Home as the Frontier

Gendered Constructs of Militarised Violence in Kashmir

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In conflict zones, the home–outside binary is often erased in practice as violence enters people's lives and personal spaces, diluting any distinction between combatants and non-combatants, even as the international humanitarian law and Geneva Conventions highlight the distinction. In Kashmir, a popular armed rebellion against the state, since 1989, has been met with brutal force. Making use of militarised masculinity to inflict violence on bodies and psyches of the people considered to be the "other" has been a norm. In extending the understanding of the front line from the border to homes, actions, bodies, and the everyday trauma that women face, the victimhood narrative is problematised by placing women as frontliners as they witness, survive, and resist.

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The recognition of violence is no longer restricted to the interstate conflicts characterised by war, but extends to its prevalence in what is the changing "landscape of combat" (Cock 1989). Despite the international humanitarian law drawing out a distinction between combatants and civilians, the former being direct participants in hostilities and getting certain privileges as prisoners of war, and the latter not being made objects of any attack under the military operations (Watkin 2003), the lines have largely been blurred as these neat categorisations do not stand in the face of modern armed conflicts, where both the public and the private spaces are militarised and violence does not remain confined to the combat front, but enters people's safe havens.

This paper highlights how the home–outside binary is rendered indistinct in conflict, as homes become frontiers where people's lives and spaces are subjected to militarised control that makes gendered constructs of identity especially prominent. The paper builds on the existing research that brings to the fore the linkages between gendered identity and violence in the context of armed conflicts, using the intersectionality framework developed by Crenshaw (1989), so as to understand how Kashmiri women become the "other" in terms of the varied strands of identity they inhabit, and how the everyday forms of violence play out, with their bodies, psyches, and spaces becoming sites of conflict. The paper includes interviews of women survivors of violence, presenting the testimonies in a single narrative without identifying the survivors.[1] Taking from Scott's (1985) understanding of "everyday forms of resistance" among Malayan peasants, the paper also brings to the fore the subtle ways in which Kashmiri women are reclaiming their spaces and how these attempts construct them as frontliners resisting the brutal onslaught of a militarised state. In bringing forth narratives of Kashmiri women about violence, struggles, and survival, the paper attempts to highlight the multiple experiences of women living in a conflict zone, beyond the binaries of victim and agent, and how they negotiate their days under a militarised code of conduct.

Gendered Constructs and Armed Conflicts

In areas of militarised conflict, gender relations are put to use to "incite, exacerbate, and fuel violence" (Giles and Hyndman 2004: 4). The body becomes a site of violence, which is marked by relations of gender, religion, class, race, ethnicity and so on. The idea of the nation posits masculinity and femininity in certain ways. As Enloe (2014: 93) argues, the construction of

nationalism springs from "masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope." In such a project, women are symbolically seen as carrying the notion of honour and identity of the nation on their backs for the men to protect.

> Men living in a dangerous world are commonly imagined to be the natural protectors. Women living in a dangerous world allegedly are those who need protection … relegated to the category of the protected … commonly thought to be safe "at home" and, thus, incapable of realistically assessing the dangers "out there." (Enloe 2014: 30)

However, it would be wrong to assume "male" and "female" to be homogeneous categories and to ignore the wide variety of meanings that social categorisations assume, when they are looked at in relation to the various other identities one is seen to represent. Thus, gender, class, caste and race do not simply have to be looked at in terms of the additive effect; there is a need to understand the complex, complicated, and intersectional effect of these categorisations as they form a part of the "intersectional wheel" (Anthias 2001). Intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) helps to bring to the fore the varied strands of identities to explain how various forms of oppression take place as a result of specific experiences and contexts. It focuses on the ways in which one experiences, reproduces, and resists social divisions in everyday life and how they go on to reinforce inclusions and exclusions (Taylor et al 2010).

The promises of democracy and nationalistic ideals to be all-inclusive and egalitarian have found the starkest contrast in the lives of women and other marginalised groups. They exist at the fringes of the nation-building exercise, in contrast to those seen as the main actors of the process. Thus, we see how, as symbols of the nation's collective honour, women become the "other," since they are seen to carry particular gendered, racial, ethnic, religious identities, which intersect to subject them to particular experiences. In areas of conflict, this works to make people into the "other" to be dehumanised by violence. It is a war of "us" versus "them" and, therefore, as a means of defeating the enemy, women's bodies are used like slates to convey the message of victory of the "self" and defeat and "dishonour" of the "other." Such violence is not indiscriminate, but systemic and deliberate.

> During times of conflict multiple binary constructions are formed; not only is "masculine" contrasted to "feminine" within a group and "us" contrasted to "them" between groups, but "our women" are contrasted to "their women" and "our men" to "their men." (Alison 2007: 80)

The masculinist and femininist constructs are such that violence becomes an act of proving one's masculinity, the reason why men are thought to be the protectors of the "nation," again thought of in terms of the image of a vulnerable woman needing protection from "other" men. Writing in the context of Palestine, Kassem (2011: 157) notes that the metaphor of the nation as a woman conflates "the political control of territory with the control of the female body and female sexuality." This use of the nation as a metaphor has also come to be increasingly used in the Kashmir conflict by the construction of identities of the "self" and the "other." This is done by evoking a sense of protection for the nation, spoken of in terms of Bharat Mata—the image of a woman—threatened by the Kashmiri "other" that demands freedom, seen akin to attacking the very honour of the "motherland," and the male warriors who come to defend it. Slogans like "Bharat Mata ki Jai" and "Mera Bharat Mahaan" are seen inscribed outside military bunkers and roadside hoardings to glorify the nation. Others like "Ajeet hain, Abheet hain" (we are victorious, we are invincible) further bring forth the use of the protectionist discourse that the Indian soldiers in Kashmir, meant to protect the integrity of the nation, are invincible. One might ask: Who is the protection needed from and who are they victorious over? Since these slogans and military installations are integrated into the civilian spaces, the message goes out to the Kashmiri "other," who would be otherwise disciplined by violence.

Women and Militarised Violence in Kashmir

Kashmir has been a matter of long-standing "dispute" between postcolonial India and Pakistan. There are varied accounts of what happened in Jammu and Kashmir during the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, who the invaders were, what their motive was, and if the Pakistani government was officially involved. However, these questions are beyond the scope of this paper.[2] What needs to be emphasised in the territorial aspect of the dispute is the human cost of the conflict.

Since 1989 especially, the armed insurgency took on an ethno-religious character and the Indian state, dealing with a severe legitimacy crisis, came down with an "iron hand." The war not only saw the state brutally attempting to curb the insurgency, but also crush its support structure, an entire civilian population (which also had cross-border support from Pakistan). In the Indian state's attempt to gain an upper hand against Pakistan in the territorial conflict, militarisation over Kashmir became the norm, and in its attempt to create an Indian idea of the nation in Kashmir, militarisation in Kashmir became the procedure (Kazi 2009a: 67). Over 70,000 people have been killed and more than 8,000 men have been subjected to enforced disappearance by the state (IPTK and APDP 2015: 3). Beyond these statistics, militarisation has affected every aspect of people's lives, subjecting them to constant surveillance and humiliation. As Mohanty (2011: 78) argues, "militarised conditions privilege certain populations (the bona fide citizen–subject) while simultaneously dispossessing others," who are relegated to the status of "bare life" (Agamben 2005).

An important part of the state's militarisation process has been a concerted counter-insurgency mechanism where "winning hearts and minds" of people is sought to be achieved by providing them with incentives and welfare services through projects like Operation Sadhbhavana (meaning goodwill in Hindi). This military operation has been "the state's way of building legitimacy even as coercion continued" (Mushtaq and Bukhari 2018: 83; Bhan 2013). The aim here is to attain an even stronger presence in the everyday lives of people by having access to their social spheres, setting the standards of the services they receive, and, in certain cases, even restricting or directing their choices of employment (IPTK and APDP 2015: 16). This has

gone hand in hand with the violent manifestation of the militarised state and its institutions and processes.

Quite importantly, the militarisation in Kashmir as a process has worked to manipulate and exploit the meanings and interpretations of sexual difference (Kazi 2009b). Wars are fought in the name of protecting women, who become its justification as well as the objects to be saved, or to be "dishonoured." Elshtain's (1987) work on World War I, Enloe's (1993, 2014) works on the Cold War and the first Gulf War, Einsenstein's (2004) work on the Iraq War, and Shalhoub-Kevorkian's (2009) work on Palestine have all focused on bringing forth this relationship between gender, conflict, and militarism. Militarism does not simply extend the militarised code of conduct into civilian life; it erases the binaries between combatants and non-combatants, war and peace, home and outside, and front line and safe havens. It privileges masculinism and a devaluing of women and marginalised men, subjecting them to violence.

Gender-based violence as a feature of the Kashmir conflict has led to gendered identities becoming the sites where power is inscribed in violent ways, both subtly and overtly in all its physical, sexual, psychological and socio-economic manifestations. Women have been subjected to violence not just because they are women, but because they are seen as the "other," in terms of being the women of the "other" who are a threat to "our" national security. Also, women are seen as the repositories of honour of the Kashmiri community that is at war with the Indian state, as having a political ideology where they are vocal about the right to self-determination, and are seen to have collaborated with India's historical enemy, Pakistan, to demand *azaadi* (freedom). The national interest, "heavily laden with the symbols of masculine power" (Horn 2010: 60), works to dehumanise an entire population, "emasculating" the "other" men by attacking "their" women, thus relying on a complex web of violence.

As Asia Watch (1993: 1) notes, women have been subjected to physical violence, including torture and beating for accusations of links to militants or during crackdowns. Women have also been subjected to psychological violence in terms of constant threats to their lives and dignity in a militarised environment. This is in addition to the exacerbated economic deprivation faced by them in such a system.

Testimonies of Women

The testimonies of the women survivors of violence, which I present here in narrative form, point to the varied and widespread nature of these experiences.

> During the 2010 uprising, there were protests going on in our area. My mother and I were returning home from the hospital. The forces fired; my mother had 6–7 bullet injuries in her spinal cord. She was bedridden for seven months, handicapped. Then she died. (personal interview, 2015)
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> My brother-in-law was a militant. The army came looking for him. I was at the house. They took me instead. I was held at the nearby camp for 13 days. Inside the camp, I was beaten with rods, held by my hair and dragged around. (personal interview, 2015)
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> My husband and I were accused of giving shelter to militants in our house. We were taken, separately, to an army camp. I was tied with ropes; electric shocks were administered on my body. They made me drink excessive water and would then torture me. (personal interview, 2014)
>
> There was an encounter in our area in 2001 and an army man was killed. The army and the Special Task Force were so furious. They entered our homes and beat up the women and the elderly. These things from them were expected and common during crackdowns. Nowhere is it safe. (personal interview, 2015)

Acts of physical violence like the ones narrated by my interviewees have often happened during cordon and search operations, or when forces barge into the houses of people after an attack by militants, or during encounters. These violent practices are deeply embedded in the militaristic structure and form a part of people's everyday experiences. While the quotidian humiliation at regular checkpoints that Kashmiri men have faced over the years has been documented (Qureshi 2004: 6; Duschinski 2009: 704; Kak 2017), highlighting women's experiences of the everyday violence they face in a highly militarised environment is important. History is often "his-story" and interpreting women's experiences into historical narratives questions the masculine hegemonies that otherwise "efface women as a category of analysis from the areas of public memory, transforming them into dispossessed and non-historical being" (Kassem 2011: 3).

In the case of Kashmir, the human cost of the conflict is reflected in terms of the numbers of the dead, the disappeared, and the orphaned, while the extraordinariness (extralegality) of the everyday is seen as ordinary. Also, the foregrounding representations of Kashmir tend to be about the landscape, thus, leading to an erasure of the centrality of the people and their everyday experience of a militarised life that has "transformed the social landscape into an arena of violence and repression" (Hoffman and Duschinski 2014: 511).

Girls and women, when they leave their homes, often have to hear the directive,

> *Avoid the bunkers that house the uniformed men. Take an alternate road. Don't use that road unless you have to.* (Batool et al 2016: 4; emphasis in the original).

However, as I have stated previously, the mere cautious avoidance of the outside does not mean that the "home" is a safe space. This was evident in the 1990s and early 2000s with militancy at its peak in Kashmir. The government forces cordoned areas for crackdown, on suspicion that militants were present in the area.[3] They did this even to get the *mukhbireen* to point out the people they suspected of being militants or having militant links or sympathising with the militants.[4] The male members would be asked to assemble in a nearby playground, while the females would stay back home. The government forces would conduct house-to-house searches and, often, in these situations, they would resort to sexual harassment of the women. In a harrowing memoir, a Kashmiri woman recalls the events that took place during such cordons and what it meant for the women.

> They played a different kind of war with us. Only they knew where they pinched; only we knew how it felt. There was no name for it, like for rape or murder. So what happened when the same women saw Indian soldiers playing with their intimate things and taking sexual pleasure under the guise of search operations? (Yousuf 2014)

As noted in *Kashmir Imprisoned*, a report published in 1990 (qtd in Butalia 2002: 79):

> There seems to be a deliberate attempt to make women the primary target of attack by the security forces. The manner in which searches and interrogations are conducted smacks of a planned strategy to break the morale of the people.

With a high military presence even in the civilian areas, the "masculinist military gaze" where women become the "objects" of the male gaze, is another form of violation. During the early 2000s, even when the militant presence was low, the harassment continued to happen. Saja (name changed), 65, recalls that period:

> Army men from the nearby camp or men from the Jammu and Kashmir Light Infantry would patrol the area at night and then peep in from the windows, looking at women as they slept, teasing them. Had they found an occasion when the windows were not closed, God knows what they could have done to us. But we feared them a lot, knowing how they kept peeping in all the time at night. We could not sleep properly. (personal interview, 2015)

It is reported that the Indian armed forces have used rape as a weapon of war in Kashmir (Human Rights Watch 1994). In conflicts, the physical as well as sexual violence against women is intended to send a message to the opposing group or community that the perpetrator is the victor as it attacked the very "honour" of the opposing group. In other words:

> displays of machismo are enacted through violence against women who are associated with the target males. The rape of women carries a man-to-man message, showing that the targeted men are not able to protect their women. Men may interpret the sexual assault of "their" women as a direct attack on their manhood and their own integrity. In this way, "women are used as political pawns, as symbols of the potency of the men to whom they belong." (Reid-Cunningham 2008: 282)

Although there is no evidence to suggest that sexual violence by Indian armed forces in Kashmir is a part of the state's official policy, yet the way such acts have been carried out with the state providing absolute impunity to the perpetrators and dismissing the testimonies from the survivors as propaganda and "recorded rotten stereo sounds that play rape all over again" (Parvez 2014), points to a systemic and systematic way in which such acts occur with the silent complicity of the state.[5] Women in Kashmir have been subjected to sexual violence, including individual acts of rape by soldiers as well as mass rapes, both of which point out to the larger system of oppression and impunity that the state provides to its forces accused of such crimes. Such acts of violence have been committed to "feminise" the victim and, thereby, seek to dominate over the sexual as well as the religious, ethnic, and political identity to which the victim belongs, while at the same time seeking to empower and make more masculinised the perpetrator's identity.

> I was tied up to the table, naked, in a nearby camp, after they asked me to provide details of a neighbour who was a militant. They poured hot polythene over my private parts. I don't remember what happened after that. (personal interview, 2015)
>
> My husband was taken to the camp. We were accused of sheltering militants. It was just the two of us; we have no children. Then they came on the pretext of searching the house and raped me inside my own home in the dark of the night. (personal interview, 2015)

Cases like Kunan Poshpora provide a telling example of the use of mass rape to terrorise an entire population, as Skjelsbaek and Smith (2001: 5) write,

> Those who are ruthless enough to launch a war in which civilians themselves are the target are therefore likely to find that rape can be a convenient and effective weapon.

On the night of 23–24 February 1991, soldiers from the 4th Rajputana Rifles of the 68th Brigade barged into homes in this north Kashmir hamlet and raped around 53 women while the men were interrogated in the cold outside (Batool et al 2016: 80).

> Our homes suddenly turned into centers of violence. Rooms remind us. Our bodies bear witness. Our wounds bleed and they will speak. (Falak 2013)

The subsequent reopening of the case has only seen denials from the state and accusations against the survivors as well as the petitioners. In addition to Kunan Poshpora, the accusations against Indian soldiers of raping Kashmiri women have been levelled numerous other times like the Mubina Gani case (1990), where a bride was raped on her wedding night, or Pazipora (1990), Haran (1992), Handwara (1992, 2004) and Shopian (2009) not only highlight a legacy of sexual violence against Kashmiri women by the Indian forces, but also a lack of prosecution. This implies that the state is not averse to using it as a strategy to break the will of the Kashmiri people in their struggle for freedom from occupation.[6]

Kashmiri Women as Frontliners

Despite facing violence on several fronts, the story of Kashmiri women needs to be heard beyond the victimhood discourse in order to understand how they have survived the violence over the decades. In this context, Manchanda (2001: 20) writes,

> Women's negotiations with violent conflicts create historically and situationally specific economic, social, cultural, ethnic and national realities that form a new knowledge base and resource.

While historically the front line has been looked at as a place where the "actual" fighting between the warring groups occurs and where most damage is done, feminist analysis over the years has challenged this notion of the "front line." Both in the physical and symbolic sense, they have reinterpreted a "front line" as a "space where the traditional boundaries of public and private space are blurred" (Dowler 2002: 162), and as transformative spaces where "women's voices challenge and enrich simultaneous struggles" (Waller and Rycenga 2002: xxii). Thus, as women's bodies are marked violently in "safe spaces" and as they chalk out ways to resist militarisation, the front line becomes the home, which is militarised and also turns into a site of resistance. The front line becomes the body, psyche, and memories where the war is played out. What Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2009: 34) explains for Palestine, fits the Kashmir scenario as well.

> The frontliner can be a woman who is lining up or is humiliated at a checkpoint, a woman singing her children to sleep in the middle of night raids and incursions, one selling yogurt to make some additional money and buy food for her children, a woman giving birth at a

checkpoint because she has been prevented from reaching a hospital, or one screaming and crying in court while refusing to accept the law's failure to protect her rights.

The popular understanding of women's agency in conflict often tends to see it as women who are fighting in struggles for national liberation or simply surviving as hapless victims (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2009: 50), but it is in these ordinary acts that the forms of everyday resistance (Scott 1985) become clear. As Scott (1985) argues, it is a constant struggle and may not even account for collective action corresponding to infrapolitics as against the conventional forms of political resistance. This is not to assume that these acts are not political or that a clear demarcation could be drawn between what is outright and overt in the form of armed struggles, and what is subtle and covert in the form of the everyday struggles. These exist on a continuum and in relation to each other in developing a broader culture of resistance.

As Aaliya Anjum (2011) notes, in the early years when the Kashmiri armed movement started, women took to facilitating the men in their fight by acting as couriers who took arms from one place to another. As they could pass checkpoints without being suspected, they could inform the militants of the position of the forces, and help them flee in case of sudden cordons. Women have participated in the protests with heightened participation in the 2008–10 and the 2016 uprisings, taken out all-women marches shouting slogans for freedom, and joined the stone-pelting men. This "gendered resistance," as Ather Zia (2017) notes, has been integral to Kashmir's social fabric. Kashmiri women have a long history of protesting atrocities and resisting in their own ways, right from the time of the Mughal rule in Kashmir (Gazi 2017).

The women also "brought the private act of mourning into the public space and politicizing it into a formidable tool of moral protest against state injustice" (Banerjee 2008: 150). This is epitomised by the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons, headed by Parveena Ahangar, which brings together families of the disappeared, who stage a sit-in on the 10th of every month, seeking the whereabouts of those subjected to enforced disappearances. During the funerals of militants, women "break out into a *wanuwun*, the traditional Kashmiri song of celebration, intertwining couplets in praise of local *mujahids* (militants)" (Manchanda 2001: 51). Not only do the women use the "public space" to register their protest against the oppressive state structure, their resilience also shows in the everyday in terms of how the home, rather than being a private sphere in statist terms, becomes a site where they have to struggle on a daily basis. These struggles, visible or invisibilised, overt or covert, institutionalised or random, go on to indicate how the home–outside binary does not indicate safety, and neither are women simply to be placed in the binary categorisations of victim and agent.

Women have also used the law for memorialisation. A case in point is the public interest litigation filed by 50 women in 2013 at the Srinagar High Court seeking reinvestigation into the Kunan Poshpora mass rapes. Although the Supreme Court later stayed the proceedings of the case, what it was essentially aimed at was not to seek justice per se, but,

> to expose the judiciary being part of state oppression, to make use of law in order to preserve memory which is a powerful weapon, for it is in our remembrance that our resistance lies.[7]

Conclusions

It is not the case that women suffering violence have no ability to act, neither does the recognition of women's agency mean that they have overcome the violence and it no longer affects them. Surviving the everyday troubles of militarisation and facing its multifaceted gender-based violent manifestations means that women have to cope with having their bodies treated as battlegrounds. They have to hold their families intact and "construct counter-spaces that allow them to survive and to envision that they might someday attain the justice they have so longed for" (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2009: 187). In this paper, I have argued that women cannot simply be placed between the binaries of "victims of violence" and "agents of peace," and even when seen as survivors, witnesses or frontliners resisting militarised violence in the everyday, the analysis must not fall prey to romanticising a notion of resistance that invisibilises the violence, despair, and resilience of women's lives in conflicts.

NOTES

1 Interviewees' names are anonymous. Interviews were conducted by the author as part of her PhD fieldwork during 2014 and 2015.

2 The departure of the British colonisers from the Indian subcontinent in 1947 witnessed the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, ruled by a Dogra Maharaja, acceding to neither India nor Pakistan. However, a popular uprising in Poonch that had started prior to the partition gained increasing momentum following the division, resulting in the Maharaja's forces massacring 2,37,000 Muslims (Naqvi 2016) even as a provincial "Azad Kashmir" government was proclaimed to have been formed in Rawalpindi. This was followed by a "tribal invasion" (Lamb 1991; Snedden 2013) resulting in the Maharaja signing a temporary Instrument of Accession with India which brought the Indian army to Kashmir and later, India taking the matter to the United Nations to complain against Pakistan.

3 The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) gives security forces the right to enter or search any premise in order to make arrests (of anyone who has committed cognisable offences or is suspected of doing so), or to recover any person wrongfully restrained, or any arms, ammunition or explosive substances and seize it.

4 Plural for *mukhbir* which is used in the Kashmiri parlance for the informers, local people who provide Indian forces with the information about the whereabouts of militants or their supporters. Usually during crackdowns, men would be paraded in front of a masked mukhbir, who would then point out to the forces of any suspects who would then be bundled up in the vehicle and taken away for interrogation to undisclosed torture cells, in many cases to return dead, or severely tortured, or just disappear.

5 Not only has the state over the years rejected such allegations of sexual violence as baseless and an attempt by militant sympathisers to defame the Indian forces and bring international attention to Kashmir, it has also ensured that the forces are not prosecuted. Even in cases where first information reports are filed, prior sanction is needed for prosecution. The whole system, from the laws to the courts to the institutions and process form "structures of violence" that provide absolute immunity to the forces.

6 For more on this, see Asia Watch (1993), reports by IPTK and APDP (2012, 2015).

7 Personal interview with one of the 50 women petitioners of the case, 12 August 2016.

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