

Political Activism of Women in Kashmir: A Demystification of Women's Agency

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Abstract: *In this paper, I have tried to explore the agentive nature of women's agency in Kashmir. Down the history, Kashmiri women have displayed active public roles, be it against the autocratic Dogra rule or the tribal invasion of 1947. These roles got by and large bypassed in the mainstream narratives that always portrayed women as the vulnerable, and victims and mourners. Now collectively a good number of feminist scholars have broken the siege and come up with an alternate discourse wherein they have talked about the women organisations like Dukhtaran e Milat (DeM) and the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP). DeM talks about the rights of women in Islam, thus uses religion in a liberating sense, for example the 'veil' is used as a tool for privatising women's 'body' and subverting the male gaze. Similarly, APDP has made 'motherhood' the turf of its activism. These modes help the women conform to the conventional notions of femininity that, makes the agency debatable. No women's organization is operating independently, and the ethnic ridges get visible in the collective agency of women. The picture of women in mainstream politics is worse in the region. The paper is mainly concerned with this flawed nature of women's agency in Kashmir.*

Keywords: Kashmir, gender, women, activism, conflict, resistance, agency

1. Introduction

The centrality of Kashmiri women in public life can be found in classical literature and folklore that engages with the themes of beauty, industriousness, and wit of tradeswomen. In the countryside, women were viewed as dependable partners in cultivating rice, tending farms and orchards, and raising cattle and other livestock (Ziya, 2019).

Throughout history, there have been formidable female figures in the region, though few. Women have fought shoulder to shoulder with men, and even participation certainly makes this period a glorious chapter of Kashmir history so far, the public life of women is concerned. But by the end of this resistance period, many female activists had returned to their private life. This echoed with this postulate of feminist theory on national liberation movements that such movements in general provide space for women to be active, but they are expected to return to conventional domesticity once the struggle is over. After the Indo - Pak partition and the resultant political strife in Kashmir, very few women were visible on the public platform, mostly because of their political backgrounds. Later, when the insurgency broke out, women's public activism became crucial for social survival (Zia, 2019). Eventually the political activism of women got shaped into organizations like Dukhtaran e Milat (DeM), Muslim Khwateen Markaz (MKM), Jammu and Kashmir Mass Movement (JKMM) and Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP). Their women patrons gained a good repute in the society, still they continue to remain marginal in the male - dominated resistance movement.

Whenever and wherever women surviving in conflict zones are talked about, they are coloured monochromous with the tag of victimization, presented as stereotypically oppressed, dependent, inactive, inessential, and without agency. Though their victimization is an undeniable truth, but that is not the

only ground reality. Besides being sufferers largely, Kashmiri women play an active political role that often goes overlooked. It has been quite recent that some feminist scholars have focussed on giving a more nuanced analysis of Kashmiri women's experiences and agency, contrary to conventional gendered narratives. The struggle for Kashmir's self - determination and azadi (freedom) centres on the politicised roles of mothers, wives, and sisters as well as the besieged patriarchy under militarisation (Kazi, 2009). The identities and roles of Kashmiri women are complex and therefore cannot be neatly categorized as agentive or passive (Manecksha, 2017). The Kashmiri women in the resistance movement have crafted their notions of self to fit the requirements of the Tehreek, as it is locally called (Malik, 2019)

Women in Kashmir have evolved with different forms of agency that uniquely represent the gendered nature of the struggle, as well as women's agency in bypassing the traditional patriarchy. For example, in the APDP, we see the traditional role of a 'mother' being pushed in limits. A mother could give birth, educate her children and, as APDP proves, fight for their lives when such need arises, while still resting on the cultural ideals of motherhood, unlettered women have claimed public space. Traditional private mourning is changed into public mourning. Mothers are now political activists recognised even globally. Show, motherhood has been put to use in agentive sense, in a liberating way. If motherhood keep a woman confined to four walls in a conventional sense, here motherhood makes her a public figure. The feminist theme, 'personal is political' is invoked.

Even though the role of Kashmiri women has come out agentive in multiple forms, there is another side to the story that the political agency that has emerged during the course of the conflict is flawed. Neither is it autonomous in spirit nor does it organise independently. Individual agency of the women may be functioning good, there are problems at the

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collective level. Personal is political in Kashmir also, but the personal here is cross cut along multi - ethnic ridges. It is ironical to find out how women can justify rape in the name of national interest. In the initial years of militancy, when the sudden reports of gross rapes and molestation shocked the Kashmiris, some women in Jammu justified the acts of security forces. Similarly in the valley it was the woman who strangely remained marginalised in the protests against rapes, following the patriarchal discourse of 'honour'.

Theorising Women's Activism

Understanding gender as a doing, a performative, gender is not a singular conscious act, but rather a reiteration of everyday practices that constitute the subject (Butler, 1993). There are two dualities, or contrasts, to be noted in social reality as we know it. First, there is the duality of the 'subject' and the other; second, there is the duality of man and woman. These pairs of opposites are not related, moreover: Man always appears as the subject, while woman always appears as the other. Thus, humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. For him she is sex, absolute sex and no less (Beauvoir, 2011). The parallel drawn by Bebel between women and the proletariat is valid in that neither ever formed a minority or a separate collective unit of mankind. Women's effort has never been anything more than a symbolic agitation. They have gained only what men have been willing to grant. The reason for this is that women lack concrete means for organising themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the correlative unit. They live dispersed among the males. If they belong to the bourgeoisie, they feel solidarity with men of that class, not with the proletarian women.

Women's agency is an important constituent of women's empowerment. It is quite central to the development and wellbeing of women. Women's agency can be said to be operative when it results in a fundamental shift in perceptions (subjectivity), or "inner transformation" so that women are able to define self - interest and choice, and consider themselves as not only able, but entitled to make choices (Sen, 1999) (Rowlands, 1995) (Kabeer, 2001) (Nussbaum, 2000). Naila Kabeer (2001) goes a step further and describes this process in terms of 'thinking outside the system' and challenging the status quo. Sen argues that for women, agency is socially moulded by notions of obligations and legitimacy and as such is based on moral judgement. Any practical attempt at enhancing the wellbeing of women cannot but draw on the agency of women themselves in bringing about such a change (Sen, 1999).

There are two archetypes for women activists in Kashmir: the heroine and the respectable woman. The heroine is capable of both safeguarding herself and other women from insecurity. The respectable woman on the other hand, holds up traditional notions of being a good woman and performing piety in order to legitimize her activism (Brunlund, 2015).

Agency of Kashmiri Women:

Women are frequently stereotyped in histories of armed conflict, being portrayed mainly as the victims of violence. Undoubtedly, war and peace are gendered activities. Women

do not initiate war still bear the harshest of outcomes. They have always been objectified in the name of community's 'honour,' thus raped and molested. Though the victimization of women is a reality in any conflict, the one - sided focus portrays women in a severely limited way. This holds true in the case of Kashmir also. The patriarchal discourse has historically overlooked the women's agency. By contrast, recent feminist scholarship has broken the siege. Seema Kazi, Ather Ziya, Insha Malik are the popular names so far the discourse on women's agency in Kashmir is concerned. They provide a nuanced analysis of how Kashmiri women (Muslim) have carved out a unique niche for their political activity.

Women's Self - defence Corps (WSDC):

In 1947, Kashmiri women took to arms to defend the nation against the tribesmen from the north western frontier province. WSDC was the women's wing of J&K national militia. For the first time, Kashmiri women of all ages drawn from Hindu and Muslim families were trained in handling 303 guns, stem guns and pistols to drive away Pakistani tribal raiders. Kashmiri women took to arms when entry into the armed forces of the state was statutorily forbidden for men in the Dogra regime.

The women section of the militia was established when the threat to Srinagar was still acute. Stories circulated that the tribal forces had raped and abducted women, particularly non - Muslims. The idea behind the militia was that the women of Srinagar would be able to defend their honour should the city be overrun.

Someone who became an emblem of such radical political mobilization was Zoone Gujjari. She was a militant within the Kashmiri nationalist movement as it challenged the Maharajas autocratic rule in the early and mid 1940s. She then enrolled in the left - wing women's militia. Gujjari was never in any formal sense a leader of the national conference, then the main nationalist movement in the Kashmir valley. She did not write articles, devise strategy or sit on committees. She became an icon because of the temper of her activism and because she represented non - privileged Kashmiris among whom the national conference sought to mobilise to achieve local political dominance. She became known as Zoone Mujahid as she was reputed to have been jailed up nine times under the maharaja's rule; she was said to have been abandoned by her husband because of her political activity; and her young son was reported to have been killed during a demonstration. There are suggestions that Gujjari was the model for the female figure on the cover of the new Kashmiri manifesto and draft constitution adopted by the national conference in 1944. Attired in traditional Kashmiri Muslim dress and holding rifle in various positions, she became the symbol of WSDC.

Dukhtaran e Millat (Daughters of the Nation, DeM):

Since long, women's organization with social slash religious rules have been present in Kashmir full stop but after the insurgency, Women carved out slash religious rules have been present in Kashmir full stop but after the insurgency stronger political rules for themselves. It is in this milieu that the DeM took its proper shape to employ religion for a political purpose.

An all women outfit, DeM started as a project of education for women according to Islam, back in 1982. DeM's leader Aasiya Andrabi invested herself in understanding the meaning and purpose of her Muslim identity. She propagates what Sabah Mahmood terms, 'Politics of Piety'. In 1985, the ministry of culture, New Delhi, flew group of Kashmiri female folk dancers to Delhi, to perform in a cultural program 'Jashn - e - Kashmir'. Dukhtaran women contemplated about the situation and organised full - fledged movement against it. They discussed women's exploitation and their sexualised use only for amusement in elite government circles. Dukhtaran drafted their first pamphlet 'A message to the daughters of Fatima.' It questions women's exploitation and the gender expectations of pleasing the opposite sex as their life goals. It also questioned the role of state in the exploitation of women. The pamphlet offered religious piety as a solution. In 1987, they made a street procession of about 10, 000 women and armed with brushes and black paint, the blacked out the sensual movie posters. The idea was to question the normative objectification of women. Everything about commodification provoked DeM; to sell a single matchstick even, they use a nude woman, argues Aasiya. Her office was raided and religious books including the copies of Quran were destroyed. Both Islam and feminism form the bedrock of DeM. The political aim is to create pious politically assertive women who can question and critique the current political order. Most feminists argue along similar lines to functionalists and Marxist that religion acts as a conservative force, maintaining the status quo. For feminists, that status quo is a patriarchal society. Simone de Beauvoir (1953) sees religion as exploiting and oppressing women. She argued that religious faiths encouraged women to be meek, to put up with inequality, exploitation and suffering and doing so will bring rewards in the afterlife. However, DeM and argues that in Islam, women are not ordained to value themselves only in relation to men. Women can change their situation of operation if they know their rights in Islam. Islam grants men and women spiritual equality even if they have differentiated roles. Once women understand and demand their due rights in Islam, it will shift the gender imbalance in Kashmiri society. DeM further argue that in matters of politics, Islam empowered women to make their own decisions. Regarding financial independence, DeM argue that Shariah puts no obligation of earning on women but she can work in a respectable manner and have full control over her earnings. In 2006, DeM exposed a sex scandal in which top ranking bureaucrats and ministers were involved.

To conclude, DeM is trying to create agential Muslim women. It is invoking the religion to emancipate oppressed women, with full onus on moral politics, as Saba Mahmood talks in the 'Politics of Piety'.

Muslim Khwateen Markaz (MKM):

It was in 1987 that leaders of Islamic Students League (ISL), along with leaders of its women's wing, contemplated the idea of having a separate autonomous Muslim women's pro freedom organization, leader to be known as MKM. ISL was constantly arguing that Muslim identity had no conflict with secularism. But it rejected the statist secularism that was not

ready to recognise the historical operation on Muslims of Kashmir.

To be able to demand freedom, women must first be free, this is what MKM thought about its Moto. MKM developed outreach programs to make rural women aware about sexual violence. Thus, amidst the movement for National Liberation, sprouted the project of advocacy for women's rights. MKM women found the need of free political environment for women's rights to flourish. In late 1989, when things turned violent in Kashmir, the MKM women were tending to the wounds of either militants or civilians hurt in the crossfire. They were trained as nurses and first aid providers. More than 60 members were trained in medical care. Due to their activism, many members had to go into hiding including its head Bakhtawar. Anjum Zamrud Habib became MKM's new chairperson. She got arrested in 2003 and incarcerated in solitary confinement for 5 years in Tihar jail. She was succeeded by Yasmin Raja.

MKM is an interesting political outfit where the fight against patriarchy converged with a political cause. When the members were asked to veil themselves fully, they responded with, 'Islam cannot be enforced on anyone'.

Being the only woman leader in the Hurriyat Conference when it was formed, Anjum felt let down by the Hurriyat leadership during her trial and stay at Tihar. She wrote about it in her book, "Prisoner No.100: An Account of My Nights and Days in an Indian Prison". She felt overlooked because she was a woman. Anjum is also the author of two other data - based studies that she documented. Originally, she had formed the women's welfare association Islamabad with 200 to 300 women members, later shaped into Kashmir Tehreek - e - Khwateen. Her association was the only woman association in the group of 26 that became a part of Hurriyat Conference. "I was born for resistance", says Anjum Zamrud Habib.

Eventually, as armed struggle continued, MKM struggled to keep itself going. Many MKM women left the movement. Some got married, while others decided to watch the movement passionately but silently from a distance.

Jammu and Kashmir Mass Movement (JKMM):

JKMM traces its roots from the Muslim United Front (MUF) formation in 1986. MUF was a single coalition of Islamists. The supporters of MUF started a legal aid organization called Muslim Liberation Council in 1988 to deal with legal concerns of the MUF. Farida Dar, young woman, by being related to one of the Islamists, became aware of the work of the legal cell and decided to take part in its activities. She learnt law and saw first - hand how it works. When the atmosphere got heavy and several Islamists, including lawyer Ghulam Rasool Sailani were killed, the responsibility of continuing the organizational work fell on Farida's shoulders. With the eruption of armed struggle, Farida converted the organization into a proper political organization committed to fighting the Indian rule in Kashmir, hence renamed as the Kashmir Mass Movement. Farida was now a leader of a party with predominantly male members. Farida argues that on the path of freedom, when a woman suffers sexual abuse, she is not just a victim, she is a

martyr just like Hazrat Sumaya is one of the earliest martyrs of Islam. The JK MM was one of the first organizations to reach out to the survivors of sexual violence by the Indian Army. Farida was one of the crucial activists to expose the rape of the schoolgirl, Tabinda Ghani by Indian soldiers. Farida was lodged in Tihar jail in 1996; she spent seven years in prison facing torture and humiliation until 2010. She was convicted because one of the accused in 1996 bomb blast in New Delhi happened to be her brother. Politicising women became a fundamental goal of this organization after her acquittal. Since she suffered as a woman, she considered it her duty to pass on greater political understanding to other women. JKMM thus far is the only organization that has a membership of both men and women and is still functional.

Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP):

“Although the activism of APDP rests on the traditional symbol of a grieving mother, their politics subverts the very dichotomous public or private distinction of grieving (Inshah Malik 2019). APDP is the best example of collective political action of Kashmiri women. Parveena Ahanger was a simple Kashmiri homemaker until her son Javed was picked up by Indian forces. She cofounded the APDP in 1994 with human rights lawyer Pervaiz Imroz. As Parveen recalls, they did a ‘Khoda Rasool’ to legitimise their bond and protect their working relationship from unnecessary social criticism. APDP has always claimed that it is an ‘apolitical’ organization. But it cannot be denied that being apolitical is the most political of stances in Kashmir. It becomes a subtle mode of politics that allows the APDP exist because the term politics has quite a different connotation in Kashmir conflict.

As motherhood is seen as a prime site of ethical and moral credibility in most cultures, APDP members have become icons of maternal mortality and agency eulogized as epitome of ‘asalzanan’. Motherhood has become the turf of activism for APDP. The category of mother is allowed what Judith Butler (2004) has called a ‘virtuous disobedience’ within patriarchal norms. Invoking motherhood, seen as asexual non-threatening entity, for activism helps bypassing social constraints on women, especially half widows. Thus, motherhood frames and legitimises women’s political activity and gives them the power to act in public. In the lives of APDP activists, agency appears more nuanced than merely being openly confrontational; rather it is attuned to the cultural demands made on gendered behaviour of (Zia, 2020). Muslim women’s agency appears “not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create” (Mahmood, 2001).

To conclude, APDP activists become agentive within the established social norms for women. Apart from these active organizations, we have seen women protesting energetically on streets since 2008, some even pelting stones at the Indian forces in rage and resistance. So Kashmiri women have acted as both Protectors and Protesters as Ather Zia calls it. In addition, women have registered their agency in their writings and other forms of art, thus breaking the siege by taking control of the patriarchal discourses of Kashmiri politics.

Women’s Agency in Kashmir: Agentive or Flawed

Krishna Misri in ‘Identity of Kashmiri Women’, “The Kashmiri women entered public space, while their domestic spaces continue to be predominated by the outmoded feudal structures and attitudes”. Even the social attitudes remained unaltered (she calls it limited empowerment). No doubt the eminent women leaders played a positive role, yet the absence of an organised women’s movement negatively impacted the growth of empowering identities of women.

There is another discourse of the agency-oriented roles of Kashmiri women. These rules, contemporary feminine scholars argue, are propelled by the survival strategies that women forge and their nurturing instincts for children and families. This argument gets supported by the facts on ground like very few women start independent protests against rapes.

Quite a few women lodge complaints against rapists. Parallel to this, women are taking collective actions in the capacities of mothers and widows. We see majority of the women activists instigated with loss of a male family member (even Zoone Gujjari).

This type of political activism and agency of women has been called ‘ambivalent empowerment’ in the feminist literature. Ambivalent empowerment, on one hand signifies women’s resilience to face new challenges in adverse conditions transcending their traditional roles. On the other hand, it reflects contradictions that frame women’s identity.

The political agency of Kashmiri women becomes debatable when the autonomy of women organisations is analysed as they do not create spaces to operate independently and prioritise women’s issues. It was the idea of ‘nation’ that lied underneath every form of agency women depicted. Undoubtedly, Nation, War, Peace, all are patriarchal constructs.

“State sponsored feminism - while providing an upwardly socially mobile group of Kashmiri women opportunities for education, employment, and mobility - was paternalistic and ideologically motivated in its vision. As a result, no indigenous, independent women’s movement emerged in the state, and women’s issues became contested and linked to what was increasingly seen by them as an illegitimate rule” (Kanjwal, 2018). For the front leadership, they were merely a mass of women who were to be employed strategically for a national cause, though the women who participated in the movement were hardly ever blind to such hierarchies.

Regarding WSDC, the Communist People’s Age wrote, “The women of Kashmir are the first in India to build an army of women trained to use the rifle”. But this can’t negate the fact that women militia never saw active service. By the close of 1948, the women’s militia had been disbanded and the much larger men’s militia was eventually incorporated into India’s armed forces. Several former members of the WSDC speak warmly of a moment of empowerment for Kashmiri women and regret that the window closed so closely. Similar failure was witnessed by the MKM members. MKM member, Maryam was heard saying, “leadership appreciated and supported women, but

the patriarchal norms were intact, that is why the movement failed.”

Gender identity in Jammu and Kashmir plays a secondary role to the larger political identity. The DeM chief has been very consistent in sermonising the kind of dress code the women should be adhering to. What about a 10 - year - old girl raped? asks Anuradha Bhasin Jamwal (Jamwal, 2010). There is a less focus on the incidents of rapes by militants by indigenous writers. Women become greater targets in the raids by DeM members. They maintain that gender roles are natural. Women are emotional and not better equipped to deal with stress and decision making. This echoes with Simone de Beauvoir's observation that men assume that women think with their glands. Man superbly ignores the fact that his anatomy also includes glands such as the testicles and that they secrete hormones (The Second Sex 1949). Interestingly the Hurriyat has a presence of women representatives in it is executive meetings where they participate without interfering in decision - making. Thus, gender roles are kept intact in every organisation, and women activism is limited to that of agitation and maternal surveillance. That is why WSDC members never saw the battleground for the rifles hanging on their shoulders, and MKM members disappeared from the scene after serving as nurses in the insurgency. Overall women are operating in a narrow political space. The economic burdens of many women activists are still rested on their male relatives that makes their agency debatable. Praveena is often noticed saying, “A good mother cannot let go of the responsibility of keeping her children safe. If I am not a good mother, how can I be a good woman. I am not a father. Father is a man and a man can erase feelings like one cleans one's behind in the bathroom. But I am a mother. I cannot do that. The Indian government has wounded my womb.” Thus, it is obvious that she is recognizing herself with her sexuality. Ironically sexuality gets paradoxical for APDP members. It is allowed to use it in the capacity of mother only. It makes a mother visible and a half - widow invisible when she does not raise her voice in public and avoids to get confrontational. That is why young half widows try to dress as modestly as possible and look much older than their age. Some even use steroids to de - feminise themselves in looks at least.

To conclude, it is true that women are not acting as spectators and are in constant fight to register their political agency in one way or the other. But the agentive nature of women's agency is questionable.

2. Conclusion

Undoubtedly Kashmiri women have not been mere accidental sufferers, but have been in constant fight to voice themselves in the most unfavourable of circumstances, and thus register their political agency. Down the history, they have played active public roles, be it in the resistance against oppressive Dogra regime or the tribal invasion of 1947. Unfortunately, these roles had largely been bypassed by the dominant patriarchal narratives of the history. Now collectively a good number of women writers have broken the siege and provided an alternate narrative of the story.

Although limited, women have explored ways to voice themselves and become agentive. Even the religious activism of Kashmiri women functions only in its liberational sense. For example, as Inshah Malik remarks, the advocacy for veil by DeMis not presented as a method of subjugation, but as a resistance to the patriarchal notion of beauty. Veil is used as a tool for privatising woman's 'body' and avoid the male gaze. Similarly, 'motherhood' is used by APDP to get visible in public.

Nevertheless, women activism always appears conforming to the expectations and demands of the Kashmiri version of patriarchy. That is why Half - widows, as the Language of conflict calls them, are more vocal about the missing father of her children, rather her missing husband. Motherhood is the ethically acceptable claim of sexuality for them.

“How women experience the world around them is mediated by their class affiliation and the power that accrues from it” (Peteet, 2009). Thus, we see though 'Personal is Political' holds true for Kashmiri women also, the 'Personal' here is cross - cut by multiple ethnic ridges. That is why wealthy women can run beauty clinics here, but Sadaf, a half - widow is never vocal about her profession of a beautician as she has to uphold the notion of 'AsalZanan'.

Above all, none of the recognized women organizations is operating autonomously, and there has been no independent women's movement in the region. Women are absolutely marginalised in the protests against rapes. Asiya is justifying gender roles and Anjum is not a part of decision - making in Hurriyat, while Muslim Khwateen Markaz members retired to their regular lives after serving as nurses.

The picture is worse in mainstream politics. It was only in 1972 elections that women came to Jammu and Kashmir Assembly with 5.33% proportion, the highest ever since. Ironically all mainstream political parties have their women's wings and women members. But the most powerful voice in several decades has been that of Mehbooba Mufti, many others being provided Social Welfare and the like ministries. There are statements of women MLAs on record saying their voices are side - lined in the assembly by male majority. The number of Panchs may have increased with a 33% reservation in local bodies, but very few women are Sarpanchs as women are not thought of as decision - makers.

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