

## Violence, Vulnerability, and Resilience in *Do You Remember Kunan Poshpora*

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### Abstract

Narratives that take shape against the backdrop of political flashpoints such as Kashmir, represent women occupying an ambivalent space where appropriation and resistance exist simultaneously. While their resistance against oppression evokes a sense of surprise and admiration, their passive appropriation within power hegemonies creates a sense of despondency and despair. A Kashmiri woman has shown great amount of resilience in fighting the atrocities in life. The brutal fate to which she is accustomed makes her stronger and more independent. Be it an individual political representative, a half widow, or a rape survivor, a Kashmiri woman who has attempted to give voice to her trauma through various media, has always been perceived as a victim. She bears the brunt of violence both from within and outside the state and becomes the site of violence and its absorption at the same time. This paper uses Suniya S. Luthar's and Dante Cicchetti's idea of "resilience as a two-dimensional construct concerning the exposure of adversity and the positive adjustment outcomes of that adversity" as a critical gaze to analyze *Do You Remember Kunan Poshpora* by Esrar Batool, Ifra Butt, et al. in order to foreground and deconstruct this double victimhood of Kashmiri woman. The paper attempts to find how a Kashmiri woman suffers and at the same time shows positive resilience in the face of adversity and loss.

### Keywords

Kashmir, half widows, violence and victimization, vulnerable women, resistance and resilience

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## Introduction

Woman as a gender construct is often implicated within the representational politics of power and powerlessness. While on one hand, this gender location manifests itself as a narrative of empowerment, on the other hand, this power struggle evokes a sense of surprise and incredulity. Such representational ambivalences are especially conspicuous in writings where woman is caught at the cross-section of hegemonising appropriations and emancipatory reconfigurations of gender spaces. Such narratives become empathetic though ideological spaces to register her anger and resistance. This ambivalence is particularly conspicuous in narratives that depict the lives of women at violent crossroads. Kashmiri narratives by women are no exception. These narratives are marked by a sense of struggle and resilience by women in their day-to-day lives as part of their negotiation with their surroundings and the state. While the conventional gaze has generally etched their struggle in terms of victimhood in narratives such as *Do You Remember Kunan Poshpora*, this politico-existential experience has been dealt with more inclusively.

The Kashmiri conventional gaze has been particularly sensitive to the misery of woman. It has cumulatively built up a grand narrative of her miseries from the very onset of upheaval that broke out in the region of Kashmir in the early nineties. The battle cry that resonated in Kashmir during the early nineties was loaded with religious and political connotations. Its embedded vehemence led to the exodus of Hindu population of the Valley and exposed the masses to the brutality of militancy. Kashmiri inhabitants as a whole suffered.

The polarisation of Kashmiri society happened during the late nineteenth century at the zenith of Dogra power. Dogras were ethnically Punjabis from Jammu, and the Kashmiris felt their presence to be alien and oppressive. The Kashmiri Muslim peasants and artisans were oppressed with heavy taxation and community biased laws like the ban on cow slaughter whereas the Kashmiri Pandit minority was inducted into the lower rung of the Dogra bureaucracy. Hence, any articulation of anti-Dogra sentiments was always combined with anti-Pandit feelings because Kashmiri Pandit revenue officials became the face of the oppressive Dogra regime in Kashmir valley. The tale of tortures, widowhood, displacement, rape, and imprisonment constitute the bulk of Kashmiri narratives. Women have lost their sons as a result of barbaric killings. Many have lost their husbands, while many others had to abandon their homes. Daughters are no exception; they have been orphaned and/or raped. Due to the ongoing disturbance, Kashmiri women face tremendous misery and trauma. To live such a life is very difficult; still, these women take up challenges enduring pain and hardship showing great resistance:

Kashmiri women have supported the pervasive will for resistance and held onto their lot with grace and great resilience. Not only are they

tackling their day-to-day problems, but they are also pursuing a progressive role in the society [sic] ridden with political strife and violence. (Zia 2007)

Despite continuous torture and abuse, both physical and mental, Kashmiri women show extensive will for resistance over victimisation. They choose intensive and progressive roles as political leaders, social activists, writers, public speakers, etc.

### **Resilience and Kashmiri woman**

Along with the trauma that every Kashmiri woman is going through covertly or otherwise, women of Kashmir have shown great strength and resistance by voicing their courage, by challenging the stereotypes through writing books, by being political instead of being apolitical, by fighting the stigma of rape through talking about it, by demanding justice thus proving resistance as gender-neutral, and by reversing the gender role/duties. Among many stereotypes prevailing about Kashmiri women, one is that a Kashmiri woman cannot have a voice of her own on the occupation discourse and cannot articulate publicly the effect of the conflict on the everyday lives and the security of women. One of the survivors of the Kunan Poshpora gang rape states that, “We knew that if we remained silent, they would do it again, if not in our village then somewhere else” (*Do You Remember Kunan Poshpora*, V).

Despite the vast body of research on resilience, there is little agreement on a single definition of resilience among scholars. Scholars define the construct of resilience in a multitude of ways. Resilience is the process of coping with disruptive, stressful, or challenging life events in a way that provides the individual with additional protective and coping skills before the disruption that results from the event. It can also be defined as the process of self-righting or growth, the capacity to bounce back, to withstand hardship, and to repair oneself (Santos 248). Luther and Cicchetti have studied and explained the concept of resilience in the context of a two-dimensional construct concerning the exposure of adversity and the positive adjustment outcomes of that adversity (Luther and Cicchetti 862). They explain resilience as a “positive adaptation... considered in a demonstration of manifested behaviour on social competence or success at meeting any particular tasks at a specific life stage” (862).

Luther’s and Cicchetti’s insights on resilience provide a significant entry point to analyse and critique the discursive and ideological contours of *Do You Remember Kunan Poshpora*<sup>3</sup> (DYRKP henceforth) and women’s location within it.

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<sup>3</sup>The genesis of the book lies in the discussion among a group of South Asian women in a meeting held in January 2012 facilitated by a small IDRC (International Development Research Centre) grant on the legal silence around the questions of sexual violence, normalisation of sexual violence, and impunity.

*DYRKP* is a non-fictional narrative by Essar, Ifrah, Samreena, Munaza, and Natasha that documents the incidents of mass sexual violence in Kunan and Poshpora by the Indian army. The narrative account is a revolution in itself as it is the first of its kind that accuses the Indian army in Kashmir. Through this book, the feminist and academic activities manifest serious concerns about the growing violence, the impunity of the perpetrators, the constant and continuous lack of accountability on the part of the state, the absence of effective mechanisms to provide justice and reparations, and the virtual indifference to the psychological damage suffered by the victims, survivors and their families and communities.

*DYRKP* describes how Kashmiri women have shown positive resilience, how they have become vocal about their sufferings and sufferings of others through authoring books, staging demonstrations, signing petitions, leaving behind the card of being victims, and not letting themselves be appropriated or hegemonised by the 'male imputed' authorities. *DYRKP* through the personal accounts of the journeys of the authors, scrutinises the questions of the justice denied, of ineradicable stigma, of the nature of the irresponsible state, and the continuing repercussions of the trauma. It showcases the resilience and the resistance of the survivors of the 1991 mass rape incidents in the villages of Kunan and Poshpora. It documents the incidents in minute details: "On a cold February night when a group of soldiers and officers of the Indian Army pushed their way in seeking out militants assumed to be hiding there, they pulled the men out of their homes and subjected many to torture and raped women" (2). *DYRKP* is a work of resistance by Kashmiri women against all oppression they undergo in their lives on a day-to-day basis. This means that they are not mere victims or survivors, but fighters who have made the language of resistance their mother tongue. *DYRKP* looks into a number of ways how cultural, legal and social norms enable the state to grant impunity to the criminals and silence any demand for justice by/for the victims. It shows how the state uses erasures of memories of human rights violations or overwrite such memories with an equally gruesome offence as a tool of oppression throughout the valley. Above all, the documented account has represented these women exactly as they wanted themselves to be represented. They wanted to be represented as strong women who have fought and who are still fighting bravely thereby breaking the stereotypes of being just victims. These women are indeed the unsung heroes for whom the book is an ode of remembrance, a specimen of the defiant human quality, i.e., resistance.

### **Stereotyping of Kashmiri women**

Kashmiri women are generally regarded as a convenient set of clichés who just act as mere spectators during protests. They are cast as victims weeping over

dead bodies. But the ground reality is quite different. They do not bother about the oppressive and discriminatory socio-cultural traditions such as “a woman should be confined only to household drudgery” or “a woman should work according to the set norms of society.” They have resisted in myriad forms ranging from a simple curse or by throwing a *Kangri* (earthen/wooden firepot) at an armed officer trying to molest them, by participating in stone pelting, street protests, and mass funerals to supporting the resistance and freedom movement and organising and working in civil society forums to express their political opinions. Esrar, Ifrah, Samreena, Munaza, and Natasha have been brave enough in writing about their experiences. They have spoken about their anger and frustration. They have resisted through more traditional channels and have voiced their feelings quite clearly. They do not use a “state language” or a “politically correct language.” They nowhere reflect or show any sign of being ‘controlled.’ Each one of them narrates her personal accounts and reasons for signing the petition without being placed under the comfortable covers of silences and protection. Natasha’s (one of the authors of *DYRKP*) sensitivity, empathy, determined courage, and importantly the question she puts to herself, “who was I really,” makes her a rebel to resist and sign the petition against physical/sexual violence. She writes:

The ignominy of rape, coupled with allegations of lying about it seemed to me utterly unjust and cruel. I have always fought against the belief that women who are raped or abused in any way should suffer silently. There must be some way of ensuring justice. We should have to find one. After all, for how long would violence against women be justified as the collateral damage of war? (*DYRKP* 13)

Munaza Rashid’s (another author of *DYRKP*) belief that “[r]esistance is existence” speaks much about her resistance as a Kashmiri woman. She has been bold enough in writing what her male colleagues would often hesitate even to speak about inside the four walls of a room. She has become the voice of every Kashmiri girl who desires to speak her heart out. She says that her first reaction after reading an article about Kunan Poshpora was anger and helplessness. She is now well aware of the “terrible crimes” that were committed by the Indian forces, The ground reality which was invisible from her eyes is clear now. The bubble had broken and she has changed. She states, “I changed. When we chose to be quiet and trust India, we were cheated and betrayed. When we raised our voice, we were crushed. Resistance and not silence is the choice” (16).

Samreena Mushtaq’s tale is quite empathetic. There are so many people in Kashmir with a similar story. Her father was abducted by a contingent of the Border Security Force (BSF). He was taken to a notorious interrogation centre, subjected to the worst forms of torture and was killed. It was only at the age of 14 that she came to know about her father and his traumatic experiences when

she chanced upon a newspaper cutting. Her mother had kept the information and cutting hidden from her. Her motivation to pursue the Kunan Poshpora case has been to take revenge of her father's murder and to expose the brutalities of the Indian state in Kashmir. She states:

Our struggle is not about outcomes, but about developing a culture of resistance where impunity will be questioned by the people, where we will not remain silent in the face of oppression. The fear that such a thing can happen to us is much greater than the fear that our careers will be ruined. To live a life with dignity and honour is more important than anything else. (22)

Any Kashmiri girl can relate to Ifrah Butt, another author of *DYRKP*. Ifrah has explicitly talked about the harassment that she faced from the security personnel. She writes that she was very much agitated by the way the army men stared at her, whistled, winked, or passed a remark. A normal girl would/could generally do nothing about it. She would ignore or walk out gracefully. Ifrah says, “[B]ut how could I do that? I was not born to be troubled by anyone, so I used to give back strategic glare to show that I was not scared” (25). She had a great desire to do something productive for Kashmir and never wanted to limit her desires just to the mere glares, so she decided to volunteer to work for a report on violence against women for the Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society. She writes how when one day her mother asked her “who can be part of this petition” and her reply was “any woman whose conscience is alive” (25). To which her mother replied, “why not me then” (25). Her strength to fight against injustices comes from her mother who had willingly agreed to sign the petition. This mother-daughter duo is a true embodiment of resistance and the fearful desire of hundreds of Kashmiri women to fight against injustices done to them.

Essar Batool says that it took her quite some time to know about the occupation in Kashmir, that too through a non-state writer. It is said that charity begins at home, if charity begins at home, so should human judgment. That is exactly what Batool did. She had started the resistance at a quite young age by rebelling against the set patriarchal norms at home. She is a voice that has spoken against the state that manages to control opinions and views and covers the truth by controlling structures that are ostensibly for the welfare of people. Through her writing, she gives vent to her anger and anguish and has made resistance her mother tongue. She writes:

I could never live in criminal complacency about this occupation. It is extremely suffocating when you live in a place that is so militarized that colour becomes a casualty in the vast spread of military green; where the institution of oppression coerces you into presenting a rosy picture of the valley and want you to see the positive side of the occupation. There is no positive side of an occupation. (27)

Batool pictures the bold reality of occupation in Kashmir. In an occupation, one can only witness bloodshed, destruction, and criminality. Woman of sense and sensibility cannot withstand the false depiction of occupation and remain silent about it.

### **Kashmiri culture and woman empowerment**

While *DYRKP* repeatedly underlines the fact that women of Kashmir were exposed to adversities in the form of rape and sexual violence, it also foregrounds how these women showed positive adjustment. Resistance has given a platform to express inner pain to a Kashmiri women. Their song popularly known as ‘Wanwun’ becomes a cultural expression of their resistance. ‘Wanwun’ is a tradition that helps these women to express clearly how they feel and what they want to convey. The songs become emotional repositories of their grief and a tool to vent it out. The songs grieve their dead sons, missing husbands or their own perseverance and courage. They show their resistance by venting their emotions even on occasions of joy (during a wedding). *DYRKP* shows that one needs not be primarily a college-going, middle-class city girl to participate in a mass protest or have a strong political opinion about the occupation. They state:

Women have resisted through more traditional cultural channels and have voiced their feelings quite clearly. We have been told of women glorifying those killed by the Indian army as martyrs, through wanwun, the songs are sung at the moments of celebration in Kashmir. (6)

Seema Kazi quoting Rita Manchanda in her book *In between Democracy and Nation: Gender and Militarization in Kashmir* says that “as a cultural expression of resistance, women would break out into a Wanwun, the traditional Kashmiri song of celebration, intertwining couplets in praise of local mujahideen (freedom fighters)” (6).

The occupation has empowered women. This empowerment is the function of the resistance against gender specific brutalities. In a way, Kashmiri women have become more independent. They are emerging as fearless writers/authors/columnists, and political activists. Be it a rape survivor, a half widow<sup>4</sup> or a political prisoner, they have the desire to live and face the world boldly. They see themselves as survivors rather than victims. Aspirations among ‘half widows’ (a term which is generally used as a victim card and a social stigma) are high, however, despite the hard challenges. They are raising their children by setting the best examples as breadwinners for a headless family:

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<sup>4</sup> “Half widows” is a term used for those married women whose husbands have gone missing since the onset of existing armed conflict in the region of Jammu and Kashmir. The missing men are not officially declared dead. This has created a peculiar situation for these women as to their matrimonial status. They are living in an ambivalent zone where they are neither formally divorced, nor married nor widows. Such women are called “half widows.”

[Half widows] have emerged as survivors by not only continuing with their lives but also providing support to their families in both economic and emotional terms. The education of the children is on the top priority of the half widows and irrespective of their economic status they want to give quality education to their children. (Ather Zia 2007)

Kashmiri women have embraced all the stigmas of life with great resilience – be it re-marriage, widowhood, talking about their mental health, rape, etc. Asia Jeelani in her article “Turmoil and trauma, Voice Unheard” quotes Dr Arshad, a leading psychiatrist of Kashmir valley regarding the poor mental health of Kashmiri women (half widows) whose husbands have gone missing:

[U]sually in depression the patient is left with no desire to live but these women (half widows) amazingly have expressed a strong will to live, they exhibit a strength unknown in depressive patients perhaps for the reason that they believe that their husbands are alive and their heart refuses to accept the fact that they might not be alive. A woman whose husband has disappeared even after nine years believes he will come back and she longs to live for the day. (7)

Post-traumatic stress disorder is common in females who live in the atmosphere of war. Experts believe that this could be because of the sudden burden of responsibilities which were traditionally the responsibilities of the male members of the family. Reported or unreported psychological trauma because of sexual/physical violence and the encircling anxiety-ridden atmosphere is the chief elements in the deteriorating ‘mental’ health of the victim. Zainab Akhtar too reiterates this fact when she says that “[a]lthough receiving psychiatric treatment was a taboo in Kashmiri society, the recent years have seen an increase in the number of female [psychiatric] patients” (Akhtar 2007). Thus, Kashmiri women are strong enough not to fear death.

### **Resistance against violence**

These women, though adversely hit by war, are not emotionally weak; rather they show resistance to emotional exploitation. They do not find themselves incomplete in the absence of their men. They are capable of raising their children alone by themselves. The war seems to have helped them to live an independent life and made them more confident in decision making. B.A. Dabla in his recent study titled “Impact of Conflict Situation on Children and Women in Kashmir” finds:

Even with the provision of remarriage in Islam, most of the Kashmiri war-widows do not remarry to ensure the social security of their children. As per research reports, only 8 per cent of the estimated number of war widows have remarried or intend to remarry while 91 per cent have not remarried and decided not to marry. 65 per cent of



the remarried women kept their children with themselves and their new husbands did not object. (Dabla 89)

Women of Kashmir, be they rape survivors, political/social activists, academic researchers or writers claiming justice, have shown resistance against male impunity. Their efforts as seen in *DYRKP* and even in the real battleground are considered trivial and useless. Still, Kashmiri women have never given up. Essar Batool and her co-writers say that they were often intimidated by the army personnel because they would give those intimidating looks, “often they didn’t ask, just sized us up from top to bottom, wanting to make us uncomfortable under the male gaze” (181). They write how the lawyers of Kupwara court would pass comments like, “how can you girls be doing all this” (181), laugh and joke and look at them with uneasy glares. The police were unwilling to cooperate. The armed forces would deliberately prolong the case to intimidate them and to wear them out. Most of the persons they met for interviews said the same thing that fighting the case was a waste of time and resources and could be a threat to their own lives: “What will you do, a bunch of young girls? Why are you begging for justice? Don’t you care for your lives? Don’t you care for your family? Do you know you can be raped too?” (192) But these young women writers have univocally won the toughest battle against the doubts and in-capabilities raised by the skeptics, realising that resistance has no gender.

### Conclusion

Kashmiri women have played various roles within the resistance movement since the onset of insurgency in nineties and continue to combat and overcome the challenges. When compared to men, their contribution as well as capabilities are often invisible. Kashmiri women have been at the centre of the resistance movement. Even though they have been portrayed as victims, they have survived and resisted stoically. It is not that they are just fighting against the everyday threats like sexism and street harassment but also against a force that has occupied them and scrutinises very closely every attempt of theirs to speak against its uniformed representatives. With the turn of the century, one sees an emergence of Kashmiri women as renowned writers, directors, and actors and social and political activists. Their creative and activist interventions express their repressed emotions, suppressed existence, and also the channels for their resistance<sup>5</sup>and rebellion.

Critics such as Barbara Harlow deem resistance through cultural productions (e.g., literature) a crucial mode of resistance. According to her, “Resistance literature calls attention to itself and to literature in general, as a political and politicised activity. The literature of resistance sees itself

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<sup>5</sup>The term ‘resistance’ in connection with literature was first used by the Palestinian scholar Ghassan Kanafani in the title of his book, *Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine: 1948-1966*, published in 1966 (Harlow 2).

furthermore as immediately and directly involved in a struggle against ascendant or dominant forms of cultural production” (Harlow 28-29). Kashmiri resistance literature challenges the dominant historical and political narratives as well as expresses the suppressed voices from Kashmir. Besides the writers of *Do You Remember Kunan Poshpora*, there are some more famous women writers such as Baby Halder, the author of *Aalo Aandhari (A Life Less Ordinary)*; Nitasha Kaul, a poet, an activist and a writer of the novel *Residue*; Saba Shafi, the author of *Leaves from Kashmir*; Zooni Chopra, the author of *The House that Spoke*; Nayeema Mehjoor, the author of *Lost in Terror*; Paro Anand, the author of *No Guns at My Son's Funeral*; Padma Sachdeva, a Dogri writer whose anthology *Meri Kavita, Mere Geet (My Poem, My Song)* was bestowed with Sahiya Akademi Award; Shereen Bhan, an Indian news anchor and also an editor of *Young Turks*. Batool, Butt, Samreena, Munaza and Natasha as women writers have been able to generate a lens through which one can clearly see how openly the women writers have brought issues like impunity, physical violence, resilience, and resistance to the forefront.

In *Gender, Space and Creative Imagination: The Poetics and Politics of Women's Writing in India*, Rekha says that the ‘critical gaze’ that the women writers create against the set patriarchal discourses, prospects “strategic vantage points” to untangle the tangled yardsticks of patriarchal contours (30). The belief that crime can never die in the new generation women writers, makes them resist injustice and bring them together in their fight against all hues of injustice. These women writers are brave and conscientious, as they refuse to be intimidated by any show of patriarchal power and have the courage to stand by the victim and her dignity. They do not passively hope for justice but become an active instrument to stake their claims for it. Through their writing and their acts, they give strong messages to the world that they have neither forgotten nor will ever forget the tales of gender-based brutalities and injustices. They are not mere victims but fighters.

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