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Women, Trauma and Pain: A Selected Reading of Kashmiri Narratives

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Abstract:

Violence renders unspeakable trauma and pain, most importantly on women. Time and again they are either forced to bear it down in silence or as an honour to a community's orthodox beliefs. The paper brings out the human sufferings in the context of Kashmir with the help of Kashmiri short stories by multi-dimensional writers such as Akhter Mohiuddin (*Jalla's Teeth* and *The Stain*) and Siddhartha Gigoo (*The Fistful of Earth*). Through these stories, I raise a question against history, memory and violence which are so crucial to understand pain in Kashmiri women's lives. The paper also puts light upon certain forms of resistance present in the chosen narratives and how it brings home the idea of hope and humanity in every individual.

Keywords: women and pain, impunity, Kashmir, resistance, humanity.

Introduction

The partition of the Indian subcontinent- into India and Pakistan in 1947- gave birth to the conflict over the former princely state of the British Indian Empire, Kashmir. Since 1947, neither India nor Pakistan have reached consensus on an argument for the territory of Kashmir, despite three wars (1948, 1965 and 1999) fought between the two divided nations. Kashmir got divided into three parts: Indian Administered Jammu and Kashmir, Azad Kashmir (administered by Pakistan) and Aksai Chin (region controlled by Chinese since 1962). On 5 January 1949, United Nations Commission for India and Pakistan resolved the question of the accession of the state of Jammu and Kashmir to India or Pakistan by promising a free and impartial plebiscite. However, both the countries failed to arrive at this proposition and continued to postpone the plebiscite. The tensions kept on increasing as clashes triggered between the governments of India and Pakistan as to who should exercise control over the land of Kashmir. Because of the unfulfilled promise of plebiscite, a rebellion emerged in the valley. The 1987 outbreak of the anti-India insurgency in Kashmir focused on the Kashmiri's right to determine their own fate and this reemerged as a critical component of the conflict. This conflict gave birth to the violence in the valley which changed the life of the inhabitants and

their living conditions became worse than miserable. While the people of Jammu and Kashmir never received their promised plebiscite, it is clear that these issues of self-determination and freedom have been a constant source of dashed hopes and vacant promises for Kashmir and it thus, became the national level discourse as well as a discourse of human beings against the coerced inhumanity.

The modern philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer contributed in the field of pessimist philosophy of human pain and suffering. In his work *On the Suffering of the World* he elaborates on the animalistic side of human beings which causes plague and unstoppable suffering to the other and this suffering is inevitable in the world which is bad or even the worst possible.

He starts his argument by stating that human identity is supposedly about pain. Pain caused by coercion on the body of the subject or on the mind through cultural and social means, disables the being of a human. “Just as a stream flows on smoothly as long as it encounters no obstruction, so the nature of man and animal is such that we never really notice or become conscious of what is agreeable to our will; if we are to notice something, our will has to have been thwarted” (Schopenhauer 6). In a way, a man keeps going with the flow and feels content with his life but the moment subordination or oppression takes place, his will and conscience get disrupted. A man’s suffering wears down his inside as well as his outside world, so much so that pain becomes unbearable and unstoppable. Furthermore, he suggests that it would be better if life did not exist at all because trouble would keep on happening and cause the suffering. He regards suffering and violence as an innate characteristic of a man and to overcome this he vents out his emotion and loss through art and philosophy. Schopenhauer says that art becomes a humanitarian relief for the creator. He writes, “The world is Hell and men are on the one hand the tormented souls and on the other the devils in it” (Schopenhauer 15). He considers the nature of the world as evil which only commits the crime against another human being and that brings suffering. He ends his argument by proposing an outcome for every individual. He says that art becomes a home for mistreated souls and brings the “fellow-sufferers” together. It illuminates the ray of hope for the resistance from the marginalized section of the society. Despite the nature of everything that comes before a man in his life, Schopenhauer recommends good-will. “Tolerance, patience, forbearance and charity, which each of us needs and which each of us therefore owes” (Schopenhauer 60) – good-will towards fellow beings, good-will towards life and good-will towards humanity.

The human predicament and intricacies are the central most themes present in the Kashmiri narratives. The Kashmiri narratives become the expression of its people who have been living in a void and records the voice of flowing Jhelum that witnesses all the turmoil. Not just the traditional poetry of Queen Begum Akhter and the modern nostalgic poet Agha Shahid Ali, but also the fictional stories of writers like Akhter Mohiuddin and Nayeema Mahjoor portray their land of fire and ashes, steeped into the bloodied history.

To build upon Schopenhauer's premise, it can be said that the relationship between women and pain is perhaps the oldest. Time and again, the pain is perpetrated on a woman's body, conscience and being in the name of honour and tradition. They become the victims of gendered violence which is done during the times of bloody conflicts between two communal forces or between the state and the civilians or through any other way. The spirit of a woman is connected with pain, so much so that she goes through with it right from her familial set up or to the larger stage of state and social politics. Urvashi Butalia in her critical memoir on partition titled *The Other Side of Silence* metaphorically titles one of its chapters as *History is a Woman's Body*, showing how history was played out on women's body during the partition of India and Pakistan and how women became passive, suffering subjects of history without being able to claim recognition of their suffering and even martyrdom. This entire history of pain which is rooted in suffering, rupture, arson etc. shows how women is left to be possessed by the patriarchal society which does not even allow them to speak about their pain. Every murder, scam or wars were either made off with money, property or women. "Of course, women, Women of course" (Roy 314). Their desire, dream, career, youth and love are grounded in the name of freedom and security. In Kashmir, human rights are doubly violated on women and in the end, they become widows, half-widows, orphans and half-orphans etc.

A Case Study

The story of the twin villages Kunan and Poshpora in Kashmir shows the victimization of women who were raped, tortured and faced other atrocities against the army. The silence around such crimes breeds impunity and doubly oppresses the women who should not have suffered such cruelty. On a cold February night in 1991, a group of soldiers and officers of the Indian Army marched into the houses of these two villages. They were given the orders of a cordon- search for the militants who were suspected to be hiding in the villagers' homes. At that night the soldiers forcefully entered inside the locals' houses and commanded the male members to step outside and stand in a queue for search and interrogation. While very few

soldiers remained outside, most of them entered the houses where female members were to keep still. On that cold night in winter, they brutally raped around forty women in the twin villages. This incident of mass rape, later on went unheard, the police closed the case on the grounds of being baseless and of without having any reliable witness and wagged a green flag for impunity in Kashmir. With the help of this case study, it becomes more important to reach out to the narratives of women in Kashmir and to understand their trauma.

Fictional Narratives

Apart from sexual violence, the fictional narratives of Kashmir show the disturbance in the life of commoners. This disturbance becomes a rupture in the case of women who are doubly marginalized. *Jalla's Teeth* is a story of a young girl who has passed her matriculation examination successfully and has also obtained a law degree. Her father Rasul who is a donkey driver is filled with pride by his daughter's academic achievements. Every time he sees the name plate outside his house- Jalla Rasul B.A. L.L.B., he feels immensely happy and proud. On a curfew day, Jalla requests army personnel to allow her father to meet someone on the other side of the road. The soldier grants permission, Rasul crosses the road and Jalla comes back inside the house. After a minute or two she hears the old man's cries outside the road and rushes out to find out the reason for this chaos. She is baffled by the brutal condition in which her father has been beaten up by a soldier. Jalla then confronts the officer and enters into an altercation with him. At the end of the story, the curfew is uplifted on the next day and Rasul is miserably looking for Jalla's teeth which might have been broken by the soldier while beating his daughter for arguing with them.

This story shows the helplessness of a daughter who is well-educated and yet deprived of humanity. The irony of the story is that Jalla holds a law degree which empowers her to rise against the oppression and still she has no voice of herself against the powerful structures of the society. This shows the futility of her education in a military ridden society. Her qualification becomes just a fancy wall hanging of which a father is very proud of but it has no power over the men outside her threshold. The last scene explains how Jalla's identity of an independent, educated woman has been crushed just because she was trying to reason her father's condition. The physical violence committed on her, left the wounds on her being and psyche. This pain is doubled after seeing the poor condition of her father.

“Suddenly the soldiers started beating Jalla mercilessly and she received blows on her head, neck and face injuring her badly” (Mohiuddin 85). The soldiers misused their authority

and stroked Jalla just because she was trying to answer back for her father who was hit by another soldier. This story documents the barbaric impunity which is a serious violence in Kashmir. Men fought with each other through guns but to fight with themselves, they vent out their frustration, anger, grief and honour on a women's body. It overwhelmed them to be violent on the subject which has been silenced and not in power to rebel or fight back. Women become the battlefield on which two oppositions fight, in which one wins and the other loses. But the battlefield becomes infertile and abandoned once the power is attained. Their body and emotions become the ground through which guns are uploaded and used to kill. Similarly, Jalla became the battle ground between her father and the soldier. She became the victim of this violence for no reason and the criminal went escort free. The soldier arbitrarily chose Jalla as their prey and hunted down her being through physical as well as verbal abuse.

Even after taking the permission, the authority beats her father mercilessly and Jalla witnesses all this by her own eyes and still couldn't help anything. Jalla not just went through the humiliation as a woman but also as a daughter. In fact, it is the latter which is leading the former in the story. The pride of her father and shining stars in his eyes were snatched away by the soldiers who, for once did not think about the daughter to whom they granted the permission. Jalla thought that all her father did was went across to meet someone and that too with the permission, still they destroyed, first her pride and then her own self being. Undoubtedly, the narrator has given a voice to Jalla's character. She speaks up, reasons, questions and confronts but all that is too powerless in front of the men in authority. The last scene of the story is very heartbreaking when Rasul tries to find Jalla's teeth in order to reconcile with her emotional and physical pain. "Rasul was searching something while shedding tears. Without speaking to anyone in particular he was saying Jalla's teeth, they must be lying here somewhere" (Mohiuddin 85). Jalla on the other hand, gets into her shell on the very next morning when the curfew is uplifted.

Jalla's Teeth defined the horrible culture of impunity which took place after the valley was flooded with soldiers at check posts, in bunkers and in every village to keep their eyes on the locals' activities. In every part of the valley, people were being watched- walking, praying, bathing, cracking jokes, shelling walnuts or taking a bus-ride home- all the time they were in the rifle- sights of a soldier. This surveillance was also kept on women to meet off their lusts. "The army officer, perhaps moved by Jalla's beauty replied that Yes, Yes, go uncle go" (Mohiuddin 83). The soldier glanced at Jalla and just to impress her granted the permission to Rasul. But another soldier attacked her for practicing her right to speak up against wrong. Till

the time Jalla was appeasing and soft-spoken, the soldier took to her beauty but when she raised her voice against them, they suppressed her. Such crimes went unrecorded in the valley only because they were committed by soldiers who are meant to protect people. The irony of the story is that they were the ones who hit and chained down the basic rights of civilians. Women were forced to shut their mouth and submit to unnatural whims in their private as well as public sphere. Jalla, who was a lawyer and also took care of her father by performing all the other household duties, became a victim on a curfewed day. That incident brought long and painful curfew in her life. It is disheartening to see innocent people like Jalla and Rasul being so ill treated by others in the difficult times.

The next story *A Fistful of Earth* is a beautifully woven story of a young girl who is a doctor and now comes to know about her ties with an old lady whom she has to operate. Even long gap and ages fail to erase their connection. The story begins with a telephone ringing in the early morning which the girl answers in a half-asleep voice. The call is from her hospital where she is asked to rush to report for an emergency case. This routine becomes her daily schedule and day and night the girl attends to her patients, operates on emergency cases and when comparatively free, she is assigned to conduct autopsy in the morgue. The intern's world is nothing but the conglomeration of diseased and decaying hearts, lungs, kidneys and livers. "She was used to the peals of a ringing telephone. If there was one thing she wanted to throw out of the window, it was the telephone in her hostel room. 'Why do things happen so suddenly?' she wondered" (Gigoo 72). Then another morning the telephone rang but this call was from her village. A neighbor informs her gravely that her mother has passed away and they are waiting for her to come so that they can start with the cremation ceremony. For a moment she couldn't believe what she heard. She thought her mother must be joking to call her back home. But it wasn't any prank, her mother was really dead and it was no joke. She boarded a bus and reached her village. She saw her mother's body clad in a shroud when she reached home. After her mother's cremation she decides to leave for her hospital job but before leaving she invited her father to come to live with her in her hostel. The story then proceeds to the hospital when an old woman has been admitted. The woman had a nervous breakdown and she did not last another night. On that same night, the father accompanies his daughter to the morgue and there he recognizes the dead body of the old woman. He requests his daughter to visit the cremation ceremony of the woman and not only that he gathers her ashes and handovers them to his daughter to keep it as a parting gift from her grandmother's belonging. "Nothing, the father said, except a fistful of earth from your mother's grave" (Gigoo 85). In

the last part of the story the father reveals that he and mother ran away to get married secretly because of their different religion. The mother's parents who were Hindu never accepted their marriage and broke all the connections with their daughter. The story ends with a journal which the girl wrote after she gets to know about her family's background of which she feels proud as well as laments over the emotional pain she has to go through with every death and loss.

This story expresses the continuity of a historical run up with reference to Kashmir. The protagonist of the story, the young intern who works day and night treating the patients is in the state of an unspeakable pain wherein she witnesses young deaths, the cries of old parents and numerous experiments on the dead bodies of people who were once alive and beautiful. This is the time of crises in which a doctor must have a strong heart and carry out his/her duties. It describes the trauma of doctors who also witness this war. They become grave diggers of all those young ones who have died for their freedom. She is so distressed with her work that in hospital she imagines to be living in a different world where there is only pain and death. She could not help feeling the pain of each and every patient she comes across with. It is the pain which is not in the x-ray or in the injection but on her being a human in the times where violence is going on. Her pain doubles after her mother's death. Her mother repeatedly called her home to visit her parents during the holidays but she couldn't go just like those dead young ones who never went back to their homes once they entered into the war. The pain and loneliness grow on her after her mother departed from her life. The girl struggles to find a balance and stability in her personal and professional life. The times are so engrossed in pain and violence that she couldn't be happy or less sad in any of these. After the death of her mother, her professional life crumbled even more.

Initially, her pain is bound inside the walls of hospital where every other day she listens or struggles with her patients' pain. But after the death of her mother, the girl loses her only hope and has been left alone to suffer with the pain that are yet to come. The deaths of her patients and her own mother disturbed her day and night to the point that she stopped talking to everyone but only suffered and survived. This legacy which starts from her grandmother who had to forego her daughter because of the religion one belongs to and the other chooses to adopt. The mother who embraced a new religion, a new faith and a new way of life for the sake of love, gave up everything – her parents, her home- even her name. Now this pain of separation and emptiness comes down to the girl who is as helpless and needful for love and care as her grandmother and mother have been. In their small world they are so bound by the circumstances and yet afar because of the same circumstances. The religion or the choices which distanced

them later brought them together in death. Although the grandmother and mother have reunited in their death, but the girl is left alone with her grief and longing. The only companion who listens to her pain, thoughts and sufferings is her diary. “Last night, I saw Mother and Father in my dream. Mother looked like a bride. She was making peach jam. Father was digging the soil in our garden and collecting deadwood. Now I have nobody to tell my secrets to. On certain days, I write my secrets in my diary, hoping that they would reach to my mother. In the nights, loneliness grows on me” (Gigoo 81). In the story, diary becomes the symbol of humane bonding which one longs in his/her life. It records the unspeakable pain of a young girl whose world has been fallen apart by the death of her mother and grandmother who were related and yet a stranger. In Kashmir people did not talk about pain but silently shared the same grief and loss of the whole generation and of their ancestors’ as well. Especially women survived through the silence or through non-living things like girl’s diary.

The Stain is set in the backdrop of the communal riots of 1947. The Muslims were being slaughtered by Hindus and Sikhs in some regions and in other regions Sikhs and Hindus by Muslims. However, there were some people who tried to restore the humanity by displaying extraordinary love and even sacrificing their lives for the cause of harmonious pact. This story is based on a Sikh man, Abdus Samad and his wife. While Sikhs were fleeing from Bandipora, Baramulla and Hindwara to Srinagar, a maimed Sikh man with his ailing child reaches in Abdus Samad’s vicinity begging for food. Learning that the lady who offered him food is a Muslim, he is wonderstruck as how those Muslims could be so brutal who destroyed the lives of many back at home and made him flee. The man proposes that he should keep the child with Abdus Samad’s wife for she is childless and wishes to have a baby in her lap. Abdus and his wife adopt the child and rear him with passion and affection. The Sikh visits the family quite often to see his son and feels happy to see him dwelling into a little gentleman. One day the child fell ill and had to be admitted to the hospital. Abdus Samad’s wife accompanied him to the hospital and remained beside him for five long days. For her son’s better health, she prayed and even kept Quran under his pillow. She begged the doctors to heal her child at any expense or by any means. Unfortunately, the child died on the sixth day and all the efforts and prayers went in vain. “The people in the hospital were stunned. A purdah lady and a Sikh were weeping together over the dead child while far away in Punjab it was said that Sikhs and Muslims were murdering each other like beasts” (Mohiuddin 23). In fact, each party pesters the other to perform the last rites of the body as per its own rituals. In the end, it is agreed upon that the boy would be buried as per Muslim rituals where the Sikh recites his own prayer in silence.

This story shows the other side of the communal riots of 1947 between India and Pakistan. It takes an optimistic tone on the relationship between human beings. Although it nurtures the relationship of a Sikh with a Muslim, but the pain of a barren and childless mother is hidden behind the story. Abdus Samad's wife tried for a child several times but each time the child did not survive more than the age of four or five years. But when the Sikh man appeared on her threshold for food and shelter, she sees a ray of hope. Since the starving baby also needed a mother, Abdus Samad's wife offers to keep the baby and serve for his good health. The Sikh assented and the woman also felt the blessing of Allah after receiving a child in her arms. As the days passed, the child grows to be more playful, happy and healthy. The story turns painful when the child's health starts to decline and then one day he dies.

While in the Indian subcontinent pain was turning into hate. In Kashmir, at Abdus Samad's home two men came together to serve love and humanity. Before Sikh and Muslim, they were Kashmiri and even before that a human being. They both were forgiving and understanding for each other's pain. Both the families joined hands to love each other and especially the child who was in need of a mother and a home to be look after. The woman's love towards the baby was unconditional and she fed him well through day and night. Similarly, her pain for losing the child, at the end of the story, has no boundaries. Even when the child was not her own and not just that he was not even from her religion. But the story shows that love and pain have no limitations or conditions. If a person's religion, caste, color or genders get on the margins then the pain of separation with the loved ones comes in the centre. In a way, both the communities unite by the end but the pain of a mother is different and more difficult from this. It knows nothing except the idea of love, unity and harmony. As a wife, as a mother and as a human being, she transcends all the earthly barriers and rises towards humanity where an individual selflessly serves the other who is in need. But the pain of death of her child becomes more unbearable as she raised the child with her own hands. The significance of the story is that it moves beyond conflict and explores new realms of possibility in basic humanity. When rest of the country was killing each other just because of their religious identities, this mother was weeping for the unreasonable death of her adopted Sikh son. The generosity of the Sikh man is also very heart melting in the story. Instead of performing the last rites of his son in a Sikh tradition, he requested the woman to bury the child because he was nurtured in her faith, belief and practices. Both of the families found their peace in the differences they both shared and strangeness both had for each other. "Even today sometimes people see some flowers and rice on his grave. Some say these have been left there

by the Sikh but others say that Abdus Samad's wife comes after dusk wearing a *burqa* and leaves them there" (Mohiuddin 25).

Conclusion

"How do I describe my day? My day is spent with sick people who talk like us and keep silent about their fears. Each day they greet me. They count their days. What do they think when they see me in the mornings? Maybe happy to see me alive" (Gigoo 79). Whether it is displacement, communal conflicts or militarized area, the women became the conflicting or militarized zone; the women became conflicting property for the family, her society and for the state as a whole. It is the code of power-structures that run them and control them. Their pain gets dismissed when there is a battle between men in power and their stories get curtailed behind their consciousness. Both the authors have tried to bring out their bitter experiences as a woman, mother, daughter and a human being. In each of the story, we could find a possibility of resistance that the subject offers. In the novel *What the Body Remembers* by Shauna Singh Baldwin, a unique and inspiring examination of the marginalized female is conducted. Baldwin's study shows that at a site of violence, a locus of resistance and agency for the articulation can also be seen (Baldwin 57). Her novel depicts that the possibility of resistance and protest lies in owning up one's corporeal consciousness, the critical knowledge of one's victimhood and a sense of historicity. So is the case of the short narratives based on marginalized women. Jalla's resistance is found in confronting the soldiers but the soldiers who were meant to protect the civilians instead harmed them by their own hands. The protagonist of the story *A Fistful of Earth* reclaims her past and ties with her motherland through the diary in which she records all her pain and feelings. Their stories might not have reached the larger area of apprehension and sexual violence but they do comment on the eternity of human pain in a woman's life, especially in a Kashmiri woman's life.

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