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The Role of Kashmiri Women Writers in Shaping Gender Discourse

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Abstract:

Kashmiri women writers have played a pivotal role in shaping gender discourse by challenging patriarchal narratives and amplifying women's voices in literature. From mystical poet-saint Lal Ded to contemporary authors like Naseem Shafaie, their works reflect identity, resistance, and empowerment. These writers use poetry, fiction, and autobiographical narratives to highlight the intersection of gender, conflict, and cultural transformation in Kashmir. Their literature critiques socio-political structures that marginalise women while celebrating their resilience and agency. The ongoing conflict in Kashmir has further influenced their writings, making them a medium of both personal and collective expression. By redefining traditional gender roles and advocating for women's rights, Kashmiri women writers contribute significantly to feminist thought in South Asia. This paper explores how their literary contributions challenge dominant discourses, foster dialogue on gender issues, and pave the way for a more inclusive representation of Kashmiri women in literature.

Keywords: Kashmiri women writers, gender discourse, feminist literature, identity, resistance, empowerment, gender and conflict, cultural transformation, socio-political

critique, resilience, agency, traditional gender roles, women's rights, South Asian feminism, inclusive representation.

Introduction

The landscape of literary expression in Kashmir has long been dominated by male voices, mirroring the broader socio-political and cultural marginalization of women within the region. However, over the past few decades, Kashmiri women writers have emerged as powerful agents of change, challenging patriarchal norms and actively reshaping gender discourse through their literary contributions. In a region ravaged by decades of conflict, where the personal and the political issues intertwine, women's voices hold particular significance—not only as testimonies of lived experiences but also as transformative narratives that critique and reimagine societal structures. Writers such as Nilofar Iqbal, Naseem Shafaie, and Farah Bashir, among others, have carved out spaces within Kashmiri and South Asian literature to interrogate themes of identity, resistance, trauma, and agency.

This body of writing—poetry, memoirs, fiction, and journalistic essays—serves not merely as a reflection of gendered experiences in conflict zones but also as an articulation of feminist consciousness grounded in Kashmiri realities. These women writers do not simply seek inclusion in literary canons; they actively deconstruct dominant narratives, foregrounding women's subjectivities and asserting the importance of female voices in socio-political discourse. Their works intersect with broader feminist theories while remaining rooted in the particularities of Kashmiri culture, history, and politics, offering unique insights into the dynamics of gender, resistance, and resilience.

This paper examines the evolving role of Kashmiri women writers in shaping gender discourse, analyzing how their narratives contest patriarchal ideologies, document silenced histories, and

envision emancipatory futures. Through a close reading of selected texts and a contextual understanding of Kashmir's sociopolitical framework, this study aims to illuminate how literature becomes a space of empowerment and resistance for Kashmiri women. In doing so, it contributes to the broader field of gender studies and Postcolonial literature by voices that have too often been marginalised or ignored.

Historical Context: Early Kashmiri Women Writers

The historical context of early Kashmiri women writers is deeply rooted in the region's cultural, social, and literary traditions. Kashmiri literature, influenced by Sanskrit, Persian, and later Urdu, often reflected the dominant patriarchal structures of society, relegating women to traditional roles within domestic and familial spaces. Despite these constraints, some remarkable women emerged as poets and literary figures, challenging societal norms and making significant contributions to Kashmiri literature.

The literary contributions of Kashmiri women have deep roots, tracing back to the mystic and spiritual traditions of medieval Kashmir. Among the earliest and most influential figures is Lalleshwari, also known as Lal Ded, a 14th-century mystic poet whose *vaakh* (four-line verses) remains central to Kashmiri cultural consciousness. Her poetry, composed in vernacular Kashmiri, served both as spiritual guidance and as a subversion of patriarchal and orthodox religious structures. Lal Ded's verses centred on self-realization, internal divinity, and liberation, which subtly challenged the dominant Brahmanical and Islamic patriarchies of her time (Hoskote 12). Though not conventionally labelled a feminist, Lal Ded's assertion of female subjectivity within a religious and male-centred milieu laid a foundational precedent for later Kashmiri women writers.

Following Lal Ded, the 16th-century poet Habba Khatoon, often called the "Nightingale of Kashmir," played a significant role in the evolution of Kashmiri literary identity. Her lyrical

poems expressed profound emotional depth, particularly the pain of separation, unrequited love, and longing. Though her poetry appears romantic on the surface, it is also deeply rooted in the experience of being a woman in a feudal, patriarchal society. Habba Khatoon's work reflects an emerging individualism and female voice, which was rare in literary traditions dominated by male authorship (Kaul 87). Her poetic legacy is especially remarkable given that she lived in a time of minimal literacy and limited educational access for women, underscoring the oral and performative nature of early Kashmiri women's literary expression.

The contributions of these early figures were essentially spiritual or emotional in tone, but they laid essential groundwork for the emergence of modern Kashmiri women writers in the 20th and 21st centuries. Their works are often revisited by contemporary writers and scholars not only for their aesthetic and spiritual value but also as proto-feminist texts that predate formal feminist discourse in South Asia. Notably, both Lal Ded and Habba Khatoon wrote in Kashmiri, anchoring women's voices within the vernacular and offering resistance to both linguistic colonization and gendered marginalization.

While their influence is sometimes romanticized or decontextualized, revisiting these poets through a gendered lens reveals the subversive potential of their work. As Nitasha Kaul suggests, "Early Kashmiri women poets laid the foundations of a cultural memory that, while often mythologized, contains within it the seeds of a gendered critique of tradition and authority" (Kaul 90). Therefore, understanding the historical context of these literary foremothers is critical to tracing the lineage of feminist thought and gender discourse in contemporary Kashmiri literature.

Contemporary Kashmiri Women Writers and Gender Discourse

In contemporary times, Kashmiri women writers have increasingly positioned themselves as critical commentators on gender and conflict, reconfiguring the literary space to

reflect the nuanced realities of women living under political turmoil and entrenched patriarchy. The intersection of gender, identity, trauma, and resistance forms the crux of their narratives, marking a shift from the spiritual introspection of early poets like Lal Ded to a more overt engagement with feminist themes. These writers, through memoirs, fiction, poetry, and journalism, resist dominant state and patriarchal narratives and reclaim agency over the representation of Kashmiri womanhood.

One of the most significant voices in this contemporary wave is Farah Bashir, whose memoir *Rumours of Spring: A Girlhood in Kashmir* (2021) offers a deeply personal yet politically resonant narrative. Chronicling her adolescence during the peak of armed conflict in the 1990s, Bashir weaves memories of curfews, military raids, and emotional trauma with the bodily and psychological transitions of puberty. Her narrative collapses the private and public realms, demonstrating how female bodies are especially vulnerable to both militarized surveillance and domestic expectations. Bashir's writing highlights "the slow violence of everyday fear," rendering visible the often-ignored emotional toll of militarization on women (Bashir 137).

Similarly, Naseem Shafaie, widely regarded as the first major woman poet in contemporary Kashmiri literature, brings a poetic sensibility to the gendered experience of conflict. Her poetry collections, such as *Neither a Shadow Nor a Reflection* (2018), articulate the suffering of women caught between militarism and patriarchy. Shafaie's verse gives voice to maternal grief, enforced silence, and emotional labour, drawing from lived experience in conflict zones. As scholar Fozia Qadir notes, "Shafaie's poetry speaks from the margins but asserts a centrality for the gendered subject in Kashmiri political discourse" (Qadir 72).

Other voices like Nilofar Iqbal and Siddhartha Gigoo (though male, he often amplifies women's experiences in his fiction) have contributed to portraying Kashmiri women not as passive victims but as bearers of memory and resistance. Iqbal's *Amidst the Valley* (2015)

presents short stories centred on ordinary women navigating extraordinary circumstances, illuminating how gender expectations persist and mutate under conditions of chronic instability.

Furthermore, Kashmiri women journalists and essayists, such as Anuradha Bhasin and Rifat Fareed—have been instrumental in foregrounding feminist perspectives in their reportage. Their work critiques not only state oppression but also gender-based violence, honour codes, and the silencing of dissenting female voices within Kashmiri society. These writers challenge the homogenized portrayal of Kashmiri women in both nationalist and global media by offering diverse, localized narratives that resist victimhood and celebrate resilience.

Contemporary Kashmiri women writers thus represent a transformative force in both literature and gender discourse. They confront multiple layers of oppression—colonialism, patriarchy, religious orthodoxy, and militarization—while creating spaces for healing, solidarity, and feminist imagination. As Nitasha Kaul articulates, “The act of narrating as a Kashmiri woman is itself a form of resistance, a reclaiming of voice and subjecthood in a context where erasure is the norm” (Kaul 94). Through their varied yet interconnected works, these writers extend the lineage of Kashmiri women’s literary tradition, reshaping not only how gender is discussed within the valley but also how Kashmiri identity is understood globally.

Theoretical Frameworks: Feminist and Postcolonial Lenses in Reading Kashmiri Women’s Writing

To critically engage with the literature of contemporary Kashmiri women writers, it is essential to situate their works within appropriate theoretical frameworks—particularly postcolonial feminism, intersectionality, and subaltern studies. These frameworks allow for a nuanced understanding of the multiple and overlapping systems of oppression that inform the

experiences of Kashmiri women living in a region marked by protracted conflict, cultural erasure, and patriarchal control.

Postcolonial feminism, emerging as a critique of mainstream Western feminist thought, argues that gender cannot be analyzed in isolation from colonial histories, cultural contexts, and global power structures. Scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty critique the homogenization of “Third World women” in Western feminist discourse, advocating instead for an analysis rooted in local specificities (Mohanty 62). Kashmiri women writers resist both the Indian nationalist portrayal of Kashmir and the global tendency to frame Muslim women as inherently oppressed. Their narratives emphasize agency, rootedness, and cultural knowledge while highlighting the violence of militarization and occupation. For instance, Farah Bashir’s *Rumours of Spring* is not merely a personal memoir but a postcolonial feminist document that challenges the Indian state’s framing of Kashmiri women as either “victims” or “terrorist sympathizers,” instead presenting them as complex individuals negotiating violence, memory, and adolescence (Bashir 129).

Intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, offers another crucial lens for understanding how gender interacts with other axes of identity—such as ethnicity, religion, class, and geopolitical location—to produce unique forms of discrimination (Crenshaw 1242). In the context of Kashmir, intersectionality is vital to recognizing how Kashmiri women are marginalized not just by patriarchy but also by militarized state policies, communal politics, and socio-cultural norms. Naseem Shafaie’s poetry often conveys the layered pain of being a mother, a Muslim, and a Kashmiri under occupation—each identity intensifies her vulnerability while also shaping her resistance (Shafaie 23).

Moreover, subaltern studies, particularly Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s work, are relevant in examining the silencing of Kashmiri women’s voices in both colonial and Postcolonial

discourses. Spivak's famous question, "Can the subaltern speak?" resonates strongly in the context of Kashmir, where women's voices are often appropriated by dominant political narratives—whether Indian, Pakistani, or separatist (Spivak 66). Writers like Nilofar Iqbal attempt to answer this question by narrating stories that centre female subjectivities in their terms, resisting co-optation by nationalist rhetoric.

These theoretical approaches together illuminate how Kashmiri women's writing functions as both literature and activism. The texts are not simply creative expressions but political acts that disrupt hegemonic knowledge systems and articulate alternate epistemologies of survival, resilience, and justice. As literary scholar Ananya Jahanara Kabir argues, the writings of Kashmiri women "map the emotional geography of the conflict, filling the silences left by official histories" (Kabir 194).

Thus, employing these feminist and Postcolonial frameworks enables a richer, more ethically engaged reading of Kashmiri women's literature—one that honours their voices while critically engaging with the layered realities they inhabit and resist.

Comparative Analysis: Narrating the Personal and Political in the Works of Farah Bashir and Naseem Shafaie

Contemporary Kashmiri women writers have used literature for both self-expression and political resistance. Among the most influential voices are Farah Bashir, whose memoir *Rumours of Spring* (2021) explores the interiority of a teenage girl in conflict-ridden Kashmir, and Naseem Shafaie, whose poetry captures the emotional landscapes of Kashmiri women navigating the trauma of war, social expectation, and memory. Though working in different genres—memoir and poetry, respectively—both writers challenge patriarchal and militarized representations of Kashmiri womanhood, offering powerful gendered interventions into the discourse of conflict.

Bashir's memoir is anchored in the quotidian realities of growing up in a militarized society. Through a confessional and introspective narrative voice, she describes the psychological toll of militarization on the female body. Bashir's attention to her adolescent experience—marked by menstruation, bodily changes, and fear of surveillance—underscores the intimate intersections of gender and political violence. For instance, she writes, "I had started flinching at the sound of a doorbell. I began to arrange my clothes in a way that covered my developing breasts" (Bashir 94). Her narrative deconstructs the binary between public and private, showing how even the most personal spaces are shaped by the political context of occupation.

In contrast, Naseem Shafaie's poetry captures the collective emotional ethos of Kashmiri women. Writing in Kashmiri, she draws from local idioms, domestic imagery, and maternal voices to express grief, endurance, and quiet rebellion. In her poem "Mother," Shafaie writes, "I sweep not just the dust / but the silence from your footsteps / fearing what the night might bring" (Shafaie 11). Her language is spare yet haunting, using the metaphor of domestic labour to signal broader fears of violence and loss. While Bashir's memoir foregrounds a single narrative voice and bodily perspective, Shafaie's poetry gives voice to an entire community of women—mothers, wives, daughters—whose daily routines are marked by uncertainty and grief.

A key similarity in both writers' works is their insistence on centring women's experiences within the broader conflict. Neither writer allows the political to overshadow the gendered; instead, they depict how conflict exacerbates pre-existing patriarchal structures. For Bashir, this is evident in how family honour becomes a mechanism of control over young girls during times of violence. For Shafaie, it is seen in how women are tasked with preserving social continuity—through food, prayer, or silence—even as war dismantles the world around them.

However, they diverge in their stylistic approaches. Bashir's narrative is grounded in realism and memory, often drawing from sensory details and a linear temporal structure. Shafaie's poetry, on the other hand, is lyrical and elliptical, allowing space for ambiguity, allegory, and layered meaning. This stylistic difference reflects their broader thematic choices—Bashir's work is rooted in the personal archive of lived adolescence, at the same time, Shafaie is shaped by communal mourning and maternal witnessing.

Moreover, both writers contribute uniquely to feminist discourse in Kashmir. Bashir, through memoir, reclaims a narrative space traditionally reserved for male political figures or journalistic reportage. Shafaie, through poetry in the native tongue, revitalises Kashmiri women's oral traditions while inserting them into the literary canon. As literary scholar Ananya Kabir notes, "Kashmiri women's literature is not merely about loss—it is about the cultural work of remembering that loss in a language of resistance" (Kabir 198). In this way, both writers ensure that Kashmiri women's experiences are not peripheral but central to the story of the region.

Themes in Kashmiri Women Writers

Kashmiri women writers, working across genres such as poetry, fiction, memoir, and journalism, explore a complex interplay of themes rooted in gender, identity, conflict, and memory. These themes are neither isolated nor purely literary—they emerge from and respond to the lived experiences of Kashmiri women under conditions of militarization, patriarchy, and cultural displacement. Their writings reveal how the political and the personal are deeply entwined, with recurring themes such as trauma and loss, resilience and resistance, body and surveillance, and the politics of memory and voice forming the thematic backbone of contemporary Kashmiri women's literature.

1. Trauma, Grief, and Loss

One of the most dominant themes is the chronic experience of trauma and loss. Living in a conflict zone marked by enforced disappearances, state violence, and constant surveillance, Kashmiri women articulate a collective grief that is both personal and historical. In Farah Bashir's memoir, *Rumours of Spring*, the trauma of losing a loved one is intertwined with the fear of bodily violation. Bashir reflects on how everyday occurrences—like footsteps at the door or a knock at night—trigger paralyzing fear, writing, “Trauma had a strange way of embedding itself in muscle memory” (Bashir 103). Similarly, Naseem Shafaie's poetry is replete with images of absence—mothers waiting for sons, homes silenced by grief, and kitchens that no longer carry the scent of family meals (Shafaie 17).

2. Body, Surveillance, and Gendered Space

Another central theme is the female body as a site of control and resistance. In Kashmiri society, the body of a woman is often politicized—viewed as a bearer of family honour, a symbol of the nation, or an object of state scrutiny. Bashir vividly describes how growing up in the 1990s involved negotiating both public violence and private restrictions: “My body had become a battlefield—not only in the militarized streets but also within the boundaries of my home” (Bashir 78). The body becomes a metaphor for Kashmir itself—occupied, violated, but persistently alive.

3. Silence, Voice, and Subversion

Kashmiri women's writing often navigates the theme of silencing and voice. Their works reclaim narrative authority in a space where their stories are frequently told for them, either by nationalist discourse, male writers, or external observers. Shafaie's poetry, often spare and suggestive, captures the enforced silence of women while simultaneously breaking it through metaphor and allusion. Fozia Qadir observes, “Shafaie's poetics is marked by an eloquent

silence—she uses minimalism to amplify the unsaid” (Qadir 74). Memoirists like Bashir, in contrast, directly confront this silence, choosing disclosure as a form of resistance.

4. Resistance and Resilience

Despite the overwhelming backdrop of conflict and constraint, Kashmiri women’s writing also celebrates resilience. Women emerge as caretakers, storytellers, and survivors who maintain emotional continuity in the face of rupture. The mundane acts—cooking, praying, storytelling—become quiet rebellions against the disintegration around them. Nilofar Iqbal’s short stories in *Amidst the Valley* depict women who persevere through humiliation and hardship, not as martyrs but as pragmatic survivors (Iqbal 44). These works suggest that even within the tightest circles of repression, agency can be asserted through everyday choices and emotional endurance.

5. Memory and Generational Inheritance

Finally, the theme of memory, particularly intergenerational memory, is pivotal. Writing becomes a means of documenting, remembering, and passing on not just trauma but also culture, hope, and resilience. Bashir’s narrative is partly an attempt to archive her youth for future generations, while Shafaie’s poetry embeds cultural references and linguistic richness that anchor identity in times of fragmentation. As Ananya Kabir notes, “The act of remembering becomes political when entire histories are erased. For Kashmiri women, writing is a counter-archive to state-sanctioned forgetting” (Kabir 195).

The Influence of Kashmiri Women Writers on Feminist Discourse

Kashmiri women writers have increasingly emerged as transformative voices in the broader landscape of South Asian feminist discourse. Their literary interventions provide a crucial counterpoint to dominant feminist narratives, particularly those shaped by Western paradigms or mainland Indian perspectives. These writers reshape feminist thought by

foregrounding the lived experiences of Kashmiri women situated at the intersection of gender, occupation, religion, and cultural marginalization. In doing so, they offer a distinctive indigenous feminist framework that is deeply rooted in local histories, languages, and resistances.

One of the significant contributions of Kashmiri women writers to feminist discourse is their challenge to monolithic representations of Muslim and Kashmiri women. Often reduced to tropes of either submissive victims or radicalized figures in mainstream media and literature, Kashmiri women are reimagined in these texts as complex subjects possessing agency, intellect, and emotional depth. In *Rumours of Spring*, Farah Bashir breaks away from the stereotype of the oppressed Muslim girl by presenting a nuanced and intimate account of adolescence under siege. Her act of remembering and narrating is inherently political: “Writing this book,” she notes, “was about reclaiming what the conflict took away—my ability to tell my story without fear” (Bashir 9). Through memoir, Bashir enters a space traditionally dominated by political actors, affirming that personal history is as valid and potent as national history in feminist critique.

Similarly, Naseem Shafaie’s poetry introduces a gendered grammar of resistance into Kashmiri literature. Her poems give voice to women who endure and contest patriarchal and militarized violence through silence, rituals, and community memory. In her poem “Pregnancy,” Shafaie uses metaphor to speak of anticipation, fear, and change—emotions that are both personal and collective in a conflict zone (Shafaie 34). Her use of the Kashmiri language itself is a feminist act, asserting linguistic and cultural autonomy in a space often overwritten by dominant languages such as Urdu, Hindi, or English.

Beyond the thematic content, these writers also influence feminist discourse by redefining modes of resistance. Unlike radical activism that is overt and confrontational, Kashmiri

women's resistance often manifests in subtler forms—through storytelling, poetry, memory-work, and care practices. As scholar Deepti Misri argues, “Kashmiri women's resistance is embedded in the everyday. Their testimonies, songs, and silences are all forms of feminist praxis that challenge the binaries of voice/silence, resistance/submission” (Misri 162). This subversion of binary thinking is a critical intervention into global feminist theory, emphasizing that resistance can be quiet, fragmented, and deeply contextual.

Moreover, Kashmiri women writers have expanded feminist discourse by highlighting intersectionality in its most urgent form. Their works emphasize that gender-based violence in Kashmir cannot be separated from military occupation, political silencing, or Islamophobic narratives. In doing so, they align with the writings of postcolonial feminists like Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, while also extending their critiques to hyperlocalized realities. For instance, Nilofar Iqbal's short stories delve into the psychological and emotional experiences of women caught between domestic expectations and public fear, exploring how militarization seeps into every corner of personal life (Iqbal 58).

In the broader scope of Indian and South Asian feminist writing, Kashmiri women's literature introduces themes that are often absent in dominant narratives—such as state-sponsored sexual violence, enforced disappearances, cultural erasure, and trauma transmission. By writing from a space of both geographical and epistemic marginalization, these authors push feminist theory to engage with voices from the periphery. Their work critiques not just patriarchal structures, but also the complicity of nationalism, militarism, and coloniality in the suppression of women's stories.

Through their literary practices, Kashmiri women writers are not merely participants in feminist discourse—they are shapers of it. Their narratives force a reevaluation of what feminist resistance looks like, where it occurs, and who gets to define its boundaries. In

reclaiming voice, language, and memory, these writers are contributing to a more inclusive, intersectional, and decolonial feminist future.

Conclusion

The contributions of Kashmiri women writers to gender discourse are both significant and transformative. Through memoir, poetry, fiction, and critical essays, these authors disrupt dominant narratives that have long portrayed Kashmiri women as voiceless victims or peripheral figures. Instead, they reclaim narrative authority, centering their experiences, emotions, and perspectives within the broader socio-political realities of Kashmir. Writers such as Farah Bashir, Naseem Shafaie, and Nilofar Iqbal resist both patriarchal and militarized silences, articulating the complexities of gendered existence in a deeply contested and occupied space.

Their literary works challenge conventional feminist frameworks by foregrounding intersectional realities—where gender oppression intersects with colonial occupation, religious identity, and cultural marginalization. In doing so, they expand the boundaries of South Asian feminist discourse, asserting the necessity of local, contextualized feminisms that arise from within the communities they represent. The themes explored—trauma, resilience, memory, bodily autonomy, and everyday resistance—not only reveal the intimate effects of conflict on women's lives but also emphasize their enduring strength and agency.

Kashmiri women's writing thus emerges as both testimony and theory, bearing witness to historical injustices while simultaneously crafting new feminist languages of resistance. By placing their voices at the center, these writers ensure that any meaningful engagement with gender in Kashmir must begin with the women who have lived, survived, and resisted through words. Their influence continues to shape both regional and global feminist conversations, making it clear that Kashmir's women are not just subjects of discourse—they are its creators.

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