

Conflict and gendered representations of exposure to violence: The case of women in Kashmir

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Abstract: Sites of political conflicts are marked by a high degree of militarization as seen in the Kashmir Valley. The militaristic nature of such conflicts results in the representation of women in specific roles of 'victims' that are part of the dominant masculine narrative. We begin by examining a theory of militarism and conflict that explores sites of political conflict as masculine militarized spaces and how gender roles are negotiated and represented in those circumstances. We then examine accounts of violence exposure among women in Kashmir through the same lens, by reviewing relevant literature and qualitative findings from another study. The image of women as victims of violence in Kashmir overemphasizes on certain roles and masculine representation of women while sidelining other aspects of this victimization. The implication of the same is discussed with respect to peace activism and reconciliation in Kashmir

Keywords:

I. INTRODUCTION

The Valley of Kashmir has been a disputed territory for more than two decades. It is today a site of intractable conflict and one of the most militarized areas in the world. The ethno-political-religious conflict has affected the lives of almost every civilian within the Valley and in the larger Kashmiri Diaspora. The discourse around self determination, identity assertion and resistance to occupation, has increasingly become centered on a master narrative that often fails to adequately represent the voices and opinions of marginalized groups. Considering the fact that subversion of gendered accounts is a typical feature of militarization, as has been reiterated by many feminist and gender studies scholars, it is not surprising, that narratives of suffering, that have focussed on women in Kashmir, raise many questions. This paper explores gendered narratives of the conflict in the Kashmiri context and how women have been given particular significant roles within that narrative to suit the masculine militaristic values that dominate situations of armed violence and militarization.

The militaristic nature of conflicts

The concept of a 'militaristic state' representing values and perpetrating ideologies and practices that encourage so called 'masculine' traits of aggression, dominance and violence, has been highlighted by feminist scholars like Cynthia Enloe (2007, 2000) and Colleen Burke (1998). Mama & Okazawa-Rey (2012) describe militarism as 'an extreme variant of patriarchy, a gendered regime characterized by discourses and practices that subordinate and oppress women as well as non-dominant men, reinforcing hierarchies of class, gender, race and ethnicity, and in some contexts, caste, religion and location'. Militarism is not just the use of actual physical violence as in war and military occupation, it has an ideological component, that 'includes a dissemination of military values, symbols and language among the civilian population which promotes acceptance of hierarchies,

nationalism which defines the "other" as enemy, violence as a legitimate means of resolving conflicts, and strict division of proper masculine and feminine roles' (Burke, 1998).

Politically disputed areas and sites of conflict like that of Kashmir are highly militarized areas, creating a space that is constantly marked by militaristic ideologies, fears, regulations and practices. War and armed conflicts have historically been the domain of men. However with the change in nature of conflicts and proximity of civilians to sites of violence, the way gender roles are framed and affected has also transformed. Mama & Okazawa-Rey believe that militaristic states that are formed during political conflicts and wars are an extension of the gender differences and polarized gender identities that exist in the pre conflict society. Moreover, these identities and experiences are not limited to war situations, and in fact get transposed to states of apparent peace. "War and conflict are merely the explicit expressions of deeply gendered, as well as ethnicized and classed, long-term dynamics that precede the outbreak of conflict, escalate dramatically, and persist long after 'peace' has been officially declared" (Mama & Okazawa-Rey, 2012). Hence gender roles that exist in pre conflict societies marked by patriarchal ideals are further polarized and strengthened in situations of militarization with violence targeted at the body of the victim. Consequently sexual violence has characterized majority of armed conflicts around the world, like a collective imposition of masculine roles of power and dominance. "Militarism in the broadest sense reifies polarised gender relations and gender identities, and particular notions of masculinity and masculine prowess seem to be bound up with gender-based violence, which threatens women's security" (Mama & Okazawa-Rey, 2012).

We argue from a critical-psychological stand, drawing on a feminist paradigm, that the militaristic representation of women in conflict situations is not only reflected through

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accounts of sexual violence, but extends to the imposition of racial, religious and other identity based symbols and rules of conduct seen more visibly among women in societies experiencing conflict. Narratives that comply with masculine concerns like acts of sexual violence against women are given significance while completely marginalizing alternate narratives of victimization that is specific to women and may challenge long existing norms of the society. Similarly, the experiences of women are then framed primarily in relation to men (as mothers, wives) with other accounts of loss of freedom, impositions on movement and choice remaining outside the master narrative. We further argue, based on the proposition made by Mama & Okazawa-Rey that the gendered representation of experiences of conflict and violence is an extension of gender roles that existed in the Kashmiri society historically. The discussion in the next section is based on qualitative data derived from secondary sources like newspaper articles and reports, that were used to understand how Kashmiri women have been viewed as victims. The other set of data comes from a survey study that explored qualitative understandings of exposure to violence among male and female colleges students in Kashmir (unpublished). Lastly, the author has based a large section of theorizing for this paper on informal exchanges and communications with women of various ages, while working on a research project in Kashmir.

II. DISCUSSION

Militarized violence in Kashmir and the role of women

Kashmiri women have traditionally been placed in paradoxical positions with regard to social opportunities and exposure. Drawing from Islam that emphasizes on the equal right to education and opportunity, women in the Valley are encouraged to pursue education as much as men. However the visibility of women outside their homes, and in professional areas remains negligible. Unlike many regions in the Indian subcontinent, Kashmiri women have participated in politics and the economy actively. The participation however has been restricted to a few popular and commonly approved arenas like teaching, nursing, social work and so on. It is also difficult to come across significant female names in the political history of the region, even though women appear in folklore and locally popular stories. Within the usually large extended family, that continues to live together or in a connected neighborhood, men hold decision making powers and are implicitly the head of the household. Thus Kashmiri society like most others has well formed patriarchal norms that have guided gender interactions and roles through generations. Irrespective of the ingrained traits of patriarchal subversion, it has often been said that because of the multi-cultural history of Kashmir and the practice of a more liberal and mystical form of Islam, gender roles and status of women in particular was more progressive than most other Islamic South Asian societies in the post colonial era. The position of women as those who are equal to men, yet are subordinate to their decisions, are as skilled as men, and yet secondary to them in terms of economic achievements, has not only remained through the years of armed militancy and post militancy resistance, but has in fact become more restricted in an environment of

masculinized and sexualized violence. The militarization of the Valley has been accompanied by a polarization in gender roles, where men have become prominent as victims, perpetrators and witnesses of violence, making the whole discourse of conflict focussed on the dominant-male narrative. The long drawn conflict has also created more realistic conditions of deprivation and poverty which has resulted in women getting even less of a share of the limited resources.

Hamilton (2007) points out the practical limitations that were faced by women in the Basque region when it came to being exposed to the ideology and politics of the ETA and being recruited within its wing. Access and exposure, which almost universally continues to be disproportionate between men and women, similarly allowed for a completely masculine armed rebellion in the 1990s, which remains in the memory of many Kashmiris as a time of honorable rebellion, resistance and martyrdom. The fact that the movement only recruited men, left women to participate in the perceived 'just and honorable' movement in secondary roles of providing assistance in escape, hiding ammunitions, communicating messages etc. The armed rebellion eventually dissipated against the heavy military attack of the opposition that shattered civilian life in the Valley. Most accounts of the suffering meted out to Kashmiri civilians by the Indian paramilitary forces include images of young men being gassed, shot, beaten and tortured. The debates and reports on disappearances, unmarked graves, false encounters, and human rights violations have primarily been about young men. There is no doubt that because of the existing social structure and the primary positions held by men in public and private life in Kashmir, there is a significant gender based difference in causalities that has resulted in a secondary victim status being attributed to women in popular media and discourse, discussed later in the paper.

Majority of accounts of torture that have focussed on women have been about rape and sexual violence. For instance, the Shopian case, where two young girls were allegedly raped and murdered by paramilitary forces became the subject of mass protests in 2009 and 2010. The other instances of women activism that emerged during the period of conflict include organized groups like Dukhtaraan-e-millat and Khawateen Markaz, members of which took to the streets to demand for women's rights and openly declared their support for self determination. Most of these groups however inclined themselves with radical Islamic factions that had formed during the armed militancy and eventually were reported to perpetrate violence against the women of Kashmir who did not follow regulations of appropriate dressing. Another popular organization that is largely led by women is the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) fighting for the people who went missing during military crackdown (arrest and interrogation of young men who were suspected of having ties with militant groups during 1990s). Mothers and wives who lost their family members in these cases of 'Enforced Disappearances' have since organized themselves to present petitions for the identification and return of the bodies of their male relatives and in general, highlight the atrocities that were committed in the name of counterinsurgency. More recently, images of women

protesting on the streets during the stone pelting agitations of 2008 and 2010 have become popular, where women have taken up the shared cause alongside young male students who spearheaded these movements. What is however missing in all of these accounts of women's participation and activism in the Kashmiri resistance and movement for self-determination is the representation of women as independent agents whose needs and demands are separate and sometimes (as one could assume) conflicting to those of men in the society.

Representation of Kashmiri women as victims

Burke(1998) posits that images of women during conflict are usually seen “only in relation to men--as victims in need of protection”. It is interesting to note that a similar narrative of Kashmiri women has emerged from media and socio-political discourses. Media representations have presented Kashmiri women as helpless victims of violence, who either have no active role in the conflict, or have become involved through their personal relationships with men (Hamilton, 2007), further accentuating the incapacity of the society (and its men) to protect women, and how this symbolizes the failure of the movement. For instance, ‘The women were at the forefront of protests and rallies, and provided psycho-social support to their men folk. In turn the men got killed and the women bore the brunt of it, saddled with the burden of fatherless families, and sometimes in the form of the most gruesome human rights violations’ (Sobhrajani, 2008).

‘Innocent women and children, who have nothing to do with militancy in Kashmir, have been suffering immensely, just because they happen to be related to known militants’ (Sharma, 2013).

‘Thousands of women in Kashmir are increasingly suffering from infertility. Couples are finding (it) hard to fight the problem which has saddened hundreds of families across the valley’ (Altaf, 2012).

Anjum (2011) points out, ‘relegating women’s engagement in conflict situations to the passive space of victimhood is the anticipated outcome of the unequal distribution of power in gender relations.’ This however does not mean that the suffering, which is often in fact unequal and in many ways more shattering for women, is not of importance. With due respect to the various forms of victimization that the women in Kashmir have been exposed to, identifying the representation of women in this context, highlights the way gender relations are negotiated and constructed, in a radically transforming and shifting environment, to suit the masculine nature of military violence. The author further elaborates,

The active participation by women in the Kashmir conflict involves an individual struggle for many on varying planes. It demands a counter balance of their private space of home and hearth, with the public sphere of political action. It requires departing from gender stereotypes and creating a meaningful political space for themselves. Kashmiri society being patriarchal and largely conservative, in spite of the liberating influence of Sufi Islam, is not comfortable with a woman’s active political participation in the public sphere, especially where there is a high level of risk involved- as in the case of separatist politics and street protest

Gendered narratives of exposure to violence

To further elaborate how exposure and experience of violence may be gendered, we look at the findings from another study conducted by the authors of this paper, on the qualitative understanding of exposure to military violence related to the political conflict among male and female college students in Srinagar, Kashmir. This was part of a larger survey on exposure to violence, and consisted of a set of open ended questions asking respondents to write down about their experiences of violence. The responses were then content analyzed to gauge the aspects of violence exposure that were salient for the youth of Kashmir. Interestingly, many pointed to aspects of violence exposure that are not viewed as significant within the dominant physical violence based framework used for psychological and psychiatric interventions.

More relevant to this discussion were the responses from female participants that point to how these women make sense of their experiences of violence and what constitute as salient and significant aspects of that experience. While ‘witnessing’ violence on others (mainly men) was highly reported it was directly connected to ‘mental torture’. Moreover, ‘impositions on mobility’ and ‘lack of freedom of movement’ was another significant insight that emerged from the responses. The frustration related to the limitation of movement and choice in a highly militarized environment, was reiterated by many of the women that the author had the chance of interacting with in Kashmir. This was however seen from a security perspective and thus not questioned irrespective of the unequal opportunities that are available to women under the present circumstances.

The findings point to two things-

Firstly that witnessing violence being directly related to distress, anxiety and other trauma symptoms, is as significant as an experience as that of actual physical violence and needs to be understood and examined further. How power relations that exist in a society, including relations of gender are then responsible for designating this experience as marginal when compared to direct forms of exposure like physical harm and sexual violence may become apparent once we indulge in the examination of these alternate narratives of violence.

Secondly, a range of experiences that do not comply with a mainstream trauma discourse, like issues of mobility and freedom, are not sufficiently reported. Future research needs to explore the less overt manifestations of exposure to violence and how the inadequate attention paid to these aspects maybe directly related to certain masculine ideologies that proliferate during armed conflict. Expressions regarding the lack of freedom challenge the impositions that are unequally placed on women during times of conflict in the name of their protection and welfare and this maybe one of the reasons why they remain outside the dominant narrative.

Lastly, the emergence of a dominant identity, as has been in Kashmir through the course of the movement for self-determination, makes itself visible in symbolic and material forms like adherence to certain religious practices, clothing choices, cultural practices etc. Gender roles and power dynamics get carried on through these transformations,

often without being identified. On the same lines, violence affected identity polarization in Kashmir has imposed many specific gender based regulations that are disqualifying women from opportunities and spaces of engagement. How these gender roles are negotiated in the current context of Kashmir will unfold gradually. What is more important is whether and how the alternate accounts of gender specific experiences of violence find a medium of expression through research and enquiry.

Implications for peace building and reconciliation

A critical psychological perspective, questioning existing power structures in a society caught in intractable conflict becomes essential to shed light on issues that fall outside the master narrative. These complexities are not only ignored by the People of that culture but also by the larger public, owing to the way life and politics get framed and represented in the media and through people's generation and re-generation of memories and experiences. Like Turner (2010), discussing Enloe's ideas says, 'We make choices about whose stories will be incorporated into memories of war and whose will be left out', it is often seen that post war initiatives are built around issues that dominate the political and social agenda during times of conflict.

Similarly efforts towards reconciliation, mental health support, and social reorganization in Kashmir are being demanded and focussed on the collective understanding of harm and victimization that the violence has created. However, reconciliation and successful conflict transformation cannot be achieved unless marginalized identities and narratives are considered and appropriately addressed. Ignoring these varied experiences not only marginalizes women from "existing power structures" it also perpetuates a masculine understanding of war as "useful" and "winnable" (Burke, 1998). It is therefore imperative for peace activists to examine the intricate connection between patriarchy and militarism and how institutional oppression (militaristic state) is closely linked to personal violence. Considering the discrimination faced by women around the world in post conflict or transforming societies, where security is highly dubious and women's rights is often crushed under the excuse of state building, the sustained welfare of not only Kashmiri women but the whole society relies on the identification of loopholes in the current public discourse. It is only when gender roles and gendered violence is explored through a critical lens in contexts of conflict, can post conflict work be successful at eliminating or dealing with the harsh outcomes of protracted violence.

III. CONCLUSION

Gallimore (2012) presents a comprehensive explanation of militarism, drawing from the definition provided by the World Council of Churches that views it as an outcome of militarization to "achieve a dominating influence on the political, social, economic and external affairs of the state ...[and] as a consequence the structural, ideological and behavioral patterns of both the society and the government are 'militarized'." Thus we see that in states as heavily militarized as Kashmir, violence is presented through a masculine lens that marginalizes certain narratives. It is not

just true for gender based accounts, but is also related to other minorities or less powerful communities. The outcome is a dominant narratives of violence that perpetuates and strengthens patriarchal ideologies.

During a research project in Kashmir, the author observed as to how women who spoke about the lack of freedom of choice, movement, independence and opportunity, did not themselves relate it to the broader context of power, and only viewed it as an unfortunate outcome of military occupation and violence. Even if they did identify their current status as secondary to men, these concerns have rarely been raised in any form of collective action, either by women themselves, or by the people of Kashmir in general. Turner (2010) describes how women have historically de-masculinized war, by presenting it as a harmful reality without heroism and honour attached to it. It then is a pertinent question if women in Kashmir, atleast some of them, may have similar ideas on the conflict and separatist movement and if such voices have failed to emerge because of the subversion of agency against the rise of a singular identity. Documenting alternate narratives becomes an extremely essential task in any context of conflict, as it may be the only way to gauge the contesting identities that lies within the master narrative. Feminist accounts and war narratives of women have often presented perspectives that are novel and critical of a common universal understanding of war and violence. It is only through a greater understanding of 'what women want to say and have not been able to say' can we identify any context, including that of conflict, as one with multiple perspectives and questions that need to be addressed.

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