

## **Identity, Agency and Aspirations: Reflections on the Woman Question in the Literary Writings from Kashmir**

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### **Abstract:**

The canon of literature from Kashmir has been dominated by the works of male writers and has remained insensitive towards the voices of women in conflict. Literature is the mirror of a society and it not only gives an insight about hopes and aspirations of the writer, but also exposes fears and insecurities of the people it represents through its pages. However, denying this space to the women of Kashmir over the years has only suppressed their voices silenced their experiences and ignored their realities. This article through a critical reading of Naseem Shafaie's collection of poems, Neither a Shadow Nor a Reflection, and Nitasha Kaul's novel, Residue, aims to explore the plight of these women amidst an armed conflict, the factors that influence their writings and records their struggle to dissociate from the ideologies that have only showcased them as submissive, passive and unassertive members of the Kashmiri society. This article thus intends on reading and analysing the voices that strive to become a part of the literary canon, to establish a discrete tradition of women from Kashmir within it, and

aim to place them and their writings at par with the larger framework of women's literature from around the world.

**Keywords:** Kashmiri Women, Literary Tradition, Women's Writings, Conflict

### **Introduction**

This article seeks to bring to light the issues addressed by the women writers from Kashmir by focusing on two such literary works that not only are representatives of the voices of the women of the margins but also endeavour to bring to light the affects of an age old and an ongoing conflict and along with it the rigid norms of the society on the individuality and agency of the women of Kashmir. Their works do not only explore and reflect the longing of female consciousness to desire, dream and aspire but to also find an expression in a disturbed political and a biased social setting. Naseem Shafaie is a new age poetess and the first woman from Kashmir to have won the prestigious Sahitya

Akademi Award for her contribution to the literature of Kashmir. In *Neither a Shadow Nor a Reflection*, she exposes the influence of the conflict on the everyday lives of these women who are also caught up in the traditional patriarchal customs and paints a picture of their determination to resist and survive through it. Her work is highly influenced by the culture and the troubled life of the place she lives in and her experiences have a bearing on her poetic expressions. She is critical of the ideology that confines her existence into the canvas of male gaze and wants to break free of the representations of body and desire that have been used over the years to portray a certain image of the women from Kashmir (Shafaie 48- 49). Nitasha Kaul is an academic and the first woman writer from Kashmir to write a novel in English. She through the depiction of her female protagonist in her novel, *Residue* addresses the plight of Kashmiri Pandit women who were uprooted from their homes in the armed conflict of Kashmir and since then have lived their lives in exile, facing difficulties in surviving in alien territories, sticking to their precious memories of home and finding ways of passing it on to the younger generations as a legacy.

Both the works contain in them brutal realities and are repositories of the memories of a shared past and of their

collective pain and sufferings. A re-reading of the experiences of women in conflict, through the literature produced by women writers gives expression to the unheard voices that have struggled to be defined in an unbiased way and find a place in the literary canon. It is through their literature that their stories strive to be heard, their passivity protests to act and their repression sets to deconstruct multiple identities strung around them. In a conflict, representation of experiences of women through literature becomes an act of protest against all the socio-political forces that did not provide them access to this space and at the same time challenge the dominant tradition of male supremacy, not just in the society but also in the larger literary tradition.

### **Women and the Kashmir Conflict**

Women in Kashmir have suffered irrespective of their religious backgrounds. Both Kashmiri Muslim and Kashmiri Hindu women have had to bear the brunt of the political conflict in Kashmir post 1989 as there was a surge in the extremist activities in the valley. This resulted in an increase in violence in the state which gravely affected the normal life of the people of the valley, women and children being the worst sufferers in the entire situation. Radha Kumar in her book, *Paradise at War: A Political History of Kashmir*, gives a detailed account of the changing politics of the

state of Jammu and Kashmir. The Kashmir conflict, as she discusses, has its roots in the partition of India and Pakistan and to this day continues to be a hotbed of political tensions between the two nations (Kumar 2018). The continued acts of violence and the uncertainty of events led to the imposition of restrictions on the mobility and free will of women and further pushed them towards the margins. A chain of events post 1989 that were aimed to cater to religious extremism in the valley led to the exodus of the Kashmiri Pandit community and their forced displacement from their homeland. All these circumstances created a hostile environment and a sentiment of fear for Kashmiri Pandits who were concerned about the safety of their women and hence were forced to migrate to new and unknown lands. Ironically the experiences of Kashmiri Pandit and Kashmiri Muslim women have since then remained outside the political history of the Kashmir conflict (Malhotra 71-80).

Caught amidst the quagmire of exclusion and suppression, a woman from Kashmir becomes the other, an outsider whose experience, tradition and voice is too bizarre to understand for the men around her and unfamiliar for those women who do not relate and empathise with her struggles. However, breaching the walls of silence, women writers from Kashmir talk about the experiences of women

they have grown up watching and in the process fill their absences in the history by narrating their stories. Amidst the narratives of hope, faith, endurance and survival, these women try to subvert the established norms and their works reflect their quest and struggle to define and rediscover their selves. They also focus on how the conflicting and yet overlapping identities of being a socially excluded gender and a minority in a conflict situation act individually and together as one.

### **Female Identity, Agency and Violence in Conflict: Gendered Constructs**

Shafaie and Kaul talk about how various dominant socio-political forces affect the everyday lives and mar the creativity of women in a conflict. Women in Kashmir, find it difficult to exercise their agency and will. With practically no control over their lives, they find it difficult to transgress the rigid boundaries and various layers of identities that clothe their existence. As the title of the collection of her poems, *Neither a Shadow Nor a Reflection* suggests, Naseem Shafaie refuses to be seen as a mere shadow or a reflection-formless, inexistent and illusory. Her verses are suggestive of the themes of the woman question- their identity, agency and aspirations. She wants to dissociate with all such categorisations that relate a woman's existence to being dependent on men and value their worth only in relation

to the dominant male supremacy. Dismissing the beliefs that the identity of women is dependent on the roles they attain in the society of being selfless mothers, dutiful wives and perfect daughters, she is on a quest to explore and establish her identity separate from this rigorous order and have an authority over her choices concerning all aspects of her life (Shafaie 1- 3). Her poems reflect her longing to search for her real self which is evident from the following lines:

I am not like you, the imprint of your dreams, You have your own being and I have my own; if you want to race with me, a defiant competitor in me you find, a different individual, you have to accept. (34- 37).

The word identity is conflicting in itself, referring to both uniformity and diversity that either makes people similar to one another or at the same time is used as a distinguishing scale to mark dissimilarities among people. Its contradictions increase when the term is used in relation to women. Female identity goes on establishing itself through a process in which the society adds layers to their primary essence of being an individual at every step through various institutions and channels. Throughout the lives of women, the self is defined only through social relationships, their gendered roles and the interactions of their self with others. Gender, being

an important parameter of one's identity works in the society by deliberating power relations as it goes across various channels of social interactions at any platform. These power relations attributed to different genders along with the intersections of other identity parameters like caste, class, race, and ethnicity give rise to distinctions and differences in the society. Interactions of these multiple identity traits with the pre-existing vulnerabilities of gender further create various dimensions of disempowerment at different levels (Parekh 21-24, 61).

In another of her poem, "The Girl Child", Shafaie addresses how the idea of female identity is constructed socially and culturally on two binaries where on one hand women who honour and fulfil all the expectations of the society without questioning them are put on a pedestal and are labelled as saints or goddesses, while on the other hand those who oppose and challenge the norms laid down by the patriarchal setup of the society are categorized as witches or prostitutes (15-16). In "A Soundless City", the image of a bird is used by her as a metaphor to signify the women of Kashmir whose voices are suppressed and hence are not allowed to sing melodious songs of hope and peace (17-18).

Keya Raina, the female protagonist of Nitasha Kaul's novel is a Kashmiri Pandit who witnessed the exodus of

her community as a child. Keya's story is weaved around the traumatic history of her people and the loss of their home and identity. In her novel, Kaul talks about what the conflict did to the psyche of the third generation migrants who do not belong anywhere and feel lost. The residue of the past of their parents and grandparents is the only link that connects them to their roots. Keya is a scholar whose interest lies in reading experiences of people living in exile and relates it to her own and gathers comfort through their memories. Her love for Kashmir was inherited by her from her father's tales about the culture and the beauty of life in the valley. She felt that she belonged to Kashmir more than she ever belonged to any other place. Her father was the only link that connected her to Kashmir and even taught her the art of making Kashmiri handicrafts and cooked authentic Kashmiri meals with her which represented the essence of belonging somewhere and of having a home. These were important acts of reassurance on part of her father to establish a link of his home and his memories with his daughter. Kaul through her work also wants to establish how circumstances change people and perceptions overnight. Her novel is filled with deliberate silences that echo the wrath and plight of the displaced people and especially of the women of Kashmir who are caught up in the complex web of multiple identities and have this constant fear

of getting lost and forgotten with time. They feel that they belong nowhere and yearn for a home they can call their own (Karmakar 80-87). She talks about all womenfolk from Kashmir who have suffered in all kinds of ways in the Kashmir conflict. Women who got displaced from their homes had to go through extreme situations to resettle in refugee camps outside Kashmir and had to work tirelessly to make ends meet. Over the years they have struggled to have a voice and be heard. Their forced displacement altered their identities and changed their realities forever. It had a huge impact on the physical and psychological health of women and children. Their circumstances also brought about a negative change in their personal and social relationships (Sawhney and Mehrotra 83-99). Urvashi Butalia in *Speaking Peace: Women's Voices from Kashmir* writes about the experiences of women from Kashmiri Pandit community as,

The grave human tragedy began with the persecution and genocide, kidnappings and a spree of killings, torture, rape, murder and molestation of women, even little children and young girls were not spared... A large number have suffered mental breakdown due to stress, terror, violence and genocide. Behavioural syndromes, psychological disorders, depression, panic attacks and phobias have seized all age groups. (182-184).

In her poem “We Are Different”, Shafaie points out that the women of Kashmir are different from others as they don't run freely in the open pastures to chase new possibilities but their dreams and aspirations are put down together by the pressures of the society and the terrifying conflict. They are different as per her because their mothers wail endlessly and their pain and helplessness echo in their cries. It is their struggles and hopes that are reflected through her poems (67). Addressing these women through their works, Naseem Shafaie and Nitasha Kaul urge them to seek themselves, escape from the hold of their inner conflicts, reject the society's perception of them, assert their individuality, break the moulds of expectations and redefine themselves.

Women experience the conflict differently and go through their own struggles in it. Society as a process defines identities and forms structures that in turn define the position of a group or community in it. The difference in the social conduct further shapes these ideologies that promote unequal gender relationships, giving rise to a patriarchal structure in a society. Patriarchy is not just a set of assumptions but a way of thinking that gets manifested and translated into the society and its various structures. It is due to the belief that authority and power are to be in the hands of the socially accepted

stronger sex i.e. male, the concept of a female as an inferior sex gets created. Patriarchy manifests itself in the everyday lives of women living in fear of an armed conflict and the everyday episodes of violence in ways that make them vulnerable to suffer more and exposes them to various forms of physical and psychological trauma. The acts of sexual violence in a patriarchal society that is also witnessing an armed conflict are to be read differently from the episodes of sexual violence elsewhere. Pitaway and Bartolomei in their research article, “Refugees, Race and Gender: The Multiple Discrimination against Refugee Women” argue that women in conflict, “are targeted not only because they are women, but because they are certain women- it becomes an act of intersectional discrimination implicating gender, ethnic and national, etc, identities- a cause for international human rights law concern” (Pitaway and Bartolomei 27). Thus, sexual violence on women acts as a symbol of oppression and a display of power over the weaker group in a conflict situation. Urvashi Butalia in the context of partition of India and Pakistan through her work, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, points out how the idea of a nation is always equated to the idea of a woman, both represented in the form a territory, wanting to be won over, protected and controlled by a superior male authority. This metaphor that

symbolises a control over not just the bodies of women but also their sexuality is used as a tool to destroy the honour of a particular community and to claim their rights over them and holds true for the women of Kashmir as well. In this process, sexuality of these women in a conflict is not just violated but its control is transferred from their 'own', who earlier controlled it, to the 'others'. Violence that is direct or indirect, psychological or physical or both does not remain limited to the public sphere but pervades through the fragile walls and enters the home as well, making the personal and the public one. A conflict changes reality not just in the outside world, but also creates transformations within the boundaries of the home affecting relationships (186-192).

Mushtaq Ul Haq Ahmad Sikander in "Women in Conflict: Surviving and Struggling in Kashmir" takes stock of the situation post 1989 in which the armed conflict in Kashmir forced women to make compromises with their circumstances and live their lives in fear of unpleasant uncertainties. A large number of women in Kashmir are half-widows; a term used for women whose husbands have disappeared but there is no proof of their death and hence remain untraceable. They wait hopelessly for the return of their husbands and live in dire conditions. Neither can they move on in their lives as they cannot be officially

pronounced as widows, nor are they given their husband's share in the inheritance. Besides this, as soon as they enter the public sphere in search of a livelihood they are looked down upon in the society (23-24). The petrifying images in the following verse, "The playful birds stifled their melodious warble, / the fairies' song was wailing of the Inn of Mourning" are suggestive of the gloomy hearts that suffer silently (17- 18). These are the hearts of mothers who have lost their sons, of wives who keep waiting for their husbands to return from nowhere and of women who dream of returning back to their homes one day (Shafaie 54). Many women suffer psychologically because of increased stress that their circumstances create. Amidst difficult state of affairs, they are compelled to shoulder responsibilities all on their own, both outside as well as within the home and create liveable conditions for their children and themselves. Most of them get exploited at work places owing to their lack of experience and unsuitable qualifications or skills required for the job. Not just this, women in Kashmir has been time and again forced to wear the veil. After the inception of armed insurgency in the early nineties, women were threatened with acid attacks and even were harassed publicly for not doing so. Extremist organisations introduced a dress code to differentiate between Hindu and Muslim women. The fundamental fractions even tried to

control reproductive rights of the women as it was declared by them that using contraception and going for abortions is against Islam and all those who went for it would bear the consequences (Sikander 21- 23).

### **Conflict Creating Constructive Spaces and Opportunities to Grow**

Shafaie talks about how women have put together intimate spaces of female companionships and friendships to cope up with the horrors of the everyday happenings in the conflict and these alliances are shaped by the need to have a medium to express themselves and talk about their shared experiences of loss, grief and joys. The need to have a space of their own in turn manifests through this need for a collective, a support system which these companionships provide. These intimate spaces help keep the memories of the past alive and it is through these memories they are united in sorrow and in happiness (Diana and Sandell 287-296). Similarly in Residue, Kaul establishes that her protagonist after having experienced exodus herself had grown empathetic towards the experiences of people living in exile all around the world and had made her more compassionate towards them as a result of which she valued relationships and understood the importance of community bonds.

The conflict has helped build cohesiveness among the women in Kashmir. Naseem Shafaie talking

about the wounds and blisters on women's bodies in her poems is referring to the hardships and resolve of their grandmothers and mothers that was passed on as inheritance, to be treasured and carried forward by them. Speaking of shared experiences and shared pain in her poem, "The Sunset", she talks about how the women of her land understand each other's pain through their silences and tears, "Words spoken are lost, and unspoken speak. / Even upon meeting sometimes there still persists a gap. / Words drip from the eyes and lips are famished" (17-19). Coming together of these women and forming alliances is a political act of resisting all the forces that aim to break them and a means to not just assert their agency and have a medium to express solidarity with each other, but also to dismantle the age old manifested patriarchal conventions that suppress female voice and confine women within the oppressive framework of duties and expectations. Owing to their increased patience and undeterred resolve, they have claimed spaces that were shut down on them. The age old conflict has made them self-reliant by putting them into circumstances where they have no other option but to tread the traditional boundaries and enter new realms to be financially and emotionally stable. The conflict smashes the customary beliefs that honour men as the protectors of women and places both at an equal



podium where women are not dependent on men for their safety. Hence each woman becomes her own protector and in case of widows and half-widows, they even become the guardians of their children, defenders of their well being and providers of livelihoods.

### **Repression of Creativity and Aspirations: Voicing Silences**

Women's literature from Kashmir gives a wider sense of women's intellectual expanse, their capacities and commitments, their aspirations and goals, their insecurities and vulnerabilities, and their contributions to the society at large. There was a time in the history of Kashmiri literature when women writers like Lal Ded- a fourteenth century mystic poetess who wrote about spirituality; Haba Khatoon- whose verses reflect her love and longing for her lost husband; among a few others occupied a place in the literary canon of Kashmir, but over the years women in Kashmir have been too preoccupied with the conflict, struggling and surviving through it that tending to their creative pursuits and honing their creativity has taken a back seat (Khayal 80- 86). Since women in Kashmir do not have a broad and diverse canon to read about and take inspiration from, literature produced by women just like them who are facing the same problems and dealing with same issues unites and places them in an equal space where they

learn and gather strength from each other's experiences. Lack of funds, no support from their families or literary bodies, unavailability of platforms for literary discussions, poor marketing strategies, an attitude of non-seriousness of publishers and insensitivity of readers towards the works produced by women especially from Kashmir have kept them away from the literary tradition.

Women in Kashmir are bound by marital constraints and societal pressures in multiple ways and they do not often have the space or a state of mind in which they can write freely. Even if some of them do, a range of social, political and cultural pressures and restrictions are brought to bear on them especially when their everyday lives are affected by the conflict. The political tensions in Kashmir, lack of financial independence, cultural restrictions, weight of traditional societal expectations, psychological trauma, acts of sexual violence, fear of losing their loved ones and deteriorating mental health of the women in Kashmir have further pushed women towards the margins.

### **Conclusion**

Women from Kashmir are differently placed in the social, political and economic domains and suffer subordination at each level. Dearth of writings by women from Kashmir has always kept them outside the literary history. Virginia Woolf in her book, *A Room Of One's Own*,

talks about two basic requirements for a woman to be writing i.e. a space of her own and economic independence (Woolf 2017). In Kashmir, owing to the tensed political scenario and rigid patriarchal norms, women have been denied both, making this medium to share their experiences unattainable to them.

Critical of the established values and hypocrisy of the society, Naseem Shafaie and Nitasha Kaul through their works express their concern on how women from around the world have ignored their struggles and turned a blind eye towards them. There has not been an organised women's movement in Kashmir to address their issues and no one cares about giving them opportunities and platforms to express their creativity and prevent repression of their desires and aspirations. Women's movements across the country have also very conveniently ignored the issues faced by the women of Kashmir (Fazili 53-74). In a quest for them to be accepted and heard, they as women writers from Kashmir and the women they represent and address through their texts, struggle to find their identity, assert their agency and are determined to fulfil all their aspirations living in the midst of a conflict. Kashmiri women writers' struggle for existence, desire for acceptance and recognition can be read through the works of Shafaie and Kaul, who on having denied the space for self expression,

overcame these constraints, chose to write their stories and reclaim this space. In this process they define themselves not as passive victims but as having an agency of their own and command spaces that were denied to them, both in the literary tradition and in the Kashmiri society. This study, thus, is an attempt to celebrate and recognise the resolve of these women who despite all the odds struggle everyday to find their sense of self, share their experiences, aspire to attain their dreams, go about exploring their creative pursuits, defy rigid cultural norms, fight their fears, strive to resist in a conflict and claim the spaces they have been always denied access to.

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