



Special Article

Azadi vis-à-vis Kashmiri Women: The Question of Nation in Nayeema Mahjoor's Lost in Terror

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Kashmir, as a geo-cultural space, has been at the centre of numerous political debates and conflicts since the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. Though it is an integral part of Indian territory, Kashmiris have never been able to either completely integrate into India or secede from the northern territory of India. Residents of Kashmir valley and the adjacent region have remained in a state of dilemma due to their inability to decide on the fate of their citizenship. On one hand, different militant groups, actively engaged in disseminating the notion of 'azadi' through their violent activities, have been influencing the Kashmiris to raise their voice against the central government; and on the other, the soldiers deputed in the Kashmir valley by the India government, have been attempting to suppress the 'azadi' movement by killing the militants involved in spreading terror in the region. This clash, between the militant outfits and the central forces, has indeed put the entire region in a state of indeterminacy. Kashmiris, since the creation of two nations in 1947, have been witnessing violence, and in the present scenario, Sumantra Bose believes that the "conflict" in the region "stands" at the "crossroads" and the violence in the Kashmir valley can stop only "through diplomacy and stagecraft" (291). In fact, the condition in Kashmir worsened mainly after 1980, when, according to Bose, "an armed rebellion against Indian authority" mobilised thousands of Kashmiris to demand freedom, leading to a massive bloodshed in the region (2). Discussions on the issue of freedom or 'azadi' in various chronicles and critical books often tend to ignore the condition of Kashmiri women. Historians generally tend to read the 'azadi' movement in Kashmir from the point of view of the nation versus state

conflict. The notion of freedom is significant in the context of Kashmiri history and culture, but it is not a purely male-centric discourse. Kashmiri women played a vital role in raising their voice against the injustices of the state, though there were many whose voices were suppressed within the domain of family. Among the recently published literary narratives of Kashmiri, Nayeema Mahjoor's *Lost in Terror* (2016) is a commendable piece of work that focuses on the psychological turmoil of Kashmiri women and their condition in society. This novel makes an attempt to capture the spirit of Kashmiri women, belonging to different classes of society, and their respective responses to the 'azadi' movement. This article seeks to discuss the representations of Kashmiri women in Mahjoor's novel, and in doing so, it attempts to explain the complex negotiation between the notion of 'azadi' and the Kashmiri women. This article also foregrounds the gendered idea of 'azadi'.

Activism and Kashmiri Women: A Model of Feminist Geography

In the context of a discussion on the activism of Kashmiri women which has been foregrounded in this novel, the theoretical premise of feminist geography provides a suitable framework to map the subtle nuances of protest emerging from a particular spatial zone. Women in Kashmir engage with the notion of 'azadi' to build a comprehensive network of feminism located in a space that incorporates differences of opinions and resists homogeneity. In the introduction of their edited volume, *Feminist Geography Unbound: Discomfort, Bodies, and Prefigured Futures* (2021), Banu Gökariksel, Michael Hawkins, Christopher Neubert, and Sara Smith discuss the possibility of formulating the praxis of feminist geography which aims to focus on "new modes of thinking about and doing geography" (6). Such geographies of thought and action, Banu Gökariksel et al. argue are unbound spaces "that are nondeterministic and nonessentialist" where hierarchies are abolished and hegemonic discourses are challenged (6). The emphasis of this new discourse is on the "discomforting encounters" of "gendered bodies" (6-7) that seek to form an alliance to enunciate new modes of "feminist world-making" (18). The narrator in Mahjoor's novel is a journalist who uses the space of the radio station to foreground narratives of violence. She builds relationships with many Kashmiri women to understand their oppression, and in doing so, she also convinces them to protest against the male hegemonic structure. Shiasta, a professional actor and performer, allies with the narrator to organise performances aiming to sensitise the women to issues related to their roles and activities. When Fareeda, a

housewife, loses her husband, the narrator advises her to channelize her anger against the militants by adopting an activist stance. The narrator organises awareness programmes at the radio station to project the pathetic condition of Kashmiri women, encouraging women such as Fareeda and Saida (a woman who loses her son) to articulate their anger against the militant groups. Faiza, a relative of the narrator, is trained to think independently about her career and she is even convinced by the narrator to reject the proposal of marrying a militant. Instead of devoting her mind to philosophical writings, she is encouraged to adopt an activist mode of thinking. Thus, the radio station in Mahjoor's novel becomes an interesting site for forming an association of women desiring to script a feminist mode of thinking based on "discomforting encounters" of "gendered bodies". These encounters are spatially located in a territory (radio station) that is "nondeterministic and nonessentialist" where activism acquires a new shape enabling all the participants to contribute to the notion of "feminist world-making". Criticism of the concept of 'azadi' in Mahjoor's novel is therefore rooted in the discourse of feminist geography as the voices of dissent emerge from a space of mutual understanding and care.

Whose 'azadi'?: Narratives of Kashmiri Women

Mahjoor's novel, *Lost in Terror* is about those Kashmiri women who silently fought dual battles: one at home and another outside home. The novel is dedicated to those women, who according to Mahjoor, "lost everything" (Kindle Location 83 of 3823; original emphasis), including their respect and identity, in a reign of terror. Mahjoor chooses an anonymous woman narrator to present the narratives of loss and through the eye of this narrator the lives of different Kashmiri women are presented. Instead of focusing on the anonymous narrator's predicament and difficulties, the novel presents a cluster of mini-narratives of Kashmiri women that foreground the aspirations and failures of these women. Set against the background of 'azadi' movement in Kashmir during the 1980s, these narratives seek to question the legitimacy of this movement while drawing attention to the subjugation of women in the domestic space. The narrator is a journalist for the All India Radio station located in Kashmir and her family consists of her four sisters, her father, and her in-laws. Being a journalist and also because of her well-educated status, she is alienated from the other Muslim women in society who are often unable to receive a good education. While referring to the 'azadi' movement at the beginning of the narrative, she feels quite confident of the fact that this "enthusiasm about

Azadi” is not going to bring any change in their “otherwise-mundane lives” (Kindle Location 146 of 3823). This ‘azadi’, as the narrator conceives, is required for the Kashmiris and she even wishes to live in that Kashmir which shall not be under the control of the Indian government, but her idea of achieving ‘azadi’ is radically different from her husband’s (Asad) notion of ‘azadi’, who like the Islamic militants, believes that freedom can be achieved by using guns and bullets. ‘Azadi’ for the narrator is about Kashmir becoming a separate state with no affiliation to any nation. Despite nourishing a different version of ‘azadi’, the narrator’s voice is suppressed by her husband and eventually she realises that like the “government” which treats “Kashmir as her property” (Kindle Location 548 of 3823), she too is Asad’s property. Thus, the notion of ‘azadi’ in the context of this narrative assumes a gendered dimension. Nyla Ali Khan, in her introductory essay, “Special Issue: Writing About Kashmir” while discussing briefly the condition of Kashmiri women observes that, “Kashmiri women” are forced to “wipe away their footprints” which eventually has led to the obliteration of their significance in the history of Kashmir (4). Mahjoor’s narrator sheds light on this aspect by highlighting the eradication of the role of Kashmiri women vis-à-vis ‘azadi’ movement. In this context, one may refer to Partha Chatterjee’s theoretical perspectives on nation and nationalism. He argues that the “root of our postcolonial misery” is because of our “inability” to frame “new forms of the modern community” (11). He further argues that the nation, as an “imagined community”, must enable citizens to construct ideas based on synchrony between “community and state” (11). In Mahjoor’s novel, the subnationalist spirit of forming an independent state of Kashmir is driven by the militant groups’ desire to colonise the valley. These militants, who are trained to actively work to achieve freedom in Kashmir, are not connected to the mainstream Muslim community. Their theoretical idea of ‘azadi’ is the functional framework based on which the common Kashmiri people dream of achieving independence. Thus, in the case of Kashmiri people, the very idea of forming a separate and independent state of Kashmir is imported from the militants, which is reflective of the inability of the Kashmiris to form an autonomous notion of a “modern community”. Asad and other Kashmiri men support these militants and their aim to achieve independence, without realising that the community’s aspirations are not synchronous with the imagined idea of Kashmir. These militants, actively involved in conducting violent activities, are exiled from the community and they are imposing notion of ‘azadi’ in the minds of common Kashmiris. This phenomenon indicates a rift between the idea of Kashmir and the community of people that constitute

the state of Kashmir. Chatterjee's ideas, therefore, are crucial to the understanding of the concept of 'azadi' in Mahjoor's novel.

The narrator's relationship with Asad elucidates the complex issues related to the concept of 'azadi'. Asad tortures the narrator and does not allow her to work independently. She is under the constant surveillance of both Asad and the militants who seek refuge in Asad's house. On one occasion, the narrator expresses her fear of being watched by unknown people who "had trapped" her "mind and soul" and the "constant staring" had made her "mentally weak" (Kindle Location 892-893 of 3823). Asad, as the narrator realises, is not aware of his political goals; his sole aim is to fulfill the needs of the militants without bothering about the consequences of supporting them. At home, Asad discusses politics and the future of Kashmir, however, in reality, there is a big gap between his theoretical idea of 'azadi' and the praxis. The narrator attempts to convince Asad to dissociate from the militants and think of conceptualising 'azadi' in a different manner. But, this attempt fails and Asad becomes a dreadful "shadow" for the narrator (Kindle Location 900 of 3823). While the narrator distances herself from the 'azadi' movement, there are numerous incidents cited by the narrator to critique the notion of freedom in Kashmir. Shiasta, a professional actor, is killed by the militants because she refuses to secretly carry guns to a particular place. Her death is mourned by all the employees of All India Radio because she has performed numerous times at the station. The narrator is deeply shocked after receiving the news of Shiasta's murder but she also questions the legitimacy of the freedom movement. This movement, she feels, has "become a very deadly weapon" and women such as Shiasta are "falling into an abyss of shame and disgrace" (Kindle Location 1222-1223 of 3823). Shiasta's murder is indicative of the failure of the notion of 'azadi' in relation to Kashmiri women. These women lack agency as they are being used by radical men to achieve freedom which denies basic rights to common Kashmiri women. After Shiasta's death, the narrator becomes aware of the dangerous notion of freedom and states, "I dreaded Azadi" (Kindle Location 1349 of 3823). Shiasta's murder is followed by the murder of Fareeda's husband, who is suspected to be a terrorist and therefore killed by the Indian soldiers. When Fareeda's husband is killed, the narrator notes how Fareeda puts her husband on her lap and shouts loudly to claim freedom. Fareeda shouts for freedom, her loud voice tears apart the narrator's peace of mind as she ruminates on the notion of 'azadi'. While fighting secretly for the freedom of Kashmir, if men are killed on the basis of suspicion, the logic of endorsing such a concept of freedom is useless. The narrator, while reporting this incident

of killing, critiques the standpoint of Islamic militants who preach freedom without taking into account the magnitude of the loss of human lives. Fareeda's suffering is akin to Auntyji's, who loses her beloved son. Auntyji's son is also suspected to be a terrorist by the soldiers and they kill him. After her son's death, Auntyji's joviality is transformed into melancholy, which leads to her death. The narrator describes another incident that exposes the ruthless attitude of the militants. At Asad's house, a village girl named, Pasha arrives to stay for a few days. This girl, finding no other safe place to seek shelter during curfew, comes to Asad's house to secure her safety. During her stay at Asad's house, the militants rape her. This incident highlights the brutality of the militants; threatening the lives of common Kashmiri people, they seek to oppress the minds of the Kashmiris. Pasha's rape provokes the narrator to question the stances of Asad and the militants supported by Asad. Another significant incident that occurs in the narrator's house subdues the spirit of her sister, Sadia. The narrator's cousin (Saida's son) goes to Bangalore for higher studies, but without completing his course, he secretly joins hands with the militant groups operating in Kashmir and indulges in acts of violence. This news shatters Sadia because she knows that her son will never return to her house. The freedom movement puts the lives of so many Kashmiri women at stake, making them suffer in different ways. These sufferings make a big impact on the narrator's life, making her feel weak and timid. When her father is hurt in a bomb blast in the market, the narrator fails to communicate with others. She is interrogated by her sister, Mehmooda for not being able to "stand up" for her "rights, desires and dreams" (Kindle Location 2646 of 3823). The narrator feels insulted, humiliated, shameful and helpless and all these incidents create a sense of self-hatred in her mind: "I loathed myself for being a woman" (Kindle Location 2722 of 3823). In fact, Mahjoor puts the narrator at centre of all these incidents to elucidate the impact of these violent and inhuman activities on the mind of a Kashmiri woman. How does a Kashmiri woman bear the trauma of insult and shame under the guise of freedom movement? Is the freedom movement really liberating for common Kashmiri women? Ideologically, whose idea of freedom is dominating the state of Kashmir? These questions are indeed very pertinent in the context of Mahjoor's narrative. The narrator, being a Muslim woman journalist, desires to organise programmes for awakening young people but her attempts fail. Prolonged periods of curfew lead to the cancellation of such awareness programmes.

Faiza, Asad's sister, is another interesting character in the novel. She loves to read books on philosophy and her vibrancy attracts the narrator. Faiza and the narrator bond

well as they discuss philosophical ideas. However, Faiza's fate is doomed when one of the militants approaches to marry her. Despite Asad's unwillingness to allow the militant to talk to Faiza, the militant proposes marrying her and compels Asad and his family members to agree. Instead of directly opposing the militant's proposal, Asad decides to send Faiza to the house of a relative in Jammu. The narrator witnesses Faiza's helplessness and the dominance of the militants which make her feel that "Faiza's condition was pitiable" and at this crucial moment of crisis her "philosophy" fails to rescue her from the "calamity" (Kindle Location 2860 of 3823).

Burka Campaign and the Question of Freedom

After the curfew period, the government officials at the radio station decide to organise a new programme for advising women victims and suggesting methods to tackle the psychological turmoil occurring due to heinous acts of violence. This programme aims to counsel the women victims, who have experienced suffering, and the "objective" is to "win the hearts and minds of the Kashmiri women" (Kindle Location 2925 of 3823). Saira, one of the colleagues of the narrator, decides to contact people in her locality who have undergone serious mental turmoil. Though the format of this new programme is not structured, it is decided that Saira shall conduct an initial survey to sensitise the women victims. When Saira returns to the station after meeting some women victims, the narrator is surprised to see her dress covered in paint. Saira explains that in the market some women wearing veils came near her and reprimanded her for not wearing burkha. In order to publicly humiliate Saira, these women put paint on her dress. This paint is a marker of Saira's anti-Islamist stance because the burka, according to these fundamentalist women, is a symbol of Muslim identity. Without a veil, a Muslim woman can never claim her religious identity. These thoughts populate Saira's mind, disturbing her to an extreme extent. The narrator, after listening to Saira's incident, realises that the "burka campaign" in the Kashmir valley has "become a part of the Azadi movement" (Kindle Location 2956 of 3823). The debate on the veil has been a major topic of discussion in the Muslim world. Katherine Bullock extensively explains the theoretical/religious discourses on the use of *hijab* in her book, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical & Modern Stereotypes* (2007). Bullock conducted several interviews to get opinions about the wearing of the veil, and explaining the stance of many Muslim women, she states that the "*hijab* is a religiously sanctioned dress that is not oppressive" and many women believe that the *hijab* is a symbol of a Muslim woman's "dignity and respect"

(xxi). Contrary to this opinion, Bullock also mentions the general viewpoint on the veil, which considers the *hijab* as a “symbol” of oppression (xxv). In the context of Mahjoor’s narrative, the *hijab* is used as a symbol of Muslim identity to subjugate women. Women cultivating the practice of wearing burkha are not aware of the fact that enforcing women to wear the veil harms the dignity of those women who are not comfortable with the idea of wearing burkha. Wearing a veil is a matter of choice and this cannot be enforced. The moment this practice is enforced the veil becomes a symbol of oppression. Saira and the narrator are tortured by burkha-clad women which creates a sense of insecurity in the minds of liberal Muslim women not willing to wear the *hijab*. The burkha campaign in the Kashmir valley is associated with the ‘azadi’ movement to contain the liberal Muslim women who have been making serious efforts to liberate the oppressed Muslim women. This campaign is a weapon used by the militants to suppress the good motives of liberal Muslim women. While pondering on the sudden rise of this burkha campaign, the narrator realises that the freedom movement has “taken a new turn” because it has become “an Islamic movement” (Kindle Location 2966 of 3823). Thus, the conflict, which initially was between dominant Muslim militants and Kashmiri women, changes its character, creating a new dispute between fundamentalist and liberal Kashmiri women. Describing the magnitude of this new dispute, the narrator observes that the media was now reporting news about this “women against women” issue in the Kashmir region (Kindle Location 2970 of 3823). Instead of the male activists, now there are women activists enforcing women to either wear the *hijab* and become devout Islam or become an outcast. Commenting on this dismal scenario, the narrator mentions that the “secular image” of the Kashmir region has lost significance, and the freedom movement has “turned into a nightmare” (Kindle Location 2974-2975 of 3823). The burkha campaign along with the act of breaking the unity of Kashmiri women is evidently evocative of the malicious intent of the militants, considering the fact that ‘azadi’ for them is a strategy of ruling the minds of Kashmiris.

Conclusion

In her seminal book, *The Life of a Kashmiri Woman: Dialectic of Resistance and Accommodation* (2014), Nyla Ali Khan deals with the problem of addressing the Kashmiri women question. For her, the idea of a “monolithic ‘Kashmiri’ female subject” is a difficult notion (2). Kashmiri women, Khan argues, do not belong to a homogenous category, and therefore the “possibility of a unified subjectivity” is an improbability (2).

Mahjoor's novel emphasises the impossibility of framing a "unified subjectivity" of Kashmiri women. These women experience sufferings differently, react to violence differently, respond to situations differently, and these differences are genuinely acknowledged in the novel. The narrator presents a series of mini-narratives to highlight these differences. In the context of the conflict between fundamentalist and liberal Kashmiri women, the narrator shows the rift between these two groups while examining their modes of conduct. Mahjoor's novel offers a deconstructive reading of the 'azadi' movement placing at its core the Kashmiri women and their attitude to freedom.

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