss and displacement like Karbala does, nothing even defines resistance against oppression as it does. The relationship between Karbala and Kashmir

is an everlasting one. Karbala is a *darsgah*,
where we draw our lessons of resistance
from. As we mourn every year amidst

restrictions we remind ourselves of the
words of Imam Hussain,

'Hay haat mina zila'.
Far from us is humiliation.

[1] Sham-e-Gareeban translates to 'an evening of strangers and homeless'. It refers to the evening of 10th Muharram when after the battle of Karbala was over, the forces of Yazid rampaged through camps of Hussain a.s, taking his family captive, and looting their belongings. The night is marked with a silent march where lights are turned off as a symbolic replication of the scene in Karbala and signify the destruction that befell the family of the Prophet (pbuh).

***Baksa*: Selective Remembrance of Partition**

Ravneet Kour



Nani sits on the lawn basking in the afternoon sun. She carefully looks through the bundle of *haakh*, separating the clean leaves from the bad ones. The singing *koyal* and the gentle breeze mark the peak of a pleasant summer. Her grey hair is oiled and combed neatly, and her eyes have a few more wrinkles than the last summer. I sit beside her and observe my fingertips that have developed a brownish tint from picking the raw walnuts yesterday. This colour will take a few more days to fade. There is an odd familiarity with these events.

My summer vacations were spent at my *nanihaal* which was nestled in the hills of Delina in Baramulla town. The main road

for connectivity was carved through apple orchards and paddy fields. One could see a picturesque view of the Baramulla from the hill. The summer was never harsh, and the evenings were pleasantly windy. The families often enjoyed the evening tea in their lawns while the kids played, and the cattle returned home after a day of grazing. “*Jayi, bakse ko nazar maarni ae?*” (Grandmother, do you want to go through your trunk today?) asks my Aunt as she joins us, helping Nani with the leftover *haakh*. Nani's trunk had an air of mystery around it. Since childhood, every kid in the house had been intrigued by the *baksa*. Nani rarely opened it as she had all her expensive jewellery and clothes tucked safely in it. She cherished this little wardrobe of hers. The opening of the trunk was an event of its own. It smelled of *charmies*, *dupattas* and mothballs. She would put down all her Pashmina on the carpet carefully while cleaning the trunk. Each article in this trunk had its own story. That was all there was, for us children, the awe of expensive fabric and the smell of *charmies*. We would gently touch them, admire them, and then go back to our paused games. She would always tell us how this *baksa* was the only thing she had that belonged to her father. As we all grew up, the tradition of *baksa* opening continued. It was not until 20 years later that I realised the significance and her deep attachment to that box.

Nani was two years old when the tribals invaded Kashmir during October of 1947. She was the youngest of five children and lived at Kanispora, around 5 kilometres away from the Baramulla town. This invasion remains a forgotten chapter in the historical accounts. It was the earliest clash between the two countries after the partition

for Kashmir and arguably the most tragic one too. This secret invasion, named Plan Gulmarg by Pakistan, was carried out towards the end of October 1947. The strategy of this militia was to capture Srinagar airport as soon as possible. They moved forward looting and ravaging Muzaffarabad while Baramulla remained unaware of what was nearing quickly. The Sikh population of Kashmir became the first casualty of this attack. *"It started with a few rumours, nobody could confirm the news"* says Nani. *"Koi Sheri daaro aaya nasda, aata kabali aarien."* (Somebody came running from Sheri alerting everybody that invaders had come), she adds. Many of the villages in Baramulla were deserted within a few hours. Some people escaped to safer places nearby, some returned to their villages hoping to see what little was left, while the remaining others began the long journey to Ichhahama and Attna on foot. Nani's family left for Srinagar on their horses and carried whatever little they could manage. All five children took turns to ride the horses as the elders kept walking for the rest of the road. They reached Ichhahama in Budgam the next day where they took shelter in Gurudwara Singh Sabha. Nani recalls that the Gurudwara was ambushed at early hours by the columns that had camped by the borders of the village on the third day of the raid. The native lands were heavily guarded by the ill-equipped Sikhs for five days (22nd-27th October) against the well-armed invaders. My great-grandfather, Nani's father was shot dead from the Gurudwara's window and had to be left with the others while they ran towards Srinagar. She recalls that her family had decided to leave her next to her father's body for they had limited means to escape,

but her elder brother returned midway to take her along with them. She struggles with the memories of these few days and her father. She recollects through stories how a Sardar, named Khalind Singh, stayed behind at the Gurudwara for its protection with just one rifle. A painful tragedy unfolded as a father from an adjacent village killing his three daughters with his bare hands when the family's attempt to escape failed. She recalls how her aunt had collected bodies of different family members in one place and torched down the house as a cremation site. Through her memories, she remembers the thousands of those Sikhs martyred for Kashmir while holding off this invasion as long as they could and the dispossession that followed eventually. Unfortunately, this mayhem was never picked up by historians and scholars when they wrote about the Partition. With just one limited and reliable source, Himat Singh's book titled 'Sacrifice for Kashmir', it will, if not already, be forgotten.

The shared trauma and fear of exclusion for the Sikh diaspora had begun and it would continue for years to come. With little mainstream representation and often called the forgotten minority, the Sikhs of the valley witnessed the occupation and struggle for Kashmiri self-determination up close and personal. From being used as scapegoats for communal discord to being entertained for vote bank politics, Kashmiri Sikh remain anything but relevant stakeholders even today. The massacre of Chittisinghpura in Anantnag during which 35 Sikhs were martyred by men donning army uniform, remains cloaked in mystery even after two decades. With their grievances and voices unheard, justice for them remains a long shot.

The abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019 has added to the uncertainty of the future of all Kashmiris, including, the Sikh community. The continued siege of the valley in the form of increased army deployment, a year of state-sponsored communication gag, among many other difficulties has made this dystopian tragedy seem more real than ever. There seems to be a threat to the social fabric of Kashmir, including to this spirited community which has existed in harmony with the Muslim population for 73 years, even during the peak of insurgency in the '90s.

Nonetheless, the Sikh community of Kashmir is no stranger to the concept of an identity crisis. This question has loomed over the Sikh minority for generations. Whilst I frequently encounter people outside Kashmir questioning my ethnicity, wondering how can I be a Kashmiri and a Sikh; the Kashmiris in Kashmir feel this alienation too, with their identities scrutinized. This micro minority has sustained several years of turbulent identity politics. Our nuanced identity has strong and deep roots in a multifaceted sense of community which remains highly influenced by our cultural and regional heritage. With the blend of Punjabi and Kashmiri culture, the Sikhs in Kashmir have long embraced cultural synthesis, therefore creating a unique self-identity. What places me much closer to the Kashmiri community in comparison to Punjab, where my religious allegiance lies or, to Peshawar, from where my ancestors belong and my Hindko language originates? To me, it is a sense of kinship for me. Although for many years, we, along with other smaller ethnic groups, witnessed how our sense of belonging was exploited under the pretence of keeping up the facade

of diversity in the valley. From the Kabali raid to curfews, the victimization of the Kashmiri Sikhs has been continuous but silent.

Our generations have thrived here, same as the others. We have mourned here, same as others. The essence of being a Kashmiri is there when my grandmother picks up that local *haakh* from her kitchen garden and when my grandfather spends his evenings listening to the Kashmiri news bulletin. It is there when my mother recognizes the Pashmina by just a touch and when my father writes his letters in Urdu. When I wear a *pheran* with pride and it is there when all of us feel the loss of our homeland because of this ongoing conflict, generation after generation.

Nani, with her family, returned to broken and burnt homes after months. The box had survived underneath the debris along with a few of her father's things in their house. She will keep these with her for the next 70 years. The memory of the raid, occupation and violence may be fading away, but it lives on through her lived realities. My summer vacations will continue, the walnuts will colour my hands brown again and my Nani will again open her *baksa* and tell us the stories of her home that once was.

FICTION



F is for Fish. F is for Freedom

Fouziya Tehzeeb

Every year, while men are in the Eid-gah offering prayers, I apply *heena* on the toes of the cow. Tied to the willow tree, she munches on the grass one last time. The act of preparing it for sacred sacrifice is accompanied by a bit of uneasiness in my heart. From the corner of my eye, I look at her bulging eye with thick long eyelashes. Is she at the verge of tears? I keep wondering. Is this how she appears every day and I just fail to notice? I comfort myself.

When the men in the family return, they are accompanied by a local butcher. While they are busy with the ritual sacrifice, I prepare the *samovar* filled with sweet cinnamon *kehwa*; *kulcha* with poppy seeds on top are complimentary. My brother-in-law, Bilal takes the responsibility to serve the *kehwa* to the guests and to keep it boiling continuously inside the *samovar*. He blows on the charcoal, adds new glowing red charcoal pieces, and by the end of it, his short red hair is covered in specks of white and grey ash.

Unlike this butcher who is welcomed in our homes, there are other kinds of butchers in Kashmir that nobody wants in their homes. They come, inflict pain and leave behind the memories which linger on forever. Often, they behave as actual butchers; they chop human bodies into pieces, for real. Recently, the human body parts were found in the *Kehmil* river, not far from my home. They were impossible to identify when one of the dismembered right hand was found under a boulder and his name was found engraved on top of it. It gave me goosebumps and I wondered if this was the reason for older people to engrave their name on top of their hand and forearm. *May Allah protect us all!*

On Eid-ul-Adha, a couple of families in my village who can afford it, prefer to cook fish as meat gets piled up. The rest of the families cook a big rooster and wait for the sacrificial meat wrapped in paper to be delivered to their homes. This wait for one year spanned across four seasons was never felt as deeply as it did this time. Sometimes, people spend every minute of their lives waiting for one moment and somehow, in the process, they lose the sight of what they had been waiting for all along. I am waiting for Majid to return home. This beleaguered hope is circling around me, like day and night.

Today, I have to cook 25 kilograms of fish. Day before yesterday, it was raining heavily and I travelled down South to Sopore, seventy-five *kms* away from here. After negotiating with two fishermen back and forth over the Sopore *Jehlum Gaad*, one finally offered eleven *kgs* and another, fourteen. They dumped the fish submerged in blood -red water in my big plastic sack. Upon reaching home, I soaked the small fish in cold water again in a wide mouthed cauldron. They rose up to the top, greyish black in colour and their eyes bulging out, they were looking at me; fifteen eyes at one time and some sneaking eyes underneath them, waiting to listen to me with great love. Did they sense the fear in my body? I could. Could they see how much I have endured these last six months? I can see. Suddenly I was hit by a wave of painful memories and I broke down holding the black cold cauldron with both my hands. In that moment, the fish were the witness to my pain. Next morning, I popped out those eyes.

It took me hours to clean the fish at the well while my sister-in-law poured cold water over them. I pulled out the internal organs and all the kids gathered around waiting for the balloon-swim bladder. The older kids were picking up the balloon from the pile filled with blood; rough gills, sticky eyeballs, pouty lips, yellow-green intestines, fat lumps, transparent scales and small fins. My pile of issues intensified too. I tried to cover up my stormy inner self with a rough outer display.

The white balloon has two empty sacs conjoined together like Majid's heart and mine, only that ours is filled with love. One after the other, the kids thumped on the balloons. They burst with low sound while some of the balloons burst silently. All the kids looked surprised and within seconds they all broke into a loud laughter.

My heart is like those balloons, if thumped, it will make no sound either. The storm has spiralled down leaving behind a gloomy soul.

Silence can be surprising for people in Kashmir. Not hearing loud gunshots for a while makes everyone wonder if things are okay. The sense of feeling okay in the body is experienced by the chaos outside. Each body part feels alive during the protests these days. Blood gushes high inside. Space for breath is crunched down and shouts for 'Azadi' reach straight to the lungs. Arms swing, hands clap and legs don't stop.

The body of the fish lay ripped apart into two parts now. The head, the upper and lower belly and the tail. Later in the night, I stayed up to deep fry the fish on the mud stove. For the first time, nobody in our home is looking forward to the feast.

Today, I have no time to see my *heena-ed* cow, make *kehwa*, meet or greet. I need to check the list of stuff for the feast. Deep brown fried fish/Boiled Haakh-Collard Greens/Boiled Mujje-Radish/Mustard Oil/Garlic/Kashmiri red chili powder, turmeric, black cardamoms, salt/little water.

The leftover mustard oil from last night will not burn my eyes. After stir frying the vegetables with spices in the copper pot (*deekche*), a layer of vegetables and a layer of fish pieces, another layer of vegetables, and finally the fish is placed. Water is added small but in right amount to cook the whole meal to make the fish juicy but none to be left at the end. My mother once told me that water is not good for cooked fish as it brings them back alive. It doesn't make sense but I would dread seeing fish floating in ras/curry. That's a sign of a bad Kashmiri fish recipe. Twenty-five years later, I saw Bengali fish in a yellow mustard curry.

The taxi came to a halt in front of a black high walled gate - Muqam Army Camp written in red. I adjusted my white cotton *pheran* with green and pink flowers. I untied my hijab and tied it again at the back of my head leaving the black hair above my ears visible and the braid swinging. Bilal pulled down two big copper pots.

The Muqam Army camp is nestled at the foothills of Shamsabari mountain range. It's located in the village named Muqam. *Muqam/maqam* in Urdu means the destination or a site, this is the last muqam I pray Allah for me to land at. For now, he has chosen this destination for me. It was after months of searching that we came to know that Majid was arrested and held captive at this very camp.

"What is your name and who are you meeting?" asked the soldier from inside of the gate- he had black eyes and light brown skin, speaking in Kashmiri. I could sense the anger on his long face.

"I am Saima and I am here to meet my husband, Majid".

He opened the gate, took out his long register, with year 1992 marked on it. Deep inside, I made a silent prayer. *Ya Allah! Don't repeat a year like this in my life.* But that's not how life works. He wrote my details and next to it, I put my right thumbprint.

I studied in a local primary government school till the 3rd standard. I can only recognise alphabets and numbers. F is for Fish. F is for Freedom, too. Beyond this, my vocabulary fails.

Except, Majid having introduced me to the world of poetry; love for the Beloved, and love for him and what he loves. I love him and he loves his country.

As part of his work, he was meeting new people from different parts of Kashmir and from the other side of the border. He used to guide them in the Shamsbari forest under the moonlight, lift the injured on mountain range, dress their wounds and escort them to their destination. They filled him with stories about their families, towns and favourite poets. Whenever he would come home, he would narrate those stories to me. I would travel in those stories whirling around like my fingerprints.

So, this is my third official *Mulaqaat* (meeting). *Mulaqaatas kar chu gasun?* (When are you going for the tryst?) The question I would hear often from everyone in the village. In every mulaqaat, a family member or a relative who finds it difficult to hold on to emotions is dragged along. These meet-ups are no magic potion to wipe off the pain, how can a meeting with a beloved leave you with no yearning? Instead, it brings more pain.

Since its Eid today we all decided to take my younger sister-in-law's first born newly arrived baby girl to meet Majid, her elder maternal uncle. Perhaps, this is the first and last time she would see him.

The soldier signaled to his companion, he had a dark brown complexion, tall, and yes, *Indian*, to accompany us to Barrack 11. Local men from the surrounding villages collect timber from the forest, some build barracks and huts and some work on the fence. There are others who are forced into menial labour work, including children. Ten days back, Majid had informed a labourer from our village to bring 25kgs of cooked fish.

During the day time, the prisoners are kept in small wooden barracks. The door remains shut and the light sweeps in through a single window. At night, they take them somewhere else, darker. The soldier unlocked the door.

The sun rays shone on Majid's silhouette. He was there, sitting with his arms crossed and hands chained, resting in his lap, and legs folded with feet chained, too. He was wearing beige coloured *kurta-pyjama*. His pyjama was covering his thighs and knees, leaving the shins exposed. The weight of those rusted chains felt heavier than our copper pots. After wishing him Eid Mubarak, Bilal placed the two pots in the left corner of the room one by one.

“Aren’t we a bit late for this grand feast?” said Majid with a hint of sarcasm.

“Did they beat you up again?” I asked, feeling guilty inside, but he could feel the love.

Finally, after three days of struggle with this feast, it reached the master. Majid was fighting for freedom and now for his freedom, these fish were paying the price.

I walked slowly on broken wooden planks underneath and placed Madina in his arms, resting on his elbows. His eyes were focused on her, seeing his niece for the first time in jail. He was trying to forget his pain. My eyes were focused on him. Shortly, the hook of the chain pierced her soft skin and she began to cry. I will narrate this story when she would be ready to receive the secret nineteen years later. The circle of life should never end.

Bilal handed me a plate and a spoon signaling me to place fish pieces for him on the plate before the copper pots would be taken away.

“How are the kids doing?” Majid asked.

I was stirring the layer of blood orange mustard oil and lifted the greens which had turned black-greenish, the same colour as Majid’s shin. The white radishes had turned blood orange too.

Majid repeated his question and then, with his bald head hanging down, he said, “The Commanding Officer wants 150 pashmina shawls next week.”

I stopped. My thoughts are running wild and I was running with them too, wildly. Scattered all over the place, lost in my own wilderness. Unlocking one dark empty room and running towards another. His words were ringing in my ears and along with his words, the Persian poem that he read to me once about the silence in Tehran when it came under attack by the Mongols.

*My slumbering city! Where is the spirit of your spring?
Where are your crowds, your passion, and your zeal?
The bitter tears of fall creep through veins in every leaf;
Where is your breath of sunrise, the scent of your green?
The enemy fields its troops in your markets and streets;
Where is the clamour of your riders and your horse’s screams?*

I was exhausted. All I wanted to do was to stop running. But at least, I could run, Majid couldn't. This thought grounded me.

“Is the CO going to wrap your wounds with the Pashmina shawls?” I smiled.

ANSAB JEHAN

Ansab Jehan is a virtual artist who explores a wide range of themes related to Kashmir in her artworks. At present, she is studying medicine and is based in Iran.

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ATHER ZIA

Ather Zia, Ph.D., is a political anthropologist, poet, short fiction writer, and a columnist. She teaches at the University of Northern Colorado, Greeley. Ather is the author of *Resisting Disappearances: Military Occupation and Women's Activism in Kashmir* (June 2019) and co-editor of *Can You Hear Kashmiri Women Speak* (Women Unlimited, 2020), *Resisting Occupation in Kashmir* (Upenn, 2018) and *A Desolation called Peace* (Harper Collins, May 2019). She has published a poetry collection "The Frame" (1999) and another collection is forthcoming. Ather's ethnographic poetry on Kashmir has won an award from the Society for Humanistic Anthropology. She is the founder-editor of *Kashmir Lit* and is the co-founder of *Critical Kashmir Studies Collective*, an interdisciplinary network of scholars working on the Kashmir region.

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Barooja Bashir Bazaz is a freelance artist from Kashmir. A Master in Computer Applications from University of Kashmir, her artwork is generally themed around her musings on Kashmir-its people, geography and locale. She paints mostly with watercolours, acrylics and does thread work too.

ESSAR BATOOL

Essar Batool is a professional social worker and a human rights activist from Kashmir. She is a petitioner in the case against Indian Armed Forces in Kunan Poshpora mass rape case of 1990 and a co-author of the book *Do you remember Kunan Poshpora?* which discusses the case in detail. She works on development of expression and spaces among young women and creating spaces for dialogue based on understanding of gender among youth. Currently, she works as a freelance consultant and trainer in Kashmir. She writes about gender and occupation.

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MADEEHA MAJID

Madeeha Majid, hailing from Srinagar, is a lawyer and a recent cum-laude graduate of the Advanced Master's in Public International Law (LL.M.) from Leiden University, where she pursued a specialization in Peace, Justice and Development. She is currently interning at the Global Rights Compliance, in The Hague, working on a project relating to the prosecution of international crimes in The Gambia. Madeeha has previous work experience at domestic and international NGOs, and legal offices on human rights, and civil rights matters, especially relating to Kashmir.

MARIYEH MUSHTAQ

Mariyeh Mushtaq is an independent researcher exploring the intersection of gender, militarism and precarity in Kashmir. She recently completed her MA in Gender, Sexuality and Culture at Birkbeck, University of London.

MARYAM KASHMIRI

Maryam Kashmiri is a Kashmiri language poet who writes poetry on the themes of faith, women and Kashmir which has not been published widely.

MASRAT ZAHRA

Masrat Zahra is an award-winning photojournalist from Kashmir. Her work has appeared in several international media organisations including Washington Post, Aljazeera, New York Times, etc. Through her pictures she brings out glimpses of everyday life in Kashmir.

MISBAH HAQANI

Misbah Haqani is a postgraduate student of natural sciences interested in examining the intersection of science and society, particularly in Kashmir-where there is an obvious dearth of such exploration. Currently, she is involved in research and documentation work focussed on the themes of militarism and the public health in Kashmir.

MISBAH RESHI

Misbah Reshi is a law student at Campus Law Centre, University of Delhi and a graduate from St. Stephen's College. She has contributed to various reports focusing on minority rights in India and human rights violations in Kashmir including Kashmir's Internet Seige: An Assault on Digital Rights published by JKCCS and Majoritarian Consolidation, Everyone Has Been

Silenced published by Citizens against Hate. She also wrote a chapter in the report 'Disintegration at Gunpoint' titled "Debunking the Colonial Discourse: Gender and Kashmir."

NASEEM SHAFIAIE

Naseem Shafiaie is an award-winning Kashmiri language poet writing about a range of topics including a woman's perspectives of the political turmoil in Kashmir. She has published two collections of poems *Derche Machrith* (1999) and *Na Thsay Na Aks* (2009). Her works have been translated in six languages.

NATASHA RATHER

Natasha Rather is a human rights defender and currently works as the Regional Campaign Officer for the Asian Federation against Involuntary Disappearances. She also does volunteer work for APDP/JKCCS.

RAVNEET KOUR

Ravneet Kour was born in Baramulla and brought up in Srinagar. She graduated from LSR in English Honours and completed her Masters from Faculty of Arts, Delhi University. At present, she is working as a research associate for a private education firm. Her academic interests are art history, postcolonial theory and visual Arts.

SAMIA MEHRAJ

Samia Mehraj is a poet and a writer from Sopore, Kashmir. Her work has appeared in Scroll, Greater Kashmir, Kashmir Lit, Hindustan Times and elsewhere. Previously, she was the fiction editor of The Bombay Review Magazine and a YIF fellow at Ashoka University. At present, she's a policy and governance fellow at the University of Chicago Trust.

ZARA BAKSHI

Zara Bakshi is a feminist researcher and activist based in Kashmir. A Master in Psychology, her research explores the identity intersections of Kashmiri women. She is currently working at JKCCS and documents issues related to human rights violations.

Cover Art Explainer



Kashmir Pop Art

[@kashmirpopart](https://www.instagram.com/kashmirpopart)

While thinking of a design for ZW's first issue I found myself continuously reflecting on what this collective comes to signify in trying times such as these. Picturing 'dispossession and loss in Kashmir' is an immensely difficult task not for of the lack of things to be included but regrettably because of their abundance. On thinking about loss as a Kashmiri artist, one is constantly struggling with which issues need to be taken with urgency and the questions of what could possibly be left out. Nevertheless, one can only attempt to put together and visualise a theme as vast and broad as 'loss'. Therefore, for the cover art, I start with some elements which I felt were incredibly important to be included in this historical document- even if their inclusion meant that they would be represented in symbolic forms only.



Kashmiri Woman in Protest

This image is from the aftermath of the Aug 2019 when the Indian government revoked the semi-autonomous status of the erstwhile state. Kashmiri women took to the streets in expression of their resentment of the betrayal and injustice of locking and entire people in their own homes. Original image source Danish Siddiqui/Reuters

Pencil

Representational image of the ever-increasing attack on media and educational institutions in the region. The pencil stands as a testament to individuals and groups who persist against this onslaught



Military occupation. Symbolic of the dense militaristic infrastructure in valley.

Tufail's coin

When 17-year-old Tufail Matoo was martyred in 2010, he was found clenching a fist full of grass and a five-rupee coin. This image is of the coin and a reminder that the killers of innocent Kashmiris continue to roam free without any accountability. Original image source: Sana Irshad Matoo



Deforestation, Land grab and the attack on ecological resources of Kashmir.

Increased military presence in the city.

In the first week of Aug 2019, the Indian state deployed troops in the valley adding to the existing 600,000 troops. This particular bunker is on the Lal-Chowk fly-over.





Hadishah Kadal

Hadishah Kadal of Spore was burnt down at the peak of the militancy in the 1990s. It was reconstructed a few years later. The bridge is symbolic of the disruption of Kashmiri people's everyday lives and mobilities caused by the ongoing conflict. Over the bridge, is a

Kashmiri kitchen shelf, representational of how the violence has entered in the most intimate parts of peoples (especially women's) lives.



Picture of Bashir Ahmed and his grandson.

Earlier this year, the Indian forces carried out a staged photo-op of a dead Kashmiri and a three-year-old child sitting on his chest in North Kashmir's Sopore. This devastating tragedy was shocking to many people around the world but in Kashmir, it was one more addition to India's PR spectacles of humanising their military by positing them as the 'saviours' of the child. Considering the unimaginable trauma of the child witnessing his grandfather's brutal death and to honour the memory of the martyr, I wanted to incorporate a subtle element to represent this immensely painful tragedy. This is a close-up of the toddler's printed shirt which he was wearing at the time of the incident.



Radio.

This is a picture of my grandfather's radio symbolic of the 'digital apartheid' of Kashmir in the form communication blockages pushing people to a pre-digital era.



Debris of a blasted house.

This picture is from the 2019 encounter in the Babgund village of Kupwara. The encounter went on for over 70 hours during which the Indian forces IED blasted 3 house to the ground and caused damage to several other buildings. More recently in Nawakadal, over 12 houses were gutted to the ground rendering the families homeless.

A martyr's blood-stained belongings.

Arifa Jan, wife of a Kashmiri man who was martyred in a fake encounter in, kept his jeans and the money found inside as a memory of the painful injustice and loss inflicted upon her. Original image source: Masrat Zahra



Wildflowers

Years of ongoing conflict has rendered many communities in Kashmir into a state of precarity. Already underpaid, workers in the handicraft industry have suffered major losses due to continuous shutdowns.



Economic crisis in the valley

Years of ongoing conflict has rendered many communities in Kashmir into a state of precarity. Already underpaid, workers in the handicraft industry have suffered major losses due to continuous shutdowns.



Tin wall

In the rural areas of Kashmir, aluminium sheets are used as fences around houses. This particular element is from a village in north Kashmir that has been frequent firing by the army.

Stone.

One of the most important element of the piece, the stone is placed under the collage almost like a form of support. The image of a stone via-a-via a stone pelter has been weaponised in the Indian discourse on Kashmir. Yet, the stone continues to speak truth to power, embodying in itself the collective grief of Kashmiris. Perhaps also symbolic of the rock-solid strength of the Kashmiri struggle for self-determination.



Graffiti on a wall



The wall represents the spirit of resistance in Kashmir. It isn't uncommon to come across powerful graffitis even in areas with heavy deployment of troops. In ways, the streets speak for themselves, every wall with a graffiti is a defiance of the militaristic subjugation.

Bird.

Finally a bird, *bilbichur*, which stands out of the collage symbolic of the stories, narratives and memories of Kashmiris which continues to remain free from the clutches of the militaristic clutter.





Zanaan Wanaan
new beginnings, radical possibilities
