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# Negotiating the Female Identity in Times of Conflict: A Study of Two Kashmiri Women's Narratives

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***Abstract***

*The Kashmir issue, with its protracted and controversial history has elicited myriad responses in the realms of fictional as well as non-fictional writing in India. Especially, in recent times we have witnessed the emergence of several indigenous voices from the valley who offer newer perspectives on the conflict through the portrayal of the various shades of their lived experiences. This contemporary genre of literature highlights the perilous and traumatic existence of both Kashmiri Muslims as well as Kashmiri Pandits in a perennially war-torn zone where their very identity stands to be completely annihilated. This paper mainly concentrates on two narratives- Sudha Koul's memoir* The Tiger Ladies *and Freny Manecksha's* Behold I Shine: Narratives of Kashmir's Women and Children*, to explore the neglected yet crucial role of women in conflict situations. While Koul's memoir deals with Kashmiri Pandit women, Manecksha's narrative focusses exclusively upon the Kashmiri Muslim women and their struggles, yet both these works seek to effect a comprehensive understanding of the complexities underlying women's roles, responsibilities and interests in the situation of armed conflict. This paper shall explore how conflict situations open up spaces for empowerment of women instead of relegating them to a subordinate position. While highlighting the strong spirit and resilience of the women of both the communities in the face of unmitigated adversity, this paper shall also focus on the subversion of patriarchal institutions and the concept of agency of women with specific reference to the two texts. The paper shall also examine both the texts from the perspective of 'exile narratives' with reference to Edward Said's Theory of Exile to try and understand the identity crisis faced by the women of both communities from their own vantage points.*

***Keywords: Kashmiri Pandits, Kashmiri Muslims, Women, Conflict, Subversion, Agency, Exile.***

Kashmir, the fabled Paradise of India has always been fraught with controversies in the political and social contexts right since independence. This contentious discourse on the land has invoked a wide spectrum of writing and the resultant rhetoric that emerged has quite well managed to portray the several shades of lived experiences of the people of the war-torn valley. Contemporary writings from the region highlight the traumatic existence of both the Kashmiri Pandits as well as the Kashmiri Muslims in a perennial zone of conflict

where human lives and human identity is in a perilous state. The two women's narratives taken up for this study- Sudha Koul's memoir *The Tiger Ladies: A Memoir of Kashmir* and Freny Manecksha's *Behold I Shine: Narratives of Kashmir's Women and Children,* aims to exclusively explore the neglected yet crucial voices of the women of the valley whose stories have long been inconspicuous and unacknowledged. Koul's elegiac memoir focusses on the lives of Kashmiri Pandit women who were the victims of relentless persecution by the fanatic militants which ultimately forced them into exile. On the other hand, Manecksha stitches together narratives of several Kashmiri Muslim women and their struggle for survival with dignity in the face of extensive militarization of the valley by the state which resulted in harrowing experiences. Though the texts speak about two different communities, they manage to acquire affinity in their comprehensive understanding of the complexities underlying women's roles, responsibilities and interests in the situation of an armed conflict.

Before moving on to any analysis within Kashmir, it is extremely necessary to acknowledge its "chequered past" and the turbulent nature of politics within the state. Since the signing of the Instrument of Accession to India in 1947, Kashmir is widely believed to have been the victim of manipulation and maneuvering by the Central Government to retain control over the politics of the state which resulted in utter disenchantment and disillusionment with the Indian democratic system among the people. The Indian state had promised that Kashmir's accession to India would be subject to ratification by the people "once the country is free from the raiders, marauders and looters". But the 'masla-e-Kashmir' or the Kashmir question remained unresolved as the people's aspirations of sovereignty and self-determination were never realized. The India-Pakistan conflict further complicated the matter as Kashmir remained the bone of contention between the two countries. Thus, instead of political negotiation, India initiated a systematic militarization of the state for the purposes of national defense which further complicated the narrative in the region. Researcher Seema Kazi while analyzing the situation of extensive militarization in the valley writes:

> *The construction of Kashmir's revolt as a threat to 'the nation' legitimized a violent nation-state building exercise in Kashmir even as the Indian state's representation of Kashmir as a Pakistan instigated conspiracy reduced Kashmir's struggle against state tyranny to an issue of 'national' territorial defence. This inside/outside duality transformed Kashmir into the most heavily militarized region of the world. (136)*

Deployment of military as a proxy for governance resulted in fresh forms of aggression as the army had been authorized with the power to repress any form of dissent. The army was also provided with extraordinary protection under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) which granted a blanket of immunity against crimes like unlawful detentions, torture, custodial death and rapes as well. It also empowered troops to search and arrest citizens without warrants, shoot unarmed civilians and raid houses and destroy property without any fear of legal prosecution. This relentless assault by the Indian army on Kashmir led to a pervasive sense of loss among the people which led to the ascendancy of the gun

and armed militancy as well as a constant political demand for separatism. The situation worsened around the 1990s as the militant outfits unleashed their wrath on the miniscule population of Kashmiri Pandits in the valley as the conflict divided the region on religious grounds. The ethno-national, social and cultural consciousness about 'Kashmiriyat' which contributed a great deal towards the harmonious existence of Muslims and Hindus in the valley faced erosion with the onslaught of armed conflict. Kashmiri Pandits were ruthlessly persecuted and killed and women were subjected to brutal torture and rape by the militants. The environment of mutual trust was reduced to shambles as the Pandits dealt with the trauma of loss of their home and homeland. Insurgency and state militarization completely destroyed the political and social fabric of Kashmir and what we notice is the emergence of a "Kafkaesque universe" and it is against this backdrop that we shall place the two texts to understand the role and position of women and the negotiation of the female identity in Kashmir.

Armed conflict and insurgency affects both men and women but the experiences and implications of conflict differ significantly. Women have conventionally been excluded from war which has always been considered an almost exclusively male enterprise. Gendering of the discourses on war and politics associates conflict with masculinity and peace with femininity. Women are of course the primary victims of warfare and at the same time the most active advocates for peace. According to a report of the Amnesty International in 2010, women form the highest proportion of adult civilian population killed and targeted for physical, psychological and economic abuse during war. But stereotyping women as victims of war limits the scope of conflict analysis as it undermines the capacity of women to act as active agents of resistance with a will and opinion of their own. In the context of Kashmir, the impact of violence has often been underestimated because of the lack of representation of women's stories and narratives. Freny Manecksha and Sudha Koul, in their respective books attempt to ferret out the experiences of the marginalized female who navigate the inner chambers of the household while asserting their identity at the same time. Both writers, in their own nuanced style reveal how each experience of women in war zones could have interwoven skeins of suffering, fear, trauma, resilience, spirit, humour and individuality. Manecksha quite correctly states in the Preface to her book: "I learnt that I could not pigeon-hole Kashmiri women. Their voices were multiple and diverse, their personas different" (xvii). The experience of armed conflict for women cannot be confined to a single discourse and therefore as the paper delves into the encounters of two different communities of women, it also takes into account the several layers of the suppression and subjugation of women. Thus, the assessment of the role of the Kashmiri women in times of conflict deserves careful consideration as they have not only made sacrifices in the domestic sphere but have also provided crucial support in the public sphere. As we try to demystify the notions about the passivity of women, the objective is to look at the various methods and strategies evolved by the women to counter patriarchal structures and create exclusive spaces for themselves.

Freny Manecksha's *Behold I Shine* challenges the centrality of men's experiences and demonstrates women's variegated negotiations with conflict and their capacity to emerge as agents of social transformation. The book chronicles the stories of several women who have faced the trauma and torture of conflict and occupation at two levels- one perpetrated by the state's institutions and another by the sections of the patriarchal society within. Sudha Koul, in *The Tiger Ladies* provides an intensely personal yet enchanting telling of the stories of her grandmothers, mothers and daughters but deftly manages to invoke the whole society and culture of the Kashmiri Pandits where the women try and negotiate their identity. A strand that appears common to both the narratives is "story-telling" as this happens to be one of the "oldest healing arts". Story-telling is intrinsic to most cultures as it helps in concretising memories and in coping with loss and hardships. Kirsti A. Dyer writes in her essay "The Importance of Telling (and Listening) to the Story Telling": "To assimilate a major loss, the grieving person needs to create a private personal story and then confide that story to others. Developing a narrative allows a person to weave together their life changes into a new more cohesive story." Therefore, we have both Koul and Manecksha resorting to stories to knit their narratives while eking out a space for the assertion of identity of the women.

*The Tiger Ladies*, while rendering the deceptively simple story of a girl's passage into maturity, marriage and motherhood conjures up an elaborate portrait of a world with its ancient customs of mutual respect and cordiality between the Hindus and the Muslims. Koul fondly talks about the "dandy" shawl peddler, a Muslim man who was critical to all wedding preparations. In fact, it was the shawl man who acted as the most reliable informant after a girl's marriage to her paternal family. Koul explicitly writes about the camaraderie between Hindus and Muslims in the valley before it was marred by violence:

> *Hindus form a miniscule minority in the valley, but I remember that it did not worry us a bit, we did not think that Muslims and Hindus were natural enemies. In Kashmir, we were more preoccupied with the fact that we were all Kashmiri and we lived in the most beautiful place on earth. (9)*

Manecksha through the chronicle of Mubeena also talks about the time when Kashmiri women could "luxuriate in solitary splendour, or enjoy moonlit walks with samovars" (Manecksha 15) without ever having to worry about the time of return. Post-independence, as violence began to acquire mammoth proportions, "the magic of moonlight was replaced by nightmares and the nights turned menacing" (16). Manecksha talks about the loss of personal spaces like the *badamwaris* (gardens) and *yaarbals* (washing ghats) which can be connected to the loss of identity of the women. *Badamwaris* have long been associated as spaces where women celebrated the incoming of spring. They became spaces where families would flock after the end of a harsh winter for picnics and get-togethers. Today, these *badamwaris* have given way to concrete colonies or have been taken over by the army. *Yaarbals* were spaces exclusive to women where they would assemble in midday not just to wash clothes but to talk. These were shared spaces of conversation, where women could air their worries and could subsequently release their suppressed emotions. But these

*yaarbals* too faced obliteration because of the violence of conflict and increasing urbanization. 'Windows' occur as an important trope in both the narratives as they provide access to the larger world outdoors to the women who may not always be able to step outside the house . The houses in downtown Srinagar, both Muslim and Hindu houses were so close to each other that the owners could pass things to each other from the windows. Animated conversations across windows or what might be called 'window talk' happened all the time as housewives shared their domestic woes and gossips as well as news about protests, rallies or funeral processions. But such 'window-talk' was more often than not, cautious and wary and not completely devoid of fear and misgivings. Koul writes: " We never announce good news because we are obsessed with the evil eye, which according to many of us has reduced entire mountains to dust…we are not comfortable with prosperity and well-being, having seen it at close quarters only for a short while" (18). The deep scars that militarization had inflicted upon the psyche of the people was visible in the dramatic altering of the mental mappings. The symbols of occupation like sandbags, barricades, checkpoints, fencing and bunkers have had such deep impact on the people that they now unconsciously use them as markers for directions which heightens the sense of disconnect of the people with their landscape. Manecksha mentions the violation of private spaces by the army through the story of Shazia, a journalist and a professor of media studies who talks about the deliberate ransacking of kitchens and cupboards containing other intimate objects like sanitary pads, tweezers and cosmetics. In another story, Manecksha talks about how homes became inaccessible as soldiers would march in and occupy family living rooms to watch television while the family had to wait outside in the verandah wondering when they would be able to reclaim their own home. Thus private selves were being made public, homes were ravaged, families brutally separated and horrifying slaughter of entire localities took place. For women, the scars ran deep.

Sudha Koul writes evocatively about ancient rituals, customs and traditions of the Pandit community, something she believes to be the lifeline of their future in spite of overwhelming odds. Koul talks about the grand Shivratri and Eid celebrations which both Hindus and Muslims partake in enthusiastically. She fondly reminisces about the lush summer days, family picnics, elaborate school lunches brought by their old servant Mohammedu, the *shikara* rides, the college trips to the mountains, family pilgrimages to the shrine of Lord Shiva and lazy strolls around the Mughal Gardens accompanied by the tunes of the sitar and the traditional Kashmiri *tumbakhnari*. Summer was a time for celebration for all Kashmiris- a festival common to both Hindus and Muslims when they could enjoy the bounty of their supernaturally exquisite valley. Of the harmony, Koul writes: "We have everything in common-our food, our music, our language, and humour, our Sufi tradition and shrines, our blossoming fruit trees, our lakes and rivers, talking endlessly over our common fences. Other things we do differently, although nothing comes to my mind immediately, except the following of our separate faiths" (122). But such harmony was ephemeral as political resentment began to fester and grow in the belly of Kashmir which would finally end up in a volcanic eruption. Koul is extremely poignant when she writes of this growing antipathy:

> *Like the ripples caused by a falling chinar leaf on the placid waters of our lakes political resentment creates a stir now and then in our life…but even though the leaves keep falling with increasing frequency, we naively prefer to believe that it is not inevitable that a frozen season will soon be upon our heels. (77)*

Despite all efforts in trying to stay optimistic, the deconstruction of the valley had begun as infiltrators started to instigate rebellion among the Muslims in the valley. News of small skirmishes and confrontations reach Koul's family which they prefer to ignore "like bitter flowers scattered amid the comfort and warmth" (Koul 128) but as these incidents gain frequency, they percolate down to the city and to Koul's own family as well. Her grandfather Shyamji, a venerated professor of English had to step down from his post-retirement job in a college where the students wanted only Muslim professors and threatened Hindu teachers with dire consequences if they didn't resign immediately. Thus began a saga of fear and distrust as Pandits began to feel vulnerable and uneasy and their own land started to appear alien to them. Suddenly, we find a trace of trepidation in Koul's nostalgic narrative- "A single match in our humidity-free dry environment could have reduced the houses to rubble" (134). Koul is hit by the stark reality of the situation when the cheerful fishmonger Fatha appears at their doorstop after a long hiatus, emaciated and a shadow of her former self. Her son had joined the militants and had been subjected to terrible torture by the police upon arrest. The woman was terrified and ashamed yet she had to resume work for she had many mouths to feed. Koul watches trouble boiling in the valley with a sense of foreboding, yet resists deep analysis. She prefers to nestle in the warmth of her household and in her mother's relatively trivial anxieties about her marriage. But she cannot remain oblivious of the larger implications, of the pain and suffering of mothers like Fatha in their miserable existence and the agony of Mother Kashmir as she watches her children draw blood and degrade the valley with betrayal and putrefaction.

As the anti-Indian political movement gained ground in Kashmir, life became precarious for both Kashmiri Pandits as well as Kashmiri Muslims in the valley. Women's lives were in greater jeopardy because of their doubly marginalized situation in a patriarchal society. Women faced brutal violation of their rights as they fell prey to gender-based violence. Sexual violence has often been used as a strategy of intimidation in conflict zones. It is not only a consequence or side effect of war or displacement, but a deliberate weapon of war that is used to destabilize and threaten a part of the civilian population. Susan Brownmiller in her seminal work *Against Our Will* elucidates on the psychology of rape which has nothing to do with "sexual gratification" but is simply the imposition of domination and authority, the humiliation, sometimes annihilation of someone who cannot retaliate. The sexual violation of women erodes the fabric of the society in such a way that the impact was stamped upon communities and cultures for years together. Manecksha, in her narrative brings forth the stories of many such women who were the victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence in Kashmir. The protective cover of impunity provided by the AFSPA empowers the army to commit heinous crimes with a blatant disregard for human rights. Manecksha shares the heart wrenching story of Hameeda who was brutally raped by a DSP

in a police station. Hameeda continues to struggle with her physical injuries and emotional trauma, while a section of the population does not cease to vilify her as 'spoiled goods'. Hameeda thus endures '*zulm'* at two levels-directed at her by the state and the patriarchal society. Yet, crime in Kashmir is often incentivized as Hameeda's rapist is awarded with the President's medal. Manecksha also mentions incidents of everyday objectification of women in the valley where they are harassed with lewd remarks, ogling, wolf whistling and taunting. It was also found that rape was being used as a tool for targeting women accused of providing food or shelter to militants and as a means of getting women to identify male relatives as militants. As Manecksha brings these traumatic events to light, she also poses the question as to how the female survivors of sexual violence should tell their stories. The emotional ordeal of recounting such dark tales of terror is so great that it is only natural for the mind to blur such memories or shut them out completely. Victims of sexual violence not only have to grapple with the violence of the act, but also the violence of the society that shames and stigmatizes the victim. Manecksha thus notes that these stories never flow in a neat, ordered manner, but with hesitation as though they were battling the fears of stigma, denial and reluctance. Koul's *The Tiger Ladies* does not make any explicit reference to sexual crimes yet it is very much interwoven into the fabric of her narrative as history bears witness to the outrageous crimes inflicted upon Pandit women during the ethnic cleansing of 1990s. Koul perhaps deliberately chooses to be silent as she cannot bear to look too closely for blemishes on her beloved land.

Systematic violence upon women, persecution and encroachment of their space results in loss of identity as they become exiles in their own land. Freny Manecksha brings together several stories of such marginalized and oppressed women who faced loss of all privileges and heavy discrimination, only to be treated as aliens on their own soil. Koul, on the other hand draws on the exilic condition of the entire Kashmiri Pandit population who have still not been able to overcome the anguish of coerced displacement from their home and homeland. This paper, thus shall endeavour to study the select texts as 'exile narratives' and analyze them with special reference to Edward Said's theory of Exile. According to Said, exile is a political condition that can be comprehended neither on the aesthetic level nor on human level. It is all about the pain and anguish. It is a creation by humans for other humans which is horrible like death and has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family, its roots and geography. Edward Said writes: "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience." The culture of an exile ceases to be a part of the society of which it was an integral part of once. Their identity is lost and thus the state of being of an exile is never secure. This rings true in case of *The Tiger Ladies* where Sudha Koul beautifully expresses the gradual seeping in of insecurity among the Pandits: "We are becoming increasingly despondent. All of a sudden we feel we are too few, far too outnumbered and far too vulnerable. Our lives and dignity have become imperiled in our own homeland" (140). One of the major thematic concerns of all exile narratives is the loss of home and the way of life. The Pandit home in Koul's memoir is portrayed as a sacred space of cultural and intellectual engagements. There is a reiterated reference to the presence of books in and around the house and intelligent and scholarly conversations on

politics, history, science and literature which symbolize the intellectual achievements of the community. Such discussions were not just limited to men but women too actively took part in them. The onset of conflict completely violated this sanctified space as the community was forced into exile where they had to toil hard to eke out a respectable existence in alien surroundings and culture. The trauma of the loss of her childhood home, the traditional and simple life of her mothers and grandmothers never leaves Koul as she tries to create a semblance of a Kashmiri Pandit home in the US:

> *It is lovely to see the multicoloured versions of Vishnu the Preserver flitting about in the front garden, on the blood red impatiens flowering amid deep green foliage, and in this universal moment I forget where I am. What is missing in my recreated world is what makes it different, the snowline and the mountains, all the relatives and the laughter and the coming and the going. (Koul 203)*

It is pertinent to note that Said's critical and scholarly works on exile stems from the case of Palestine where people lived in terrible state as exiles in their own native land. This may very well be the case for the Kashmiri Muslims, especially women who have been rendered rootless in their own land owing to military occupation. Women have also been repressed by the Kashmiri society which denied a voice to almost fifty percent of the population. The dominant male population failed to recognize the innate capacity of women to rebuild fractured societies and their power of influence and thus repudiated their demands for political space. The phenomenon of the 'half-widow'(wives of disappeared men) further put women in a permanent limbo as such women were forbidden space both in their paternal house as well as in the home of their in-laws.

The conventional patriarchal society has always deemed the female to be the weaker or the 'second' sex and has left no stone unturned at blotting out the identity of women. Years of turbulence has taken a heavy toll on the Kashmiri society and perhaps the situation is even worse in their case. In spite of all suppression and repression, women in Kashmir have managed to articulate resistance and subvert the normative conditions which complicates the question of the implications of conflict on women. Women cannot be typified as victims as they negotiate and etch out an identity of their own and become active agents of change. Using the concept of female agency, this paper shall explore how conflict situations open up spaces for empowerment women. It shall also examine the ways in which women articulate resistance and the reversal of gender hierarchies in the context of the two texts selected for the study. Prolonged insurgency led to a major transformation of women's roles as nurturers as they began to cross the boundaries of domescity and enter the public domain. "The segue from domesticity into public life", Manecksha writes,

> *…was imposed when men began to get picked up increasingly by security troops supposedly for interrogation and were never seen again. Women, who earlier did not venture into a butcher's shop because it was a male dominated space, were now forced to go to police stations, army camps, jails and courts in the state and outside in search of their missing sons and husbands. (25)*

Women thus ceased to be passive spectators and acquired centrality in the politics of armed conflict in Kashmir as they began to contest and counter structural constraints and create spaces for themselves. Manecksha, through her book brings into focus women like Parveena Ahangar and Anjum Zamrud Habib, who, after debilitating losses have started human rights organizations like the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) and Association of Families of Kashmiri Prisoners (AFKP) respectively; ordinary homemakers like Munawara who have taken on the judiciary; and a young generation of thinkers like Uzma Falak and Essar Batool who foreground the interaction of gender, politics and religion and those countless other women who have evolved their own language of resistance and liberty through snide remarks and jokes in Kashmiri and through their faith in the Sufi mystics like Lal Ded and Habba Khatoon who served as their spiritual anchors. Koul too highlights the strong and resilient spirit of the women of the valley in The Tiger Ladies. Koul's resistance is through her strong affinity to her roots even as an expatriate. She revels in the sights and sounds of her grandmother's kitchen, in the smells of the quintessential Kashmiri rogan josh and in the taste of her aunts smelts cooked in green plum sauce. The pashmina shawl, the gold jewellery and the house spirit in the attic of her ancestral home, all become an integral part of her resistance against the complete disintegration of the identity of the Kashmiri Pandit. Yet, she also speaks of the other courageous women of the paradise she left behind-the fishwife mother of a militant, the vivacious and vibrant Izmat, the daughter of the shawl peddler and the emancipated and iconoclastic principal of her college who are but the symbols of all the fearless women who have been the torchbearers of the mighty spirit of the valley.

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