

Interrogation of Feminist aspects in Kashmiri Women Writings

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Abstract

Kashmir is a land blessed with incomparable beauty and cursed with seemingly interminable turmoil. Both these things usually create a very fertile ground for powerful literature. Furthermore, Kashmir possesses a rich literary heritage that goes back many centuries. There is a vast literature in Sanskrit that was produced in Kashmir, including possibly the best and most scientific work of history that ancient India saw, Kalahana's Rajatarangini. But great literature in the valley wasn't limited to ancient period or even Sanskrit. Some of the major names in contemporary Kashmiri literature, apart from the ones mentioned above are Chaman Lal Raina, Akhtar Mohiuddin, Amin Kamil, Ali Mohammed Noor, Rafiq Raaz, Gulshan Majid, Shafi Shauk, Somnath Zutshi, Nazi Munnawar Nagrad, Mohiuddin Rishi, Gulam Nabi Aatish, Makkhan Lal Mahav, Sunita Raina Pandita and Ratan Lal Shant. But in the opinion of Raina, one of the greatest names in Modern Kashmiri literature is the noted playwright and short story writer Hari Krishna Kaul. There are other great contributors also like Gulam Nabi Khayal who has translated Omar Khayyam's Rubaiyat into Kashmir and has received the Sahitya Akademi Award for it. Another great name is that of playwright Moti Lal Kemmu who was presented with the Padma Shri in 2012. There are other great contributors also, like Gulam Nabi Khayal, who has translated Omar Khayyam's Rubaiyat into Kashmiri and has received the Sahitya Akademi Award for it. According to Raina, "The novel takes the ancient traditions of Kashmiri literature and combines it with the style of modern Indian literature." In the novel, says Raina, "Wasturvan is a forest that is a metaphor for Kashmir and the novel seeks to portray the story of Kashmir in an extensive manner." But how has the political troubles in the valley affected the writers? On this point, Raina believes that Kashmiri Pandit writers, after their exodus, "have started writing, what they call, literature of displacement which contains their pain and angst at having to leave their homeland". But Raina also assures that literature continues to bring people together and the community of Kashmiri writers is not divided.

Women writers in Kashmir have been writing from medieval times but very few of their works were published. This being the reason, they are absent in the literary history of contemporary Kashmir, despite the fact that Kashmiri literature is almost synonymous with the poetry of medieval mystic women poets like Lal Ded, Rupa Bhawani, Habba Khatoon and Arinilal. Hanifa Begum, Taj Begum Renzu and Shamla Mufti are the first women writers in Kashmiri prose, and started writing in the 1950s.

Key words: feminism, interrogation, Kashmir, women writing, regional, religious.

Introduction

As the Kashmiri language grew and evolved, a new and beautiful literature flowered. This literature was initially nourished by the two great streams of spirituality that flowed in Kashmir, Shaivism and Sufism. In the 14th century, a great Shaivite mystic poetess, Lalleshwari, rose to prominence by writing verse in Kashmiri language known as Vakhs, devoted to Lord Shiva but also questioning certain dogmas related to religion. While she was a devotee of Shiva, her poetry had a profound influence upon people cutting across religious boundaries. She inspired many Sufis and one of them, Sheikh Noor-ud-Din-Wali, rose to prominence in the 15th century. His poetry didn't just influence spiritual thought but also popular culture, and his verses are

sung to this day in Kashmir on festivals and special occasions by both Hindus and Muslims. These two pioneers paved the way for Kashmiri language to become rich in literary heritage. In modern times, a new wave of litterateurs arrived on the scene to add modern ideas and themes to this heritage.

Dr Gauri Shankar Raina, one of the foremost figures in the world of Kashmiri literature and someone who has edited and translated several important books of Kashmiri poetry and prose, talked to Guardian 20 and gave a detailed insight into the course of development of this literature and the important writers who have affected it. He also recently edited and translated into Hindi the most notable stories of Rehman Rahi, the first Kashmiri writer to receive the Gyanpeeth award. According to Dr Raina, Kashmiri literature is rich in poetry as that has been the preferred mode of artistic expression in the valley. One name that stands out among the poets is Dinanath Nadim, who, according to Dr Raina, "introduced a new kind of free verse poetic style in the Kashmiri language". One of his poems was turned into the famous song, "Bhumbro bhumbro" in the 2000 Bollywood film Mission Kashmir. Apart from this he also holds the distinction of writing the first short story in Kashmiri called Jawabi Card. Dr Raina informed Guardian 20 that a new wave of writers emerged post-Independence in Kashmir who, like their counterparts in other parts of the country, were influenced by Marxist ideology. Kashmir also had its own Progressive Writers Association. However, he says that, "it was only after they moved beyond Marxism that they discovered their own unique and independent poetic voice". Another great name is that of playwright Moti Lal Kemmu who was presented with the Padma Shri in 2012.

One area where Kashmiri literature has lagged behind, according to Raina, is the genre of novels. He feels there are only around a dozen worthwhile novels that have been written in Kashmiri. But he sees a major breakthrough in this field in the form of a novel titled Lion of Wasturvan that consists of around 700 pages and has been written by the author Chaman Lal Hakhoo.

Shamla Mufti's collection of plays titled Aes Lukh (We, the people) was published in 1977. Her plays helped in raising awareness about gender-related issues. Her autobiography titled Myen Kath (My Story) which was published in 1990s offers insight into a woman's struggle to make her voice heard in a literary world dominated by men. Taj Begum Renzu, besides being a short story writer was also an important political activist. She began writing in the 1950s. Her collection of short stories published in 1968, discusses gender issues and related questions of social change and cultural transformation. She was also the editor of a Kashmiri weekly Koshur Akhbar (Kashmiri Newspaper) in the 1970s. In the late 1990s, a political and cultural activist Atiqa Bano started a Kashmiri weekly Miraas (Heritage). This was an important and plucky step which unfortunately didn't last for a long time. But her effort must be appreciated since this was the time when the Valley was going through a dreadful time when women could hardly come out of their houses because of the prevailing political conditions and women were ordered to strictly follow the Islamic dress code. There were some other women writers at this period like Hajra Parvez, Raina, Fiza Khatoon, Aisha Mastoor, Abida Ahmed, Feroza Shauq and Zeba Zeenat. The younger generation of Kashmiri women writers include Rafiqa Bashir, Muneera Fatima, Rukhshanda Rashid, Razia Shabnam, Shamima Tabassum, Darakshan Andrabi, Saba Shaheen, Shagufta Nasreen and Sadaf Ghazala. By the 1970s, Kashmiri women were not only writing poetry or short stories but also critical and philosophical essays.

Objective:

This paper intends to explore Feminist ideology as revealed in Kashmiri women writings.

Kashmiri feminist literature historical perspective

Although a large part of ancient literature in Kashmir was written in non-Kashmiri languages it, nevertheless, bears a close affinity with the Kashmiri Language. Several Sanskrit poets and writers of Kashmir have also written in Kashmiri. Likewise, many Kashmiri poets and writers have been influenced by the work of Sanskrit poets and literature. During the Prakrit era, Buddhist scholars wrote some books in Kashmiri for the propagation of their religion. "Miland Panha" and "Brihad Katha" are examples of this literature. Later during the Muslim period prior to 1470 AD. some religious texts were rendered into Kashmiri for purposes of propagation of Islam but no trace of these manuscripts is found now. Three stalwarts stand out as the true founders of Kashmiri literature. They are Shitikanth (13th Century), author of Mahanai Prakash "Lal Ded (b. 1335/50) and Nund Reshi (b. 1377). "Banasur Katha," composed around 1446 AD by Avtar Bhatt, is another early specimen of Kashmiri literature, Persian dominated from the beginning Of Mughal rule (1586) right upto the end of the Muslim period, in 1819. Vaakh (Short, crisp saying) was the characteristic of the earliest verse. It reached its zenith in the time of Lal Ded. Shitikanth, who lived 100 years earlier and also wrote vaakhs was perhaps the first poet of Kashmir. Nund Reshi too wrote Vaakhs which, however, came to be termed as shruk (a Corrupt form of shalok! Vatsun is a long poem of four line stanzas, the last line of all stanzas being common.

The history of Kashmiri literature during the 15th century and the first half of the 16th century is clouded in oblivion. The famous queen-songstress, Habba Khatoon, born in 1541, innovated the genre of melodious 101 lyrics which are matched only by those of Arnimaal of the eighteenth century. Both of them had undergone similar physical and mental trauma. The celebrated Rup Bhavani of the early eighteenth century also wrote delectable Vaakhs and Vatsuna in the tradition of Lal Ded. Mirza Kak, also of this period, wrote Vaakhs which were published 126 years after his death in 1934. Literary history repeated itself in Kashmir towards the end of the 18th Century when —like Habba Khatoon--Arnimaal, the deserted wife of a scholar and savant, Munshi Bhavani Dass Kachru, poured out her heart's agony in titillation 101 lyrics full of such grief, pathos and poignancy that could not be surpassed by any other poet after her.

We find this lovelorn, passionate and distressed woman, Arnimaal (d. 1801), knocking at the portals of the 19th century with a unique wailing and yearning, an intensity of feeling, touching means and sobs, dismay and frustration and a vain but cherished hope of reunion with her husband whom the Afghans had exterrned from Kashmir. The whole flora and fauna, brooks, lakes and mountains seemed to echo her heartbeats. After this brief review of the ancient and medieval literature of Kashmir and the venous genres used by the poets and writers of those days, I may now legitimately turn to the main aim of this articles --- introducing to the reader the commendable work done by Shn Prithvi Nath Razdan, well-known elderly journalist, educationist and literateur of Kashmir, who is now living a life of forced migration in Jammu in the form of the present volume, entitled "Gems of Kashmiri and Kashmriyat--- Trio of Saint poets

Feminism in Kashmriyat

Writers like Naseem Shafai, Bimla Raina, Suneeta Raina, Tarannum Reyaz and Mehfooza Jan are rare exceptions and are in the forefront of the new wave of women's writing in Kashmir. Despite the fact that most of what they write doesn't get published, women generally and women writers particularly feel that they write because they want people to listen to their sufferings. For instance, one of the contemporary writers, Zamrooda Habib who was imprisoned for quite some time feels it was important to document her "sacrifices." She says: I think everybody has a story to tell and I cannot find any reason not to

document my humiliation in jail and torture in that black cage. I feel there is an urgent need of documenting our own sacrifices and pain. Nobody other than our own selves knows what we have gone through. It was difficult for me to write it down as I had to recall all the ugly episodes of my life and go through that pain again. She feels that the world totally changed for her when she came out of jail and the problem of not being able to connect with people affected her emotionally. "Writing seemed an option to share my pain, it worked as a vent," she added. Neerja Mattoo, 30 a writer, translator, academic and social activist believes that pluralism in Kashmiri society, sense of togetherness and cosmopolitan society prompted her to write. It is generally believed that in war, women not only suffer as biological entities but as collective social beings as well. One of my respondents said that in case of a rape, the honour of a family becomes the dominant discourse rather than the violation of a woman's body.

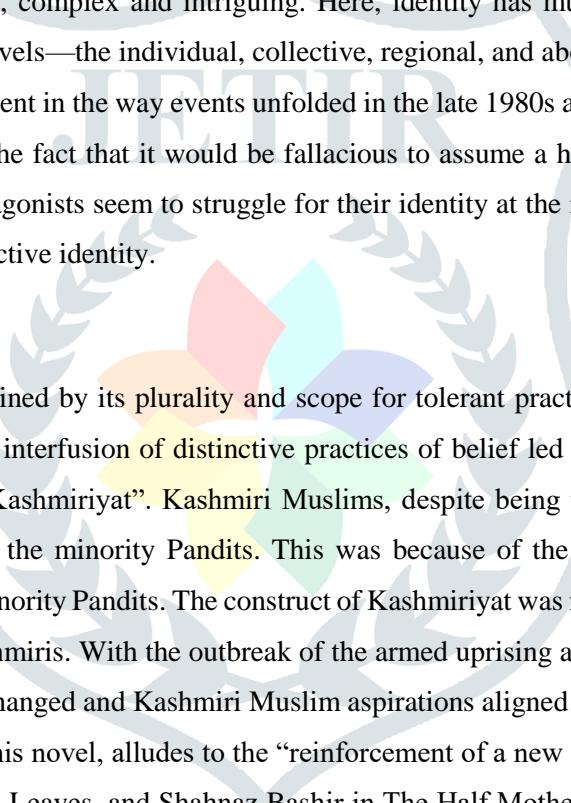
Instead of supporting her, people demoralize her by talking time and again about the problems they will face to find a life partner. One can only imagine the trauma women go through. I feel that this is not all. When we talk about a raped woman, it should not be about the honour of the family, the trauma a woman goes through but also about the pain and agony that a father, brother, son, husband of the victim. A relevant example is the Shopian rape/murder case of 2009 in Kashmir when the victim's father after facing the trauma and questions from the people declared that his daughter was killed and not raped. One can only imagine the degree of trauma he would have gone through. I am sure there are hundreds and thousands of such cases.

Feminism in the international and Kashmir local setting

In the book titled War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa, Joshua S. Goldstein talks about rape of women in wars in different countries of the world, giving examples of countless cases of rape in Netherlands by Spanish troops in 17th century, rapes during the Partition of India and Pakistan, rape of surviving women by the members of California Volunteers during US Civil War, Mozambique in 1991, Libya, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Uganda, Algeria, Indonesia, Kashmir and Burma. He further argues that rape as an instrument of violence is used, stemming from "different motivations in various wars - revenge for Russian soldiers in Berlin in 1945, frustration for US soldiers in Vietnam, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia..." This is further explained by Groth et al, who identify three basic patterns of rape in an article titled "Rape, Power, Anger and Sexuality." These are: anger rape,³⁶ in which sexuality becomes a hostile act, power rape, in which sexuality becomes an expression of conquest and sadist rape, in which anger and power become eroticized.³⁷ (Groth, Burgess and Hulmstrom 1239-1243) It thus explains that rape of a woman has been used as "an instrument of ethnic cleansing,"³⁸ as an instrument of territorial control, to humiliate and terrorize a population for ages together. It does arise from different specific motivations like revenge and frustration for the enemies. Historically, rape in war seems to humiliate enemy males since "in almost every society women are seen as the property of a man and represent the honour of the male, the family and the community," writes Nirmala Sathe in an article titled "Rape as a Means of Terrorization of Dalit and Tribal Women"³⁹ (Nirmala 144-151). Therefore, to destroy the dignity of the group, women of the class/caste/community/region are raped, which is "the most humiliating way of torture." She thus argues that rape is used as a means of political torture, and as a terrorizing and punitive mechanism against women. Joyce P. Kaufman and Kristen P. Williams quote Coomaraswamy who argues that the recent wars in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda and Kosovo point to the fact that sexual violence can be central instrument of terror especially in campaigns that involve fratricide or nationalist wars. She also argues that both rape and sexual violence "have been used to assert dominance over one's enemy. Since woman's sexuality is seen as being under the protection of men of the community, its defilement is an act of domination over the males of the community or group that is under attack" (Kaufman and Williams 38).

In truly bringing Kashmiri literary tradition on to the international scene, the eminent poet Agha Shahid Ali could be seen as a prime example. He was certainly one of the first true voices from Kashmir who produced fine poetry in English. Among the various literary narratives published in the recent years, many important works of fiction which have caught readers' attention worldwide are Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator* and *The Book of Gold Leaves*, Shahnaz Bashir's *The Half Mother* and *The Scattered Souls*, Siddhartha Gigoo's *The Garden of Solitude* and *Mehr*, and Nitasha Kaul's *Residue*, to mention a few. Memoirs like Sudha Koul's *The Tiger Ladies* and Basharat Peer's *The Curfewed Night* are other literary feats. Poets like Subhash Kak, K.L. Chowdhari, Lalita Pandit and Mohammad Zahid are also being increasingly recognised in the literary circles. All these writers mainly write in English as they yearn for a global audience to hear and read the narrations which tell the stories of their experience of a very complex lived reality. In many ways, these writings indicate the beginning of the phase of Kashmiri English writing tradition.

All this brings to the fore the crux of the matter, that is, the issue of identity. In the context of the situation in Kashmir, the concept of identity is extremely crucial, complex and intriguing. Here, identity has multiple facets and also a differential composition; it operates also on many levels—the individual, collective, regional, and above all, religious. The complexity of the issue of identity becomes all too evident in the way events unfolded in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The aforementioned texts under study bring to prominence the fact that it would be fallacious to assume a homogenous conception of Kashmiri identity. In all these narratives, the protagonists seem to struggle for their identity at the individual level, but they find that it has a close bearing upon the larger collective identity.



For centuries, Kashmiri culture was defined by its plurality and scope for tolerant practices of diverse faiths and ideas that wove people together in harmony. This interfusion of distinctive practices of belief led to the articulation of a new cultural identity which came to be known as "Kashmiriyat". Kashmiri Muslims, despite being the majority, found themselves at a disadvantageous position in contrast to the minority Pandits. This was because of the disproportionate division of socio-economic privileges that favoured the minority Pandits. The construct of Kashmiriyat was manipulated to overlook the growing political and economic demands of Kashmiris. With the outbreak of the armed uprising against the Indian state in late 1980s, the nature of discontent and resistance changed and Kashmiri Muslim aspirations aligned with the appeal to religious identity. To bring this out, Siddhartha Gigoo, in his novel, alludes to the "reinforcement of a new cultural identity." Mirza Waheed, in *The Collaborator* and *The Book of Gold Leaves*, and Shahnaz Bashir in *The Half Mother*, also recount the surge of people's religious passions with the onset of the armed movement.

Feminist literature amidst conflict

As the conflict and conflicting opinions, pertaining to Kashmir, continue to perpetuate each other, writing and research is likely to unfold new perspectives in the time to come. This can be stated with some certainty as it is now an established fact that narration or narratives—whether factual or fictional—do not describe reality in absolute terms only; rather, they attempt to present fresh perceptions and dimensions that offer new trajectories of reality. The writer of a work of literature does not aim at presenting historical facts in the same way that a historian does. Instead, he looks beyond facts to the spirit underlying those facts. This lends credence to the fact that an event, which might have a mere statistical importance for a historian or a journalist, could reveal many underlying angles of perception when presented in a work of fiction.

The narratives are mainly structured round and alternate between the present, “now”, and the past, “then”. The narratives do remember the Kashmir of the past in which the stream of life flowed smoothly, when militancy did not exist, and when life flowed along an even tenor. During the days of armed militancy, peace departed, and honour and security of life also took their leave. With their departure, a besieged people learnt to live under the shadow of the gun. The life and honour of people were at the mercy of the gun-toting armed forces and the militants. The sense of loss is especially made palpable through human loss that is defined and depicted in terms of killings, tortures, rapes, injuries, other forms of physical coercion, and even a huge displacement of a large section of population as portrayed in *The Garden of Solitude*.

It has to be said that contemporary Kashmiri English writing seems to have been more significantly influenced by the specific historical conditions pertaining to the conflict than the writings in other languages. This is in no way to demean the artistic or literary features in these writings which have retained the literary purity amidst all the topicality. On the contrary, it supposedly suggests a general historical reality wherein a literary culture is born and bred among certain specific historical and material conditions—conflict and violence in this case. Besides these poets and writers, many other young people are taking to different artistic expression like poetry, music, painting and graphic arts to express their profound angst at the existing conditions of the conflict. In significant ways, these writings provide witness to many profound issues like identity, justice, struggle, and oppression which are usually absent in the mainstream narratives on/of Kashmir. In doing so, these writings provide an alternative and heterogeneous account of a reality that seems to counter the view of the mainstream discourses that neglect very basic and yet very important facets of Kashmir's reality and experience.

Conclusion

One major debate related to Kashmiri language is its linguistic ancestor. Opinion is divided between those who feel that Kashmiri descended from the Dardic family of languages and those who see it as a progeny of Sanskrit. Dr Raina is certain that Sanskrit, that too its Vedic variety, was the forefather of Kashmiri but doesn't feel that this is a big issue. The question of which script should be used for writing the language is also debated. While writers in Kashmir continue to use the Persian script, those outside the valley are inclined towards using Devanagari. Amid all this, the ancient script of Kashmir, Sharda, is in serious danger of becoming extinct. Raina is concerned about its future: “Very few people understand the Sharda script so why would anyone write in it. As long as it is not recognised and taught to young students, it will remain marginalised.” Two leading scholars of Kashmiri, Dr Shashi Shekhar Toshkhani and Professor T.N. Banjoo have been working hard to keep the Sharda script alive but it remains an uphill task.

Inspite of all the political trouble, the world of Kashmiri literature is alive and active. Dr Raina, who has spent nearly four decades in the literary world, is happy about the interest and desire shown by Kashmiri authors for having their works translated into Hindi, “The writers want to reach a bigger audience and hence they are very keen to have their works translated into Hindi.” The one thing holding back the Kashmiri language is the lack of institutions dedicated to it outside the state. While there are students in the valley who are doing research on this beautiful language, it will benefit greatly if there are more faculties of it in premier institutions. While visiting Kashmir is a special experience for travellers, diving into the treasure trove of Kashmiri literature has to be an equally beautiful experience.

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