

## **Dalitism and the Case of Kashmiri Women**

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**Abstract:** This paper contends how the parameters of Dalitism and Dalit-feminism are differently defined vis-a-vis the crisis of occupation in Kashmir and may be in certain ways applied to the case of the women there. Sandwiched between the politics of two battling nation states, India and Pakistan and their two conflicting discourses, the Hindu and Muslim positionality of Kashmiri Muslim women receive newer dimensions of double marginalisation as in Dalit-feminism. I would use a few case studies and literary tropes from Kashmir to validate this search for a different version of Dalitism and Dalit-feminism vis-a-vis the majority Muslim population of Kashmir valley.

**Keywords:** Dalitism, Dalit Feminism, Kashmiri Muslim women identity, half-widow, double marginalisation.

*Harmukhbartalzaagaeyimadano*

*Ye daphamtelaagyo*

*Sher daphhumbalazaagaeyimadano...*

(‘An Epic and Enduring Kashmiri Song’)

This lyrical song or *lol* as it is popularly called in Koshur is possibly a variant of the Habba Khatun love song very dear to both Kashmiri Pandits and Kashmiri Muslims. The sixteenth century peasant queen of Kashmir Habba Khatun was wooed by Yusuf Shah Chak, the king, for her beautiful songs. Legend has it that he fell in love with this peasant class woman for the beauty of her voice and richness of her rhyme. The king was believed to have relieved her of her earlier marriage to take her away to his court where she reigned as a queen for six years. But then Akbar resorted to the tactics of cozenage for conquering

Kashmir. Upon reaching the Mughal court Yusuf Shah was flung into prison never to come back again and reunite with his lady love. Still her lyrical cadences refrain in the valley, generating nostalgia perhaps for a paradise lost to the generations to come.

This traditional lyric is an offering of love that is in keeping with the pristine beauty of Kashmir. Unfortunately, its beauty has been tainted and sabotaged repetitively down the ages and it has been a bone of contention for both the nation-states of India and Pakistan. From the very days of Dogra rule way back in the earlier century this much debated geopolitical terrain called Kashmir has been subjected to a hegemony that is unique in various accepts. Ashis Nandy explains it well in his essay “Negotiating Necrophilia: An Afterword” included in Nyla Ali Khan’s book *Islam, Women and Violence in Kashmir*:

Like Palestine and Northern Ireland, Kashmir is a typically twentieth century problem that has gate crashed into the twenty first century... beneficiaries of partitions mindlessly implemented by a tired imperial power, and are all associated with gory, repetitious, gratuitous violence that wean out outside observer and analysts.... The main issues in Kashmir... centre around national interest, strategic significance, territorial contest and security implications. Only ordinary Kashmiris trying to live ordinary lives in extraordinary times- Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists- sense that the problem of Kashmir has to do with the survival, clash of death machines, and the collapse of social ethics, that the pain of communities and families, however unfashionable and outdated the idea may sound in the security community and policy elite is the central reality in the land... Neither the official figures nor the unofficial estimates of human rights groups include the permanently maimed, those whose lives have been cut short by the trauma of uprooting, bereavement, or psychosomatic ailments. Everyone is bereaved and everyone is a mourner. The casualties include not merely the official and the unofficial dead and the incapacitated, but also those who have disappeared without a trace. (Khan, 149-50)

On the other hand, historicising the Kashmir Dispute Christopher Snedden explains it as an “intractable issue”:

Following Maharaja Hari Singh’s accession to India in 1947, the India and Pakistan governments, and then the United Nations, resolved to consult the people of J&K about their state's international status. This would be done via a United Nations supervised plebiscite. This poll has never been held – nor is it likely to be held. Despite being marginalized since about mid-1948, the people of J&K are still legitimate stakeholders in the Kashmir dispute. (Snedden, 1)

The caste configurations of Dalitism as it is seen in the other parts of India do not actually exist in Kashmir though the government has perfunctorily stipulated certain castes under its paradigm especially for the Hindu region of Jammu. They are listed as per government documentation. The notion of 'untouchability' and its ramifications has taken the rest of India into its toll for ages, but within the space of Kashmiriness or as it is popularly expressed or "Kashmiriyat" - it has never been a concern. According to the statistics provided by Mohit Bhatia the scheduled castes concentrate more in the Hindu based domain of Jammu:

Constituting a sizeable 17.44% of Jammu's population, they are divided into 13 sub-castes, of which Megh, Chamar, and Doom are numerically pre-dominant forming 39%, 24% and 21% respectively of the total SC population. These three sub-castes are relatively better politically organized and educated than the rest of the sub-castes. The remaining sub-castes are Batwal, Barwala, Basith, Saryala, Chura, Dhyar, Gardi, Jolaba, Ratal and Watal. (Bhatia, 942)

Issues of caste and class are often closely coupled in different contexts such as the concentration of a large number of scheduled castes in low-paying menial jobs, thus indicating a reinforcement of their low caste and class-status to a large extent. Under the Hindu rulers, "Scheduled castes and other lower-caste Hindus, together with the vast majority of Muslims were subjected to various forms of oppression". (946)

With the Big Landed Estates Act of 1950 however, there were transformations in the political power structure that weakened upper-caste dominance in the state and diluted caste-oppression. The scheduled castes too owned land substantially. According to Bakshi, the incidence of Indian landlessness is lowest in J&K. Only 11% of rural households in the state do not own any land other than homesteads, as compared to over 41% of households in rural India. Among scheduled castes in the state, the figure is nearly 22% in contrast to Punjab, Kerala, and Haryana, where landlessness exceeds 80%. (Bhatia, 951) Thus, landholding in the state in general and among scheduled castes in particular is much better than in India as a whole. Even exclusion, oppression and stigmatisation in everyday life of the scheduled caste community hardly exists in prevalent society. However, the Dalitism that is given a new connotation in the valley is of a different order. It is the "Kashmiri Muslim" who is 'othered'/ marginalised and in the context of the nation discourse is the political "other".

This paper contends how the parameters of Dalitism and Dalit-feminism are differently defined vis-a-vis the crisis of occupation in Kashmir and may be in certain ways applied to the case of the women there. Sandwiched between the politics of two battling nation states, India and Pakistan and their two conflicting discourses, the Hindu and Muslim positionality of Kashmiri Muslim women receive newer dimensions of double marginalisation as in Dalit-feminism. I would use a few case studies and literary tropes from Kashmir to validate this search for a different version of Dalitism and Dalit-feminism vis-a-vis the majority Muslim population of Kashmir valley.

Sharan Kumar Limbale in his book *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* defined 'dalit' in a way that may be seen to accommodate this position of the Kashmiri Muslim.

'Who is Dalit:

Harijans and neo-Buddhists are not the only Dalits, the term describes all the untouchable communities living outside the boundary of the village, as well as adivasis, landless farm-labourers, workers, the suffering masses and nomadic and criminal tribes. In explaining the word it will not do to refer only to the untouchable castes. People who are lagging behind economically will also need to be included. (Limbale, 30)

He further explains,

Revolt is the state that follows anguish and rejection. 'I am human, I must receive all the rights of a human being' – such is the consciousness that gives birth to this revolt. Born from unrestrained anguish, this explosive rejection and piercing revolt is like a flood with its aggressive character an insolent, rebellious attitude. (34)

The plight of a Muslim subject under the circumstances of occupation and conflict is similar to that of a Dalit in keeping with this definition. During the Dogra rule, scholars have noted that discontent grew amongst Kashmiri Muslims due to the favouritism bequeathed upon the Kashmiri Pandits. The Muslim population led a life of poverty, subjugation and exploitation. Sumantra Bose cites the report of Prem Nath Bazaz, a prominent Kashmiri journalist and political activist in 1941:

The poverty of the Muslim masses is appalling. Dressed in rags and barefoot, a Muslim peasant presents the appearance of a starving beggar ... most are landless labourers,

working as serfs for absentee (Hindu) landlords ... Almost the whole brunt of official corruption has been borne by the Muslim masses. (Bose, 16)

This establishes the hundred years regime as a disaster for the Muslim peasantry of Kashmir Valley. The Uprising of 1931 testifies this hegemony. It triggered the massive nationalist movement in the valley when the oppressed masses reacted against the regime to assert their identity and aspirations. Even post 1947 accession the air of oppression and conflict only took different shapes and worsened in impact. Elaborating on the nineties' carnage in Kashmir as Sumantra Bose further explains

In late 1947, as Hindu refugees from Pakistan poured into the Jammu region, the local RSS, headed by Prem Nath Dogra, led mass killings of Muslims in Jammu's southern the city. Tens of thousands of Jammu Muslims were killed and hundreds of thousands fled to Pakistan. In the Valley, the seemingly idyllic coexistence of Muslims and Pandits was always uneasy, the apparent harmony masking deep undercurrents of suspicion, resentment and fear. The façade disintegrated in 1990. (Bose, 43)

Shafi Ahmad in his novel *The Half-Widow* for instance, delineates the plight of the doubly-marginalised Kashmiri Muslim woman who in the background of the crises on the 1990s is oppressed both by the internal social strife and the larger oppression of terrorism and militancy. The novel expounds how existence in the conflict zone is doubly coercive and for the Kashmiri Muslim woman it imposes further barriers. She has been compelled by her circumstances to fight for her cause. Such cases are commonplace and almost everywhere in the valley. These socially outcast women were compelled to enter the public sphere due to such compulsive plights and inquire about the missing male members of their family:

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 station, army camps, jails and courts in the state and outside in search of their missing sons and husbands... This forced entry into public spaces was a double-edged sword. (Manecksha, 25)

However, for women like Parveena Ahangar such a plight was also empowering. Her venture called The Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons is one such attempt to resist and seek justice.

Again, the case of KunanPoshpora, the mass rape of Gujjar women are only to name a few of the ravages confronted regularly by the women of Kashmir.

Then there comes in such coinages as “half-widow”, “half-mother” and they are part of Kashmir’s cultural lexicon during the nineties and persist till date – women whose husbands, sons have gone missing or have suffered enforced disappearance. They have been compelled to live not just in emotional limbo forever, uncertain if their husbands and sons are alive or dead, if they have been detained or if his remains have been hastily buried in anonymous mass graveyards. In the novel by Shahnaz Bashir *The Half Mother* the irony of this prefix ‘half’ is exposed in all its uncertainties in the interaction between the advocate and Haleema:

‘Since we don’t know the status of your respective relatives who have disappeared... we don’t know whether they are alive or not... we cannot describe you as widows, or whatever the case may be. We are talking legal language here, and the status matters. So for all such uncertain cases for women whose husbands have disappeared, we will prefix the status with “Half”.’ Advocate Farooq explained.

Half. The word ringed in Haleema’s head. A cold pinch.

‘And what about mothers, Farooq sahib?’ Haleema asked, ‘Are they half mothers by rule?’...

Whether their children were dead or alive or missing, mothers would remain mothers – but Advocate Farooq was not sure. He didn’t know how to respond to Haleema. He couldn’t be certain what status of victimhood should be attested to her.

‘So am I a half mother?’ Haleema repeated. (Bashir, 142-43)

The concluding question in this excerpt in fact, not only spurs the social status of such women in patriarchy but also throws up a challenge against the dehumanised institutions of family and society and question the notion of motherhood. Such women are oppressed and ‘dalit’ not merely as widows but also as mothers.

Since husbands of half-widows were not officially dead (declared) there were issues of confusion over inheritance, property rights and bank-transfers all of which require death

certificates. Under such circumstances to make ends meet they were forced to unskilled labour as majority lacked education or vocational skills. To supplement their meagre income and run the household, their children would be forced to drop out of school and work in the carpet-making or affiliated industries. Hence economic problems aligned with social isolation make her plight doubly oppressed as Dalit women. It is not rare for the in-laws to blame the hapless wife, treat her as taboo, refuse shelter to her and her children or perhaps offer only shelter to the male grand children. Commenting on their plight Freny Manecksha points out in her study how even re-marriage for such women is fraught with uncertainty:

At one point, it was seven years but, in 2014 some clerics decreed that re-marriage was permissible after four years. Today there are half-widows who say they rejected the idea of re-marriage because they do not believe their children, especially their daughters, will be wholly accepted by a new husband, or because they fear that matrimony will get in the way of their full-time struggle for justice. (32)

She further cites how these half-widows “suffer from depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorders”. (32) She cites individual case-studies carried out by the APDP (Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons). These women believed that they had only one true relative in the world – “Jiji or Parveena Ahangar who heads the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons and have been instrumental in protesting and seeking justice for such women. The aid and ex-gratia relief that has been extended by the J&K government too is viewed with scepticism by Kashmiri men and women. Maneck Sha explains it as “layered” (41). There are times when they choose to accept relief but declare that it cannot be seen as a compromise – that their fight for justice will go on, which is a stance adopted by the like of Zaheeda, survivor of the Mohra Aachai massacre. To quote the words of another victim with similar plight of being forced to work as labourers, Zareena’s words haunt – “We remain faceless, identityless”. (41)

Cases of children of conflict are rampant in the valley. Manecksha in her study shows how the children of these women grew up to being mortified adults and suffer through the 1990s severe collateral damage.

One poem by a half-widow Mubeena’s son Arif with the title ‘A Conversation with My Mother on One of the Last Days of Ramzan’ underscores the agony:

*... Don't think about the war, pleads my mother  
her quivering voice a willow twig in August  
and a mid-summer drizzle hanging in her eyes.  
Don't think of the still-bleeding throat of the carpenter  
Whose headless body left the first floor of our home  
Without doors and windows for twenty years.  
Thoughts are very expensive, my dear.  
Kashmiris cannot afford them  
So don't think my child, don't think. (64)*

The anxiety of the Gujjars, a hill tribe in Kashmir too is worth noting in the context of the occupation hazard. Labelled to be among those most loyal to India in Kashmir, they were viewed with suspicion from 1990s till date. Pakeeza, a Gujjar woman in her narrative in Manecksha's study substantiates it and underscores how "sexual violence in conflict is very much a part of Kashmir's narrative". (63) In this context we could cite here some findings of Sans Frontieres report. It notes:

For most Kashmiris sexual violence is considered an inappropriate and difficult to discuss topic. Nevertheless a rather high percentage of respondents – 11.6 – in comparison to other conflict zones – said they had experienced a violation of their modesty since 1989.... Almost two-thirds of the people interviewed (63.9 percent) had heard over a similar period about cases of rape while one in seven had witnessed rape. (63)

In one of the world's most militarized zones lewd remarks, aging, wolf whistling and other forms of sexual harassment are rampant and come in the daily stride of life. Furthermore, according to the Amnesty International Report of 1992 – even Kashmiri boys had their genitals mutilated during interrogation. During the investigation into the mass rapes of Kunan Poshpora, medical – legal reports of burn injuries on a man's sexual organs were evident. To borrow the phrasing of human rights activist Shrimayee Nandini Ghosh, "rape in conflict areas, is also a tool to emasculate men". (71)



Therefore, women here suffered *zulm* in double folded layers – directed at her by the state as well as society because they were subjected to oppression also by the state security i.e. police who is otherwise assigned to secure them and the army (who is sheathed by the verdicts of AFSPA). AFSPA requires sanction only from the Centre to prosecute perpetrators of a crime and there is no limitation to torture while investigating. The UNICEF report *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War* echoes the sabotage it does:

Sexual violation of women erodes the fabric of a community in a way that few weapons can. Rape's damage can be devastating because of the strong communal reaction to the violation and pain stamped on entire families. The harm inflicted in such cases on a woman by a rapist is an attack on her family and culture as in many societies women are viewed as repositories of a community's cultural and spiritual values. (70)

Such women resistance has been coming again and again but never validated vis-a-vis the state of occupation. The lockdown imposed by the present Government shutting down the internet facilities altogether since August 5, 2019, has goaded the valley and its people further back to stone age. Abrogating Article 370 and the announcement of Kashmir as a Union Territory are steps where the majority Muslim community in the valley is silenced into further subjugation.

Foucault in an interview on 'Film and Popular Memory' says, "memory is a very important factor in struggle ... if one controls memory, one controls their dynamism. And one also controls their experience, their knowledge of the previous struggles". (Olick and Levy, 52-53) In this sense the ordeal of the Kashmiri women presides in such a Foucauldian realm of memory where 'popular memory' is equated with the force of resistance. Their assertion is unique and in no way lesser effective than the 'dalit's' challenge to form a new identity and seek agency. While the term 'dalit' reflects caste based identities, the Kashmiri women and their plight reassert unique dimensions of the oppressed, subdued and marginalized, neglected both within and without the society in a similar way the dalits are treated. Be it the taboo of caste or social and political status, they are equally deprived.

Dalit assertion in the mainstream is expected to challenge the dominant caste ideology and its influence on the dalit population. Here we may use Anand Teltumbde's observations on the notion of the 'dalit':

“Dalit” ...is a political term, a quassi-classidentity, devised during the Ambedkarite movement, distinct from the demeaning “Untouchable”, and from the inert administrative labels “Depressed Classes”, “Scheduled Castes”, and certainly from Gandhi’s patronizing “Harijans”. The term “Dalit” reflected Ambedkar’s aspiration that all the untouchable castes would wear this new identity and form a formidable “Dalit” constituency....The term “Dalit” as such, does not reflect social realities. It reflects caste-based identities which continue to remain the fundamental identities of people. (Kumar, 11)

Instead of appropriating the definition what strikes us here is the similitude of paradigms where the plight of Dalit women and Kashmiri women with missing family members are concerned. Both are doubly exploited and oppressed by the patriarchal domains of society as well as family. Moreover, what the study infers is that both equally seek assertion and reach out their voices in protest. This sense of agency however oppressed is a positive gesture. In their protest lies the efficacy of constituency and identity.

Agha Shahid Ali expresses in his prose poem *The Blessed Word: A Prologue* how it was since Akbar’s act of imperial injustice, Kashmir ceased to be free. He also writes how it was Habba Khatun’s grief ‘alive to this day’ that ‘roused the people into frenzied opposition to Mughal rule’:

And will the blessed women rub the ashes together? Each fall they gather *chinar* leaves, singing what the hills have re-echoed for four hundred years, the songs of Habba Khatun... And will the blessed women rub ashes together? Each fall they sing her songs. They create their rustic fuel for winter: they set fire to the leaves, sprinkle water on them as they burn, and transform them into fragile coals. (Ali, 172-73)

The continuum between the historical tragedy of Habba Khatun and the present Kashmiri women that exist now is quite explicit here. They have struggled with marginalisation, rejection, sabotage and violence since then but still pursued to seek agency and identity.

The fight is still on and we wait...

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