

September 2007

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Recommended Citation

Khan, Nyla Ali (2007). The Land of Lalla-Ded: Politicization of Kashmir and Construction of the Kashmiri Woman. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 9(1), 22-41.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol9/iss1/2>

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The Land of Lalla-Ded: Politicization of Kashmir and Construction of the Kashmiri Woman

By Nyla Ali Khan¹

Abstract

Over the years, tremendous political and social turmoil has been generated in the state of Jammu and Kashmir by the forces of religious fundamentalism and by an exclusionary nationalism that seeks to erode the cultural syncretism that is part of the ethos of Kashmir. Kashmiri women are now suffering from some of the more predictable afflictions of women caught in conflict situations: psychological trauma, destitution, and acute poverty that put them at increased risk of trafficking. The ethnographic field research, which I undertook, was a method of seeking reconnection sans condescension by simultaneously belonging to and resisting the discursive community of traditional Muslim Kashmiri and Gujjar rural women. This contiguity among disparate histories engendered a historical identity formed in a hybrid space as well as a pluralistic vision of the world, not the fixity of a glorified vision of the past in terms of gender roles, societal roles, or cultural identities.

Keywords: Kashmiriyat, Nationalism, Syncretism, Lalla-Ded, Sufiism, Ethnography, Agency

Introduction

In a post 9/11 world, in which the uncritical essentializing of people from the "Third-World" has been legitimized; Iraq and Afghanistan have been dehumanized in an attempt to disseminate enlightenment in those "dark" regions; the discourse of "honor killings" is prevalent in the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan and has carved a niche in Western academic discourse as another instance of the incorrigible bestiality of the Orient; inciters of communal riots on the Indian subcontinent enjoy the patronage of political bigwigs as evidenced by the relentless persecution of Muslims during the riots in the Indian state of Gujarat in 2002; the rhetoric of hate and binarisms pervades the politics of the "Third-World" and of the West. In such a scenario, feminist activist-scholars seek to reinterpret the repressive frameworks of military occupation, nationalism, proto-nationalism, patriarchy, and fundamentalism that essentialize the identities of postcolonial and transnational subjects. A configuration of the outer boundaries of "civilization" as chaotic and unwieldy glorified the dominance of these privileged centers of power. In order to achieve this outcome, the dominant order created structures that catered to its unquestioned authority. These privileged centers of power have always constrained reality by imposing their ideological schema on it, which underpinned their powerful positionality. Their ability to conjure images and re-etch boundaries that served their set of beliefs, has rendered them a force to reckon with. Similar ideas were expounded by the two nuclear powers on the Indian subcontinent, India and Pakistan, to attribute to the subjugated Kashmiris an inferior intellect, a lineage, and a mystique that allowed the dominant regime to manipulate the Kashmiri "Other" as a stereotypical and predictable entity. The rebelliousness of the Kashmiri subject was to

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be contained by a recognition of his nature which was said to be structured by contraries: savagery and obedience, cunning and innocence, mysticism and manipulation. A clearer statement is needed in the next paragraph about the linkages among the above and the subject of analysis.

Using self-reflexive and historicized forms, drawing on my heritage and kinship in Kashmir, this essay explores the construction and employment of gender in secular nationalist, religious nationalist, and ethnonationalist discourses in the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. I question the victimization and subjugation of women selectively enshrined in the social practices and folklore of Kashmiri culture, such as limited educational and professional opportunities; the right of a husband to prevent his wife from making strides in the material world; the kudos given to the hapless wife who agrees to live in a polygamous relationship; the bounden duty of the woman to bear heirs; the unquestioned right of a husband to divorce his barren wife; confinement of the woman to her home where she is subjected to material and emotional brutality; the hallowed status of the woman who conforms to such cultural dogmas; the social marginalization of the woman who defies them; the status of woman as a fiefdom facilitating political and feudal alliances; the exclusivity of cultural nationalism; the erosion of cultural syncretism; the ever-increasing dominance of religious fundamentalism; and the irrational resistance to cultural and linguistic differences (Butalia, 2002; Kishwar, 1998; Madhosh, 1999; Rai, 2004; Whitehead, 2004). At the same time, I do not advocate the abandoning of Kashmiri culture in favour of uncritically adopting some other culture.

I start from the premise that the syncretic ethos of Kashmir has been violated by the outburst of religious nationalism, secular nationalism, and ethnonationalism that have facilitated political and social structural violence. I discuss the nature of this ethos below. I consider the shape of women's agency in the syncretic ethos of Kashmir and the new languages of resistance, negotiation, and empowerment it adopts in the cacophonous social and political situation created by various nationalist discourses.

I draw from the cultural and ideological spaces I was raised in; the cherished verses of the Sufi poetess, Lalla-Ded, in whose immortal poetry the legendary beauty of Kashmir endures pain and strife but lives on; conversations with my maternal grandmother that are etched in my memory; informative and enlightening discussions with my parents, who have continued to live in the strife torn valley through years of unbearable hostility and the psychological trauma of armed conflict with an unparalleled stoicism; informal conversations with friends and acquaintances who were victims of the politics of dispossession; the extensive reading that I have done over the years on the conflictual history and politics of the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir, the northernmost state of post-independence India. I also draw from the field work conducted during my annual trip to Kashmir in July 2005 and 2006 among predominantly agricultural communities in areas bordering the Line of Control between India and Pakistan.

Against the backdrop of the politically tumultuous situation in Jammu and Kashmir which has led to an increase in gender-based violence, I attempt to show that women's muted voices haven't been raised loud enough against the atrocities to which they are subjected by Indian paramilitary forces, Pakistan sponsored insurgents, counter insurgency forces, and religious fundamentalists. I also emphasize the necessity of

foregrounding women's perspectives on issues of nationalist ideologies, religious freedom, democratic participation, militarization, intellectual freedom, judicial and legal structures in a milieu that does enable the creation of transnational feminisms in order to forge temporary coalitions and alliances for ameliorative social and political action that can increase the political agency of more and more individuals.

Political Discourses Inscribed on the Kashmiri Landscape

Kashmir is a space in which conflicting discourses have been written and read. Cultural notions of Kashmiris in image and word have been reconstructed to emphasize the bias that reinforces the propagandist agenda of the hegemonic powers involved in the Kashmir dispute, India and Pakistan. In establishment Indian and Pakistani thought, Kashmiris are defined as different from the nationals of the two countries. The various fractions in the state of Jammu & Kashmir, Kashmiri Muslims, Kashmiri Pundits, Dogras, and Ladakhis, have tried time and again to form a national consciousness in order to name its cultural alterity through the nation, as "Kashmiriyat." The construction of "Kashmiriyat" involved culling selected cultural fragments by Kashmiri nationalists from an imagined past that would enfold both the Pandits and the Muslims. As Mridu Rai points out in her well-researched book on Kashmir, "This espousal of a 'secular' ideology, read through a secularly written history, was intended also as a way to keep at bay a center in Delhi that had begun to encroach upon Kashmiri 'autonomy' increasingly in the early 1950s (2004: 284-85). But due to the regional sentiments that are so well entrenched in the psyche of the people, this attempt is still in a volatile stage. The symbols of nationhood in Jammu and Kashmir, flag, anthem, and constitution, have thus far been unable to forge the process of nationalist self-imagining. Although, separatist movements have been surfacing and resurfacing since the accession of Kashmir to India in 1947, the attempt to create a unitary cultural identity bolstered by nationalist politics has been subverted by regional political forces and the comprador class, backed-up by the governments of India and Pakistan. The revolutionary acts of demanding the right of self-determination and autonomy for Jammu & Kashmir have not been able to nurture a unity amongst all socioeconomic classes (Rahman, 1996: 148-9; Ganguly, 1997: 78-9).

Kashmiris men and women have tried, time and again, to translate themselves from passive recipients of violence legitimated by the foreign legislations of the physically and psychologically removed parliaments of India and Pakistan into subjects who recognize that they can exercise agency and take control of their destinies. They march forward with a refusal to allow history to be imposed on them; now the people of Kashmir attempt to take charge of their social and political destinies. The confluence of religious nationalism, secular nationalism, and ethnic nationalism create the complexity of the Kashmir issue. For India, Kashmir lends credibility to its secular nationalist image. For Pakistan, Kashmir represents the unfeasibility of secular nationalism and underscores the need for an Islamic theocracy in the subcontinent. Currently, a large part of Jammu and Kashmir is administered by India and a portion is administered by Pakistan. China also annexed a section of the land in 1962, through which it has built a road that links Tibet to Xiajiang (Rahman, 1996: 5-6; Schofield, 2002). In an attempt to resolve this conflict, Sir Owen Dixon, the United Nations representative for India and Pakistan, noted in 1950 that the Kashmir issue was so tumultuous because Kashmir was not a holistic geographic, economic, or demographic entity but, on the contrary, was an aggregate of

diverse territories brought under the rule of one Maharajah (Schofield, 2002). Sir Owen Dixon propounded the trifurcation of the state along communal or regional lines or facilitating the secession of parts of the Jhelum Valley to Pakistan (Ganguly, 1997: 3-4, 43-57; Rahman, 1996: 4). The insistence on rejecting the trajectory charted out for them by the power structures of India, Pakistan, and the West and the urge to proclaim themselves a nation that is capable of exercising the right of self-determination has been haunting the psyche of the Kashmiri people for decades.

Cultural Syncretism in Kashmir

Shiv chuy thali thali rozaan
Mav Zaan Hyound ta Mussalman
Trukhay chukh ta panunuy paan parzaan
Ada Chay Saahibas Zaani Zaan (Lalla-Ded, n.d.)

Shiva abides in all that is everywhere
Then do not discriminate between a Hindu and a Muslim
That is true knowledge of the Lord (Kashmiri Saints and Sages, n.d.)

Kashmiris have taken pride in inhabiting a cultural space within which, Vedic Hinduism and Sufi Islam formed an in-between space. The traditional communal harmony in Kashmir enabled the peaceful co-existence of Muslims and Hindus, mutual respect for their places of worship, and an ability to synthesize not just cultural but religious practices as well (Kaw, 2004; Kishwar, 1998; Razdan, 1999; Rushdie, 2004; Whitehead, 2004). The deep reverence for each other's shrines and the relics housed in those shrines is a well-entrenched aspect of the culture. Salman Rushdie describes the sentiment of "Kashmiriyat" succinctly in his fictionalized account of the history of Jammu and Kashmir: "The words Hindu and Muslim had no place in their story. In the valley these words were merely descriptions, not divisions. The frontiers between the words, their hard edges, had grown smudged and blurred" (2004: 57). A fitting symbol of this syncretic ethos of Kashmir is Lalla-Ded, a figure revered by both the Pundits and Muslims of Kashmir. Lalla-Ded was born in 1334 into a Kashmiri Brahmin home in village Simpur, about four miles from Srinagar, the summer capital of Kashmir. Lalla-Ded was brutalized in a marriage that was arranged for her by the elders once she crossed the threshold of puberty. Unwilling to acquiesce to constraints placed(d) on the "traditional" woman and questioning the self-abnegation of women that disallows them from reconciling their private selves with their roles as public contributors to the community, Lalla-Ded disavowed the psychosocial narratives inscribed on the female body in defiance of the continued immiseration of women (Bhatnagar, Dube, and Dube, 2004: 30). I would argue that by committing the sacrilegious act of crossing the threshold of the husband's house in order to choose a life of asceticism, Lalla-Ded subverted the reliance on male authority.

Although a Sufi mystic, childless Lalla-Ded eroded the construct of woman as goddess or mother that binds her to a form of subordination that is the ultimate paradigm of social relationships in traditional societies (Nandy, 1998: 30). Most historians are of the opinion that Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Wali, the founding father of the predominant Sufi

sect in the Kashmir valley, Rishiism, acknowledged Lalla-Ded as his spiritual mentor. The recorded poems and paradigmatic sayings of Lalla-Ded and of Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Wali enrich Kashmiri literature and add layer upon layer to the culture (Kaul, 1999; Murphy, 1999; Parimoo, 1987; Sufi, 1974). It is also believed that she met and held discourses on mysticism and on the different schools of Sufi thought with Mir Syed Ali Hamadani, a regal central Asian Islamic scholar and mystic, who disseminated and perpetuated Islamic teachings in predominantly Brahminical 14th and 15th century Kashmir (Banzai, 1994; Murphy, 1999; Parimoo, 1987). She chose to break the mold of patriarchy in a stiflingly traditional society by not allowing her intellectual and spiritual freedoms to be curbed.

Most nationalist movements and literatures of independence have portrayed women as icons of cultural preservation (Fruzzetti, 1990; Grewal, 1996; Hawley, 1994; Kaur, 1968). In the nationalist and postcolonial phase of nations, gender divisions have been reinforced by the hallowed figure of the “native woman” (Gandhi, 1998: 83). The complexity in the varying positions of women is ignored to preserve nationalist portraits of the “native woman,” which do not concede to the female subject the right to foreground her own “distinct actualities” (Minh-ha, 1989: 5). For instance, the iconicization of Lalla-Ded as goddess-mother in nationalist literatures circumscribes her sphere of the influence within Kashmiri folklore and social practices. I oppose this decapacitating iconicity of “woman” that traditional Islamic, Hindu, and Victorian concepts of femininity endorse. Lalla-Ded de-emphasized the roles imposed by conjugality and motherhood in order to widen her identity without totally dismissing its cultural definition. The Sufi mystic located agency in possibilities created in the variability of spaces in which identity is formed. Lalla-Ded’s unsurpassed Sufi mysticism and the eloquent verse that ensued from it led to her being owned by the Pundits of the valley as Lalla Ishwari and by the Muslims of the valley as Lalla Arifa (Banzai, 1994; Jha, 1996; Khan, 1994; Ray, 1970).

Nationalism and Gendered Violence

What are the traditional freedoms and prerogatives of Kashmiri women in the land of a spiritual luminary like Lalla-Ded? Over the years, tremendous political and social turmoil has been generated in the state by the forces of religious fundamentalism and by an exclusionary nationalism that seeks to erode the cultural syncretism that is part of the ethos of Kashmir. These forces are responsible for the shutting down of dissenters who voice cultural critique, repression of women, political anarchy, economic deprivation, lack of infrastructure, and mass displacements that have been occasioned by these events. Since 1949, the United Nations and Pakistan have consistently demanded that a plebiscite be held in order to determine the wishes of the Kashmiri people. India has denied this wish for fear of losing the vote in the predominantly Muslim Kashmir valley. India uses Pakistan’s reluctance to withdraw its forces and the decision of the United States government to supply arms to Pakistan in 1954 to justify its denial (Ganguly, 1997: 43-57; Rahman, 1996: 4; Schofield, 2002). Nearly 400,000 Indian army and paramilitary forces have been deployed in the state, in India’s most beefed up counterinsurgency operation till date. Financing these operations has taken an enormous toll on the annual administrative budget of the state (Ganguly, 1997: 1-2). Since the inception of the secessionist movement in 1989, more than 38,000 Kashmiris have been

brutally murdered by Indian forces, 100,000 Pandits have migrated to other Jammu and other parts of India for fear of persecution, over 5000 women have been violated, innumerable people have been incarcerated and held incommunicado. United Nations experts on extra judicial, summary, and arbitrary executions have not been invited to Kashmir and international human rights monitoring organizations have been prevented from entering the state (Amnesty International, 1995; Schofield, 2002). In such a conflict situation, the law and order machinery is rendered dysfunctional increasing the vulnerability of women and children.

Kashmir lives in the unpleasant reality of Indian and Pakistani dominance, which is full of redoubtable paramilitary troops, barbed wire, and invasive searches; dispossessed youths trained in Pakistani training camps to unleash a reign of disorganized and misguided terror in the state; custodial killings in detention centers and mothers whose faces tell tales of woe waiting outside those gloomy detention centers to catch glimpses of their unfortunate sons (an exercise in futility); burqa-clad women afraid of the wrath of fundamentalist groups as well as of paramilitary forces bent on undercutting their self-respect. The military has *carte blanche* under the Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act of 1978 and the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities [Prevention] Act of 1987 (Puri, 1995; Schofield, 2002; Widmalm, 2002; Wirsing, 2002). The traditional communal harmony in Kashmir has been eroded by Pakistan's sponsorship of terrorism in the state, India's repression of every demand for local autonomy and shelving self-determination for Kashmiris, the eruption of ethnoreligious fervor as the central government disregarded democratic institutions in Jammu and Kashmir (Ganguly, 1997: 14-20). The anarchy that pervades the cultural and political fabric of Kashmir has been stoked by government-sponsored militants and foreign mercenaries. In such an unwieldy situation, women are psychologically incarcerated (Butalia, 2002). Such occurrences do not enable an autonomous Kashmiri life, devoid of the pressures that Kashmiris have been subjected to since 1947. The brutalization of the culture has been rendered more lethal by the socialization of Kashmiri boys and men into military culture. Within such a masculinist discourse and praxis the rigidly entrenched hierarchical relationship between men and women is inextricably linked with sexualized violence. For instance, more than 5000 rapes were reported to have been committed by Indian security forces in the state since the inception of the secessionist movement in 1989 (Prasad, 1999: 478-506). A number of women have been ruthlessly violated by members of the paramilitary troops deployed in Kashmir as a tool to avenge themselves and indelibly scathe the consciousness of the culture that dared to raise its insurgent head against the two mammoth nuclear powers on the Indian subcontinent. A large percentage of rape victims and war widows are afflicted with post traumatic stress disorder and are prone to suicidal tendencies (Kashmir Human Rights Site, 2002).

In contemporary Kashmiri society, the question of the role of women in the nationalist scenario remains a vexed one. As Ann McClintock observes about the role of the subaltern woman in "Third-World" societies: "Excluded from direct action as national citizens, women are subsumed symbolically into the national body politic as its boundary and metaphoric limit" (1997: 345). For instance, the only women's reactionary organization in Kashmir, Dukhtaran-e-Milat, claims that the image of woman as a burqa-clad faceless and voiceless cultural icon, devoid of the agency to pave a path of her own choosing, is sanctioned by the versions of religious scriptures that this vigilante group

subscribes to and reinforces her strength and courage of conviction to sacrifice for the family. This vigilante group uses intimidating and questionable tactics to raid houses that allegedly have been converted into brothels and brutally censors romantic liaisons between college-going boys and girls. The women members of Dukhtaran-e-Milat would perhaps never identify the modern Kashmiri woman with the liberated woman of the Western world. On the contrary, they make a facile attempt to reconstruct historical and cultural discourses in order to inspire the kind of cultural nationalism that fundamentalist politics requires. This organization advocates the creation of a homogeneous culture devoid of the freedoms that Kashmiri women have traditionally enjoyed. Their draconian methods to enforce purdah, reinforce a patriarchal structure in which an unaccompanied woman is rendered vulnerable, and curtail the mobility of the technology savvy youth is an attempt to Arabize the syncretic ethos of Kashmir (Schofield, 2002). Perhaps a new paragraph here? There seems to be an insensitivity in such reactionary organizations as well as in former and current regional and national administrations, such as the Congress and People's Democratic Party coalition government in the state and the centralizing regimes of the Congress, the Bharatiya Janata Party, and the National Democratic Front in the center, of the diverse interpretations of religious laws regarding the institutions of marriage, divorce, inheritance rights, etc.; of the rich heterogeneity of cultural traditions and to the paradoxes within them. In its initial years, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah's National Conference enabled the emergence of a well-educated, politically aware generation of Kashmiris. But in the 1970s and the 1980s, Indira Gandhi's Congress regime characterized every demand for local empowerment as potentially insurgent, discouraging the growth of a progressive generation of Kashmiris (Ganguly, 1997: 84-5; Kohli, 1997: 341-2; Rai, 2004: 295). The vociferous members of the Dukhtaran-e-Milat would better serve the female population of the state by campaigning for quotas for women in the legislative assembly, legislative council, parliament, and the judiciary. An increase in the female representation in these institutions of authority would facilitate a cultural shift in terms of gender role expectations, legitimizing a defiance of the normative structure.

The intrusion of women in traditionally male domains would cause perceptible erosion in the structural determinants of sexualized violence. This form of empowerment would "frame and facilitate the struggle for social justice and women's equality through a transformation of economic, social, and political structures" (Bisnath and Elson, n.d.; Porter and Verghese, 1999). In the present scenario, no thought is given either by the state authorities or by insurgent groups to women who have been victims of the paramilitary forces and/or of militant organizations. Horrifying narratives of women and adolescent girls being humiliated and brutally interrogated in remote villages are absent from the official record, and are fearfully voiced in the atmosphere of paranoia that pervades the Kashmir valley. For instance, in 1991, more than 800 soldiers of the fourth Rajput Regiment raped 23-60 women in the course of one night in the village of Kunan Pohpura in Kashmir. These soldiers raided the village on the pretext of interrogating the local men who were allegedly insurgents. Another gruesome incident of a similar nature occurred in Handawara village in 2004, where a mother and her minor daughter were sadistically defiled by a major of the Rashtriya Rifles. In Mattan in South Kashmir, an Indian army subedar and his bodyguard of seven Rashtriya rifles were involved in a spine-chilling rape case against which the necessary governmental action is yet to be

taken (Conversations With Human Rights Activists in the Valley Kashmiri, 2004; Women's Initiative for Peace and Disarmament, 2002) .

Women representatives of the ruling People's Democratic Party and those of its ally, the Congress, are quick to make visits accompanied by their entourages to isolated villages or towns in which the Indian army has trampled on the sensibilities of the female population. The PDP, while in opposition, raised the issue of human rights abuses which, until then, hadn't been given much credence by the National Conference government. But they have been unable to advocate reforms that are specific to women. No stringent and timely measures are taken to redress those wrongs. In effect, the Kashmiri woman is constructed as a parchment on which the discourses of religious nationalism, secular nationalism, and ethnonationalism are inscribed, and the most barbaric acts are justified by Indian paramilitary forces as means to rein in uncontrollable separatist forces and by militant organizations as means to restore the lost dignity of the "women."

Secular as well as ethnonationalists assert that as long as the inner or spiritual distinctiveness of the culture is retained, an autonomous Kashmiri "nation" can equip itself to cope with a globalized world without losing its essential identity. Nationalist discourse creates the dichotomy of the inner/outer in order to make the inviolability of the inner domain look traditional. For example, ethnonationalists assert that a Kashmiri woman who marries a non-Kashmiri loses her legal right to inherit, own, or buy immovable property in the state. By inhabiting the metaphoric inner domain, the Kashmiri woman embodies the virginal purity of the culture and ethnicity which would get tainted by her stepping outside the cultural threshold. As a strategy to maintain the inviolability of the cultural sanctum sanctorium, ethnonationalists problematize the law concerning state subjects which was promulgated in Jammu and Kashmir on April 20, 1927 by Maharajah Hari Singh. This injunction was meant to protect the interests of the local landed class and the peasantry against wealthy people from outside the state who had the wherewithal to buy the locals out of hearth and home. In 1957, the new constitution of the state changed "state subject" to "permanent resident." Permanent resident status was accorded to individuals who had been living in the state for at least a decade before May 14, 1957. On March 25, 1969, the state government issued an injunction requiring all deputy commissioners to issue certificates of permanent residence to Kashmiri women with the stipulation that status was valid till that. After that, women who married permanent resident men would need to get their certificates reissued and those who married outside the state would automatically lose their permanent resident status, where-as, male permanent residents would have the privilege of endowing their non-state subject spouses with the ability to own and inherit property in the state as long as she didn't leave the state for permanent residence elsewhere (Abdullah, 1993; Zutshi, 2004).

In 2002, the state High Court declared that this proviso had no legislative sanction because it violated the gender equality clause of the constitution of the state as well as of India. The High Court held that the proviso relied on section 10 of the British law which governed pre-partition India, and that law had itself been amended (Bhagat, 2002; Puri, 2004). The bench quoted section four of the Sri Pratap Consolidation Law Act to declare that the only legislative prohibition was that the property inherited by a non-state subject could not be sold to a non-state subject. But this decision created a furor in which the

opposition National Conference asserted that the declaration of the earlier proviso invalidating the permanent resident status of women who married outside the state was an attempt to erode the distinctive cultural identity of the state. The National Conference accused the ruling People's Democratic Party of having made a compromise by withdrawing its appeal from the Supreme Court against the judgment of the state High Court. The angst of power caused the ruling PDP, including its women members, to immediately draft a Permanent Resident Bill in the assembly reinforcing the earlier stipulation. The High Court's decision was supported by the ruling PDP's coalition partner, the Congress. The issue of permanent residence was hijacked by Hindu fundamentalist organizations, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Rashtriya Samaj Sevak, to inflame regional divisiveness by condemning the opposition of the NC and the PDP to the High Court's decision as acts of Muslim secession. The representatives of the Kashmir province in the legislative assembly and legislative council opposed the decision of the High Court that declared the earlier proviso archaic and outmoded, and the representatives of the Jammu region supported it (Puri, 2004). In effect, women were deployed as a political tool not just by regional political organizations but by national ones as well.

Women politicians in the current legislative assembly and legislative council of Jammu and Kashmir played the role of tokens who bolstered the social, cultural, and moral institutions that maintain a male-dominated power structure (Amnesty International, 2004; Kashmiri Women's Initiative for Peace and Disarmament, 2002). Even those with access to the echelons of power refuse to engage "more effectively with the politics of affiliation, and the currently calamitous dispensations of power" (McClintock, 1997: 396).

Despite its firm promise, the current state government has been unable to incorporate the Special Operations Group, a paramilitary division of the police accused of heinous human rights violations, entirely into the regular police force. The SOG continues to run amok and functions as an entity that only obeys the law of the jungle. Alongside the SOG, the Special Task Force, a militia group comprising renegade militants, has been incorporated into the regular police force as well but has not been disbanded, which the PDP government had promised at the time of its installation in office. These forces have been deployed to handle extrajudicial matters in arbitrary ways and are responsible for gross misdemeanors against women (Amnesty International, 2004).

Why is gender violence such a consistent feature of the insurgency and counter-insurgency that have wrenched the Indian subcontinent for about decades? In nationalist rhetoric the equation of the native woman to the motherland has in recent days become more forceful. In effect, the native woman is constructed as a trough within which male aspirations are nurtured, and the most barbaric acts are justified as means to restore the lost dignity of the "women." The story of the partition of India in 1947 into two separate nation-states, India and Pakistan, is replete with instances of fathers slaughtering their daughters in order to prevent them from being violated by the enemy; and women resorting to mass suicide to preserve the "honour" of the community (Kaul, 2001; Kumari and Kidwai, 1998; Jayawardena, 1986; Ray, 2000). If a woman's body belongs not to herself but to her community, then the violation of that body purportedly signifies an attack upon the honour (izzat) of the whole community.

In one instance, the crime of a boy from a lower social caste against a woman from a higher upper caste in the Meerawala village in the central province of Punjab in Pakistan in 2002 was punished in a revealing way by the “sagacious” tribal jury. After days of thoughtful consideration, this jury gave the verdict that the culprit’s teenage sister, Mai, should be gang-raped by a group of goons from the wronged social group: The tribal jury ruled that to save the honor of the upper caste Mastoi clan, Mai’s brother, Shakoor, should marry the woman with whom he was accused of having an illicit relationship while Mai was to be given away in marriage to a Mastoi man. “The prosecution said that when she rejected the decision she was gang-raped by four Mastoi men and made to walk home semi-naked in front of hundreds of people. The lawyer for one of the accused argued the rape charge was invalid because Mai was technically married to the defendant at the time of the incident” (Reuters, 2002). Such acts of violence do occur on the Indian subcontinent and bear testimony to the intersecting notions of nation, family, and community.

The horrific stories of women that are, in most instances, attributed to folklore underscore the complicity of official and nationalist historiography in perpetuating these notions. I might add that the feminization of the “homeland” as the “motherland” for which Indian soldiers, Kashmiri nationalists in Indian-occupied Kashmir, and Kashmiri nationalists in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir are willing to lay down their lives serves, in effect, to preserve the native women in pristine retardation. Although this essentialist portrayal of the Kashmiri woman is clearly suspect, it is embedded more deeply in the quasi-feudal culture of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Pakistan-occupied Kashmir has been a fiefdom of feudal lords whose only concern is with the impregnability of their authority and the replenishment of their coffers. Tribal women in “Azad” Kashmir are still circumscribed within the parameters created by the paternalistic feudal culture that disallows the creation of a space for distinct subjectivities (Cohen, 2004; Talbot, 1998; Ziring, 2000).

Do women embody the history of a culture and community only as it is remembered in the murky corridors of officialdom? The on-going story of trouble torn Kashmir is replete with instances of fathers forcing their daughters to live in marital unions of psychological, sexual, and material frustration to prevent them from being violated by the paramilitary forces or by trigger-happy militants; women accepting physical and emotional torture in their marital homes to preserve the “honour” of the family and the community; and women who were “dishonoured,” either by being violated or by asserting their political and sexual agency, being ruthlessly shunned by their families (Amnesty International, 2004; Kashmiri Women’s Initiative for Peace and Disarmament, 2002). Consider Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s delineation of the contexts in which the politics of representation renders mute the figure of the “Third-World woman,” which would apply to the situation in Kashmir:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the “third-world woman” caught between tradition and modernization. (1999: 304)

Culture inscribes a wide range of experiences, which centralizing institutions attempt to render invisible and homogeneous. Women in Kashmir, as in other postcolonial countries, are positioned in relation to their own class and cultural realities, their own histories, their sensitivity to the diversity of cultural traditions and to the questions and conflicts within them, the legacies of Sufi Islam, their own struggles not just with the devastating effects of Indian occupation and Pakistani infiltration, but also with the discourses of cultural nationalism and religious fundamentalism propagated in the valley, their own relations to the West, their interpretations of religious law, their beliefs in the different schools of Islamic and Hindu thought, and their concepts of the role of women in contemporary societies. At this point, Lalla-Ded is not inscribed into the practices and ideology of gender in Kashmir. Lalla-Ded is a watershed in the cultural and spiritual development of Kashmir. Unconditional freedom from sexualized hierarchies does not exist in any social matrix. But Lalla-Ded sought in the social arrangement that she had access to concepts and tools for a new society which would be liberated from gendered forms of oppression. She self-actualized and intervened in patriarchal national history by speaking from her location about the political realities that had woven the web of prevalent social relations. Lalla-Ded's ability to be alert to how a woman's aspirations for personal emancipation are mediated by her responsibility toward her community, and to the ways that this sense of responsibility toward her community, and to the ways that this sense of responsibility inflects her own emancipatory thought has underscored her importance for me.

Women and Agency

My attempt to theorize women's agency involves framing the concept in cognitive, psychological, economic, and political aspects. I borrow eminent educationist, Nelly Stromquist's assertion regarding agency which involves taking decisions that deconstruct cultural and social norms, and beliefs that structure seemingly intransigent traditional gender ideologies; the psychological aspect refers to developing self-esteem for which some form of financial autonomy is a basis; the political aspect involves the ability to organize and mobilize for social change, which requires the creation of awareness not just at the individual level but at the collective level as well (1995). For me, empowerment is a process which enables the marginalized to make strategic life choices regarding education, livelihood, marriage, childbirth, sexuality, etc., which are critical for people to lead the sort of lives they want to lead and constitute life's defining parameters (Kabeer, 1999: 437). It is important to keep in mind, however, that women are constrained by and grapple with the normative structures through which societies create gender roles.

Women have more or less power depending on their specific situation and they can be relatively submissive in one situation and relatively assertive in another. Assessing women's agency requires identifying and mapping power relations, the room to maneuver within each pigeonhole and the intransigence of the boundaries (Hayward 1998). A woman's level of empowerment also varies according to factors such as class, caste, ethnicity, economic status, age, family position, etc.

Autoethnography

I was raised in a secular Muslim home in we were encouraged to speak of the “liberation of women” and of a culturally syncretic society. I was taught that Islam provided women with social, political, and economic rights, however invisible those rights were in our society. It was instilled in me that Islam gave women property rights--the right of Mrs. Ghulam Kabra, a Kashmiri state subject, to inherit the property to which she was the legal heir was challenged as early as 1939 because she had married a non-state subject, but the High Court legislated that she could inherit the property bequeathed to her by her parents; the right to interrogate totalizing social and cultural institutions; the right to hold political office--Khalida Zia and Sheikh Hassina in Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Najma Heptullah and Mohsina Kidwai in India, my maternal grandmother, Begum Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, in Kashmir, who represented Srinagar and Anantnag constituencies in Jammu and Kashmir in the Indian parliament in from 1977-1979 and 1984 to 1989, respectively, and was the first president of the Jammu&Kashmir Red Cross Society from 1947 to 1951(Lok Sabha, 2000); the right to assert their agency in matters of social and political import; and the right to lead a dignified existence in which they could voice their opinions and desires so as to “act upon the boundaries that constrain and enable social action by, for example, changing their shape or direction” (Hayward, 1998: 27).

Although my maternal grandfather, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, was a nationalist and an idealist, the notion of "Kashmiriyat" wasn't handed down to me an unachievable and abstract construct but, on the contrary, it was crystallized for me as the eradication of a feudal structure and its insidious ramifications; the right of the tiller to the land he worked on; the unacceptability of any political solution that did not take the aspirations and demands of the Kashmiri people into consideration; the right of Kashmiris to high offices in education, bureaucracy, and government; the availability of medical and educational facilities in Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh; the preservation of literatures, shrines, and historical artifacts that defined an important aspect of "Kashmiriyat;" formation of the Constituent Assembly of Jammu & Kashmir to institutionalize the constitution of the state in 1951, which was an enormous leap toward the process of democratization; the fundamental right of both women and men to a free education up to the university level; equal opportunities afforded to both sexes in the work place; the nurturing of a contact zone in social, political, and intellectual ideologies and institutions; pride in a cultural identity that was generated in a space created by multiple perspectives and the ability to look beyond one particular location in order to locate myself in a social world.

I was educated in a Catholic school run by Irish missionaries, although proselytization was never a concern and I learned to respect the richness of other cultural, religious, and literary traditions. Having been influenced by my maternal grandmother, who was part European and part Gujjar, I have never been quite sure who had the authority to say which cultural mores were enforced. My exposure to various cultural, religious, and educational influences has been instrumental in forming my belief that culture is shaped and shapes in multiple ways.

Ethnographic Setting (a segment of the autoethnography?)

My identity as a Western-educated, politically connected Kashmiri woman located in the conservative heartland of America, the Midwest, put me in a rather unique position as a researcher. I come to ethnography from a literary theory background, particularly poststructural and postcolonial theory. Fieldwork in an ethnographic setting has historically been characterized as objective and detached. But the paradigms of objectivity and detachment have been questioned by postmodernism and postcolonialism (Karim, 1993: 248). In order to explore women's empowerment in some militancy ravaged rural areas of Kashmir, I traveled to the villages of Mahiyan and Qazipora in July 2005. These villages are in Tangmarg, a sub-district of Indian occupied Kashmir, which borders Pakistan. The Kashmiri and Gujjar women I met with in predominantly agricultural communities, are work horses on the lands they cultivate but lack the tools to critically understand their reality and the causes creating structural poverty, and do not have the privilege of turning to discourses that subvert the one that brands them as stoic and austere cultural icons who maintain an unsullied homely space. While conducting my research, I found myself constantly beleaguered by the following question: Is the rich complexity in the social and cultural positions of "native women" ignored in order to retain the remnants of colonialist power-knowledge in "[the] appropriation and codification of 'scholarship' and 'knowledge' about women in the third world by particular analytic categories . . ."? (Mohanty 196). Is the version of those women absent from the official record relegated to the archives of memory and history?

Indigenous ethnographers who might be "partial insiders," like me, are able to raise questions about the boundaries of understanding and interpretation: "insiders studying their own culture offer new angles of vision and depths of understanding" (Clifford and Marcus, 1986: 9). My fieldwork required me to balance an insider/outsider perspective which enabled me to become more sensitive to my informants' perspectives and experiences and to avoid fitting them into neat categories. My informants might not have made me privy to all their opinions and ideas because of my foreign appearance, the well-armed security guard who accompanied me, and the fancy equipment I carried with me, but as Bahira Sherif points out in her enriching work on the field research she conducted in Egypt, "all social relations are fluid, unique, and political in nature. Ambiguities and ambivalence are present in all research relationships" (2001: 440).

My research enabled me to realize that despite being unable to overturn the structural determinants of their oppression, the Kashmiri and Gujjar women I talked with are able to negotiate in small spaces. The importance of context must be understood and used to identify items within each boundary appropriate to local circumstances. I asked them questions about the role of women in contemporary Kashmiri society; whether they had ever felt unable to do the things that they wanted because they were women; whether they were familiar with the Dukhtaran-I-Milat; their opinions of the tactics of this organization; whether they would like to see more women serving in positions in government; whether they knew about the Special Operations Group and the Special Task Force; whether they thought the state government had done enough to prevent women from being abused by these groups or others like them; whether they were consulted about household affairs, the education of their children, the number of children they would like to have, the way they should be raised.

All of them had no qualms about functioning as the main socializing agents for

their children and considered the constitution of the mother-son relationship as the nexus of every social relationship in that culture. With their faces turned away from the camera, Hafeeza Begum, Fareeda Akhtar, and Rifat Ara controlled their shy laughter after being berated by their mother-in-law, feisty Haneefa Begum, and sang a medley of folk songs for me in the intimacy of their adobe hut. The folk songs, which were translated for me by Shabeer Ahmad, a Gujjar lawyer, were a doleful rendition of the self-abnegation and loneliness of a young bride who is severed from everything familiar to her and finds herself being ruthlessly molded to fit her new environment. The most articulate of the group was Shabeer's mother who was content to understand historical and social events within the explanatory frameworks of religious and filial obligation. Her stance to the contexts that formed her identity displayed a capacity to act upon the social boundaries that "define fields of action for all actors" (Hayward, 1998: 27).

The women I talked with had cultivated a learned nonchalance to the cruel treatment meted out to women in their husbands' homes and did not think to reprimand the disrespect shown to women who were either barren or widowed, without a male protector. This ostensibly compliant attitude seems to be a strategy of survival in a social setting in which relationships are hierarchically structured, maintaining social and political stasis. The notion of uncompassionate in-laws was a part of their folklore. But it might be easier to imagine the survival strategies that women deploy in that environment if we think of power "not as instruments powerful agents use to prevent the powerless from acting freely, but rather as social boundaries that, together, define fields of action for all actors" (Hayward, 1998: 27). The agency that enables Haneefa, Fareeda Akhtar, and Rifat Ara to survive involves "bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance" (Kabeer, 1999: 438). My goal was to engage in reflective action as an educator working with diverse cultural and social groups. I was challenged to examine my own locations of privilege and seek individual empowerment in order to understand the systems that generated the culture of silence. This culture generates problematic stereotypes, alliances, and biases within the community. The feminist approach I chose to adopt brought to the fore the complicity of the elite in the dominant culture's othering, exclusion, and marginalization of some cultural and social groups. Their narratives of lived experience revealed the interwoven-ness of oppressions of nationalism, classism, regionalism, and sexism. I sought in the collision of modernity and communal memory a horizontal relationship producing intersectional ties between different cultural spaces, times, and ways of knowing the self in relation to the family, society, and the cosmos. Acknowledging our complicity in oppression, re-conceptualizing paradigmatic structures, and mobilizing cultural and political coalitions are riddled with conflict but it is the need of the day for us to engage in these processes.

This aspect of Kashmiri and Gujjar folklore that I mentioned earlier is not exclusive to rural areas and the burden of preserving the notion of its innateness to the culture is taken on by the urban women as well. Subsequent to the dismantling of the feudal economic and social structure in Kashmir in the early fifties, feudal clans and the emasculated nobility clung to their decadent traditions with an unparalleled ferocity. The lack of exposure in those clans to other paradigmatic structures, their insularity, and hollow arrogance encourages the perpetuation of regressive notions like confinement of the woman to the home, her role as mute spectator, her ostensible lack of agency while manipulating the householder to do her bidding by deploying a cunning that would be

difficult to vie with, and a bridgeable distance between the woman of a decrepit feudal clan and her upper middle-middle class counterpart.

Conclusion

Since the pervasion of an exclusive cultural nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and rampant political corruption in Kashmir, it has become a challenge to lead a dignified existence. The armed conflict has changed political combinations and permutations without either disrupting political, social, and gender hierarchies or benefiting marginalized groups. The social, economic, political, and psychological brunt of armed conflict has taken its toll on the populace of Kashmir. The uncertainty created by fifteen years of armed insurgency and counter insurgency has pervaded the social fabric in insidious ways, creating a generation of disaffected and disillusioned youth. The lack of faith in the Indian polity has caused Kashmiris to cultivate an apathy to the electoral process because it is a given that the person best suited to carry out New Delhi's agenda will be installed in a position of political import, regardless of public opinion. The earlier enthusiasm that accompanied democratization seems totally futile in the current leadership vacuum in the state. The lack of accountability in the Jammu and Kashmir polity and bureaucracy has caused a large number of people to toe the line by living with the fundamental structural inequities and violence instead of risking the ire of groups and individuals in positions of authority. The glaring lack of a well-equipped infrastructure in the valley makes unemployment rife and underscores the redundancy of the educated segment of the population. The upsurge of gender-based violence has circumscribed the mobility of women who are caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. I, for one, wouldn't have been able to conduct my field research without the armed body guard my parents provided for me. As a woman, it would have been difficult and dangerous for me to venture into secluded rural areas which are cordoned by paramilitary troops. I wonder if it'll remain a pipe dream to seek full participation for women and men in professional and political life. I do not conform to the view that women are liabilities without political rights. But the problematic of such a situation is that without a transformation of the social and cultural frameworks which create and facilitate the entrenchment of a gender hierarchy, the burden of maintaining home and hearth will shift onto the women without empowering them in their new roles. Will my daughter, Iman, return to a Kashmir in which the majestic chinars cry in unison, "We witness this is the land of Lalla-Ded where 'Kashmiriyat' will thrive till the end of time"?

Notes

1. The Hindu Maharajah of Kashmir, Hari Singh, signed the Instrument of Accession on October 26, 1947, formally acceding to the newly formed nation-state of India. This accession took place under the provisions of the constitution of India which was legitimized on August 15, 1947 and was accepted by the Governor-General, Lord Mountbatten. The subtext of the Instrument of Accession was that the wishes of the Kashmiri people would be taken into consideration once political stability had been established in the newly formed nation-states of India and Pakistan. The United Nations Commission for India and Pakistan decreed a plebiscite for Kashmir on August 13, 1948 and January 5, 1949. Needless to say, a plebiscite was never held (Chadha, 2005; Lamb, 1991; Madhok, 1963; Rai, 2004). A pledge not redeemed was “that made on behalf of the Indian nation by Jawaharlal Nehru in November 1947 to consult, through a referendum, the wishes of the Kashmiri people on the state’s accession to the Indian union” (Rai, 2004: 289). See Lamb (1991) for discussions about the legitimacy of the Instrument of Accession.

2. As Judith Butler explains, “the reconceptualization of identity as an effect, that is as produced and generated opens up possibilities of ‘agency’ that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed” (1993: 147). Butler locates agency in possibilities created in the variability of spaces that create identity.

3. Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, popularly known as the Lion of Kashmir, reigned as the Prime Minister of Jammu & Kashmir from 1948-1953. When the pledge to hold a referendum was not kept by the Indian government, Abdullah’s advocacy of independence of Kashmir led to his imprisonment. He was shuttled from one jail to the other until 1972 and remained out of power until 1975. During the period of Abdullah’s incarceration, Congress Party-led governments in New Delhi made their covert arrangements with puppet regimes installed by them. “For over three decades, in return for their endorsement of Kashmir’s accession, these selected politicians received the most generous grants-in-aid disbursed by the Indian center to any state” (Rai, 2004: 289). Prior to the 1975 accord between the Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah-led National Conference and the Indira Gandhi-led Congress, Abdullah demanded the revocation of all central laws extended to the state that delegitimized the popular demand for plebiscite. The then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, forged an accord with Abdullah in 1975 by promising to partially restore the autonomy of the state by revoking certain central laws that had arbitrarily been imposed on Jammu and Kashmir. The same year Abdullah returned as the Chief Minister of the state. Sheikh Abdullah and his National Conference won an overwhelming victory in the election of 1977 and he remained in office until his death in 1982 (Copland, 1991; Lamb, 1991; Singh, 1995).

4. My maternal grandmother, Begum Akbar Jehan’s maiden name was “Nedou.” She was part Austrian and part Gujjar. Gujjars are a pastoral people who trace their lineage to the Rajputs of Rajasthan (Lidhoo, 1987).

5. This project was funded by the College of Fine Arts and Humanities and the Department of English at the University of Nebraska-Kearney.

6. The Gujjar women I met with during my field research were distant clanswomen of my grandmother’s.

7. A subject-effect can be briefly plotted as follows: that which seems to operate as a subject may be a part of an immense discontinuous network (“text” in the general sense)

of strands that may be termed politics, economics, history, sexuality, language, and so on. Different knottings and configurations of these strands, determined by heterogeneous determinations, which are themselves dependent upon myriad circumstances, produce the effect of an operating subject. (Spivak, 1988: 260).



Gujjar Matriarchs in Paradisiacal Ferozpora
Photo credit: Shabir

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