

Muslim Women, Agency and Resistance Politics: The Case of Kashmir

Inshah Malik

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Abstract: *The book, 'Muslim Women Agency and Resistance Politics: A Case of Kashmir' is based on interviews conducted by her to almost thirty women including her extensive usage of primary and secondary sources like books and articles. This book is focused on Kashmir's Women, their agency, and their role in the politics of resistance. It has narrated the history of the Dogra period and sometimes it has touched the Mughal rule, Sikh rule, and Afghan rule as well while corroborating the facts. The author's further focus is on Kashmiri nationalism, Plebiscite, class, Islam, and Women's suffering in conflict zones like Kashmir. All in all, the book's aim looks to highlight the suffering of women and their unending struggle during the Dogra period and after 1947 till date. It makes one understand that Kashmiri Muslim women are not merely the victims of tyranny, violence, and tragedy but they have fought bravely from the Dogra period till the present times in various forms. However, the author of the book tries to discuss the subaltern (non-elite) women whose roles had never been highlighted due to the political space taken by the elite menfolk. In the preface, the author discloses that this book may have inherent limitations in offering a broad comprehension of Kashmiri or Muslim women. To encompass every conceivable political mobilization of Kashmiri women is not the objective, but rather to present insights of Kashmiri women who have chosen to symbolize the ongoing movement in Kashmir.*

OBJECTIVES:

- To study Muslim women, their agency, and their involvement in resistance politics.
- To study the historical journey of Kashmiri women's struggle.
- To study the impact of the struggle on the psyche of Kashmiri women.

Keywords: Muslim Women Agency.

I. MUSLIM WOMEN, AGENCY AND RESISTANCE

The book's first chapter starts with explaining the general idea of Women Agency which has been undergrounded over the long haul, particularly for Kashmiri women. There have been miscellaneous books that have conversed about the Kashmir violence and its repercussions on the women of Kashmir. Manisha Sobhrajani (2014)¹ points out, the women of Kashmir have been severely affected by the political tragedy. They have not only experienced the brutality of the conflict but have also been dehumanized and used for entertainment by both militants and Indian security forces.² Most writers delineated them as tongue-tied and stock-still but I am indebted to Inshah Malik who publicized their agencies and abilities fortunately, she has also foregrounded the stance of international or world feminism as well as of static feminism towards Muslim women especially those who are enmeshed in the war. They view Islam as a patriarchal religion and hold a belief that Muslim women are already oppressed by their religion as they are deprived of political

¹ See Sobhrajani, The Land I Dream Of: The Story of Kashmir's women. New Delhi: Hachette India, 2014, p.2

² Inshah Malik, Women Muslim, Agency and Resistance Politics: A Case of Kashmir, Palgrave, 2018, p. 2.

participation and snatched their rights. Here, let me ask you what they should know about Islam. I feel it necessary here to pen the words of Pakistan-American Writer and academic Asma Barlas, "I realized that women and men are equal as a result not of reading feminist texts, but of reading the Quran."³

II. KASHMIRI NATIONALISM: WOMEN, CLASS, AND PLEBISCITE

Second section sheds light on history of political resistance of Kashmiri women and collocates the upper-class women nationalists with lower-class women. The exploration starts by delving into the roots of alternative political awareness and crafting a narrative of women's defiance in response to oppressive Dogra regime. This establishes the foundation for the corresponding account of resistance of women, beginning in the outset of 1800s and continuing through different waves of the movement post-1947, showcasing the enduring spirit of female activism in the face of adversity. The author then makes it clear that the history of resistance of Kashmiri women has not been started after 1947 but has been got underway since Dogra rule who by undersigning of "Treaty of Amritsar March 16, 1846" acquired the Kashmir from British rule and ruled over it almost for a century (1846-1947). Due to their malicious and unjust treatment of Kashmiri people various anti – Dogra movements came into being. Women undertook anti-Dogra protests and remonstrated without caring about their Lives.

The women along with men chanted the following slogan during 1930's protests against Dogra rule in Kashmir.

Bainame Amritsar ko tod do

Kashmir hamara chhod do,

Jabri nata tod do

Kashmir hamara chhod do'

[Do away with the Treaty of Amritsar

Set our Kashmir free

Break this enforced bond

Set our Kashmir free].

In the second chapter, the author further delves deeper into the issue of women's representation in historical depictions of Kashmir. This trend is not limited to nationalist histories, where women are frequently depicted as victims of external forces. The responses to these historical narratives often focus on the actions of elite women, neglecting the diverse experiences of women across different social strata. Moreover, the present section undertakes a comparison between the political participation of upper-class women and cadre-based ordinary women. It also investigates early Kashmiri nationalism, particularly through the Plebiscite Front Movement, while analyzing crucial accounts involving women. These accounts demonstrate how class politics can hinder the nationalist cause and call into question the narrative of Kashmir's integration with India. The chapter accuses the previous leadership of Kashmiri nationalists of manipulating mass perception to strengthen Indian control over Kashmir. By highlighting the contributions of Kashmiri scholars, this chapter reveals the gender-specific resistance.⁴

Regarding education, the author contends that the political experiences of upper-class women, who were educated in missionary schools, were markedly different from those of the unschooled Kashmiri women who faced significant hardships⁵. The other aspect of emancipating Kashmiri women according to the author lies in the National Conference's political accommodation which permitted them to stand against the Dogra régime for the first time.

National conference (1939) which was previously known by the name of All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference (1932) was erected by Sheikh Abdullah as an outcome of the cold-blood massacre that happened on 13 July 1931, in front of the central jail of Srinagar. In this massacre, 22 people were martyred by Dogra forces while the author mistakenly enumerated 24. This day has its importance in the history of Kashmir and since then it has been observed as "Martyr's Day". During the post-killing of Kashmiris in 1931 lower-class women like Zoone Gojri, Raje Begum, and

³ Asma Barlas (2005), "Qur'anic Hermeneutics and Women's Liberation, Keynote speech presented at International Congress on Islamic Feminism, Barcelona, Spain, pp.11. See also Asma Barlas (2002), *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* University of Texas Press.

⁴ Inshah Malik, *Muslim Women*, p. 22.

⁵ Ibid. p. 32.

Fotme played a vital role against Dogra rule. Raje Begum's catchphrase, "*Walve Wesav bismallah kartav, tultave yem meakir kasabe, wen aaye sadi yemai wen laegtav*" (*Come O sisters, remove these unkempt traditional headgears and adopt these tunics and veils*) prompted more and more women to partake in the movement. Subsequently, on 15 May 1946, Sheikh Abdullah launched the Quit Kashmir movement in opposition to Maharaja Hari Singh in which upper-class women joined exclusively and when Sheikh Abdullah was brought to a standstill, his wife Akbar Jehan took charge of the movement and led the protests against Dogras. She got the appellation of *Madar e Meherban* (*kind mother*) by helping the persecuted Kashmiri community and also became one of the prominent members of the plebiscite front movements. Her prominent role paved the way for other upper-class women to join the politics. Mehmooda Ahmed Ali Shah, a student of Lahore (Punjab) started the "free thinker society" movement to inculcate the consciousness among women against the Dogra rule. Sajida Bano a 25-year-old pregnant widow from Shopian, and Jan Begum a 35-year-old widow of Baramulla are among many women who got martyred in this slash-and-burn battle which kept going on till 1947.⁶

III. RESURGENCE OF MUSLIM CONSCIOUSNESS AND ISLAMIC LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Section three discusses the role of Islam in Kashmiri politics and emphasizes the importance of not using Islamism as a one-size-fits-all concept to understand Muslim societies. The book explores how women in Islamic modernity carved out positions of agency, leading to an armed struggle in 1989. The author aims to show that women's Islamic political efforts were created to defy societal patriarchy and the Indian government. The Islamicate project emerged in response to a hostile environment that endangered women's identities, to empower and safeguard women in the Islamic community. The book also examines the complexity of the context and the challenges faced by women through their chronicles. Women's political engagement is historic and circumstantial, seeking to address the dearth of political autonomy in the public arena. In the midst of the 1989 armed uprising, women's involvement shifted towards a more combative approach, aiming to dismantle social and cultural gender constructs. These Islamic notions, combined with civil unrest, enabled women to promote women's rights and establish themselves as leaders. Women established a coalition of political groups dedicated to advancing women's rights and addressing women's issues within the framework of resistance political resistance. As Islamic politics gained ground in the early 1980s, women were initially given space in male-dominated organizations. However, in response to counterinsurgency efforts taken by Indian authorities, women started to create alternative political structures, with some being overseen by men, while others retained independent decision-making and governing powers.⁷

Identity is a constantly evolving self-concept that is molded by the individual's interactions within the political sphere. Women, like all individuals, have multifaceted identities beyond their gender, and the process of reclaiming and reshaping these identities can involve complex battles. e.g.; Aasiyah Andrabi (leader of Dokhtaran e Millat) dedicated herself to comprehending the significance and intent of her Muslim identity after being inspired by a book about Maryam Jameelah - which also helped her overcome depression after being opposed by her brother to pursue master's degree outside Kashmir. Similarly, Bakhtawar (first chairperson of Muslim Khawatein Markaz) after witnessing her 11-year-old brother's life in shambles after being given 3rd degree torture for no offense prompted her to contemplate her identity as a Kashmiri. The depiction of women's witnessing as a vital component of their self-definition is a recurring theme in various stories.

In the context of these aims of women of self-constitution, many organizations were formed with more or less the same intentions of making women folk aware of their rights, duties, and responsibilities. The Islamic Students League (ISL) initiated discussions in 1983 questioning the Kashmiris' Muslim identity. ISL through its women's wing provided a platform for young college students to engage in discussions and debates on important issues related to social and cultural rights, particularly highlighting the importance of women's rights in today's society. The women of ISL were envisioning a Kashmiri nation inspired by Islam. Post the 1987 Convention, ISL leaders, in conjunction with the women's wing, explored the concept of establishing a distinct autonomous organization for Muslim women advocating for liberty, to expand their reach beyond Srinagar to include women from other districts. In parallel, Dokhtaran e Millat,

⁶ Interview conducted by the author in 2013

⁷ Inshah Malik, *Muslim Women*, p. 55

(Daughters of the Nation), emphasized the need for reforming Islam by reintroducing Shariah laws for political liberation. Women were made aware of their Islamic rights and duties by this group and unawareness of these things was made responsible for women's subordinate position in Kashmir. The Dokhtaran e Millat has been instrumental in uncovering numerous unethical and indecent activities, including prostitution rings, involving high-ranking government officials and sitting ministers. As a result, the organization has come under government scrutiny and has been subjected to multiple raids. Additionally, the Dokhtaran asserts that Islam empowers women to make their own decisions in political matters.

Similarly, the establishment of the Women's Welfare Organization in Islamabad focused on addressing the social and cultural challenges faced by women across different religious affiliations. However, internal rifts emerged within the organization, particularly regarding religious issues and the political complexities surrounding Kashmir. In response to the intricate balance between political and social demands, Dokhtaran e Millat adopted a more combative approach. Consequently, a faction of the Women's Welfare Organization, in collaboration with affiliates of the women's wing of ISL, founded the Muslim Khawatiin Markaz (MKM) in 1987. This initiative drew inspiration from prominent figures like Leila Khaled and Zainab al Ghazali, signaling a shift towards a more proactive form of activism. The women of MKM aspired to serve as exemplary figures of discipline and role models for other women to emulate. They believed that a liberal political atmosphere was a crucial step towards securing women's rights, and thus, women's involvement in the pursuit of national liberation was inevitable. However, when the movement turned violent, Dokhtaran's radical politics failed to address many social issues, leading to the political imprisonment of its members. Despite MKM's relentless efforts, the organization struggled to sustain its activities as the armed struggle persisted. In contrast to Dokhtaran e Millat and MKM, a woman led the all-male Jammu and Kashmir Mass Movement, making it an exception among male-dominated pro-freedom parties by granting decision-making authority to a woman.

IV. MILITARISM, OCCUPATION, AND THE NEW WOMEN'S RESISTANCE

The fourth chapter recounts how the Kashmir valley, popularly known as 'Paradise on The Earth', enclosed by attractive mountain ranges, a land of empathetic, creative, and passionate human creatures has turned into dispute, tension, and violence for decades, which changed the life into misery, homes into jails, land into desert and gardens into graveyards. Kashmiris suffer from 'Disinterest in life'; peace has turned into terrorism. The innocent people of Kashmir valley have been victimized, not only by Militant Terrorism but also by State Terrorism. The foremost obligation of a state is to guarantee the provision of essential human rights to its citizens, but, unfortunately, and very unfortunately, India only theoretically says that Kashmir is its integral part (Utoot Ang). In the practical field, Human Rights Abuse in the Kashmir valley is an ongoing process, and even international communities do not pay heed. Kashmiri women have badly fallen into this trap and have been suffering victimization for decades they suffer from every angle in every dimension of life. They suffer politically, economically, socially, culturally, educationally, physically, and emotionally as well.

Furthermore, it explores how women living under military occupation navigate expressing their political beliefs without being defined by their victimization, and how they resist acknowledging their subordination. Furthermore, it also uncovers the active agency of novice young authors, which aligns with feminist concepts of empowerment. In 2008, the revival of the resistance movement, followed by the subsequent aggressive state retaliation, contributed to the reinforcement of male-controlled norms. The mass discourse in Kashmir began to focus on molestation as a tool of war, with concerns raised about the safety of women in the street. Even though sexual violence is commonly inflicted upon Kashmiri men as well, the focus was on restricting the perceived additional freedom of women. The violence in the streets led to the emergence of novel protest tactics. A fresh cohort of Kashmiri women from various backgrounds, distressed by enduring life under a military occupation, crafted innovative forms of resistance. They documented their ordeals by narrating traumatic events in poetry and recording evidence of degrading incidents through film and photography. The advent of social media saw a surge in these powerful new expressions that contested the official Indian stance on Kashmir.⁸

⁸ Ibid., p.86

Following their experiences with courts, police departments, and ministries, women unite in collective political efforts, rallying around common causes. The Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) exemplifies this solidarity, particularly in their resistance in defiance of the prevailing culture of armed forces in Kashmir. Parveena Ahangar's involvement in APDP dates back to 1994, when her son, Javed Ahangar, vanished following his detention by the Indian Army.

"The educated middle-class women were often told that the streets were unsafe. Many women sought to push back on these prohibitions and reconnect with the political realities of trauma that people dealt with. They put their skills to use by opting to write down their experiences of war and making sense of memories from their childhood years. They wrote poems and painted the grim realities through which they had to suffer. The mass uprising in 2008 offered platforms for reconnection and forming opinions and ideas about the impact of the political situation on women's lives."⁹

Aasiya Andrabi, the Chief of Dokhtaran-e-Millat, highlighted the exploitation of Kashmiri women by Indian troops during a gathering in Shopian on May 26, 2010. She stressed that the Indian military is employing women as a means of warfare, exploiting their dignity to stifle the Kashmiri people's fight for self-determination. As per the report by Kashmir Media Service (KMS), the period from January 1989 to September 30, 2016, witnessed the killing of 94,548 individuals by Indian security forces in Jammu and Kashmir. The report also revealed alarming statistics, including 7,073 deaths in custody, 137,469 civilian arrests, 107,043 instances of torture, 22,826 widowed women, 107,591 orphaned children, and 10,717 cases of harassment and gang rape of women.

V. CONCLUSION

In the concluding chapter of the book, the author explores the stories of Muslim women who played a significant role in the resistance movement against Indian rule, portraying them not as passive victims but as active participants in the struggle for self-determination in Kashmir. The author underscores the idea that it is through their involvement in political actions that these women recognize the absence of freedom and prevailing injustices in the region.

Post Script: Due to these shameful incidents of gang rapes and brutal killings, thousands and thousands of Kashmiri women became victimized by physical and psychological illnesses including heart diseases, high blood pressure, anxiety, depression, psychosis, PTSD, and so on. It also, directly or indirectly, affected women's education very badly. Most of the Kashmiri mothers are scared to send their girl children to schools. From July 2016, Kashmir schools & colleges were closed till 30 May 2017. And, now these schools and colleges have been again closed since 5 August 2019, for more than six months. Alas! Kashmiri students have uncertain academic and professional future. The broader idea derived from the book regarding the education of women is that due to the conflicting nature of the State, female education is the worst victim of it. There are hundreds of families who prefer to send their girls outside the state for education due to the ongoing and unending turmoil in Kashmir but there is a majority section among Kashmiris who didn't allow their female-folk to go outside the state for education. Thus, they became the soft victims and could not complete their education.

⁹ Ibid., p. 97.