

Islam, Women, and Violence in Kashmir: Between India and Pakistan

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Islam, Women, and Violence in Kashmir: Between India and Pakistan. Nyla Ali Khan. New York: Palgrave Macmillan (Comparative Feminist Studies Series). 2010. 211 pages. ISBN – 13: 978-0230107649.

While news stories from violence battered Kashmir have appeared in the international pages/ sections of newspapers world over for the last six decades, the dominant tropes of representation haven't changed much; the voice of Kashmiris themselves have been routinely subordinated to India's and Pakistan's resounding claims of entitlement to the civic and territorial borders of Kashmir. Nyla Khan's *Islam, Women, and Violence in Kashmir: Between India and Pakistan* (2010) is extremely significant and timely for two reasons: first, she traces the political and cultural history of Kashmir's demand for self-determination through the category of "Kashmiriyat," which draws on the vibrant diversity of Kashmir's cultural and political heritage, and second, her project is feminist, drawing on the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, religious identity, and ethnicity in discussing the varied forms of resistance in Kashmir.

Khan is writing from a complex social location. Her maternal grandfather Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah spent his entire political career, both as the prime minister of Kashmir from 1948-53 and 1977-82, and during his long periods of incarceration as a political prisoner, advocating Kashmir's independence in the form of a plebiscite so that Kashmiris themselves could determine their political future. Khan re-iterates an impassioned plea for political self-determination. Placing her own speaking subject position under analysis, she cautions herself from "sanctifying the past," while navigating between "personal memories" and the "burden of history" which she has inherited (xvi). What is particularly moving and refreshing about Khan's narrative of Kashmiri history is her feminist methodology and commitment to her subject, in which she not only interrogates her own standpoint but also examines the gap between memories and histories itself. The dominant historical and political narratives of Kashmir rarely include

the memories and voices of the countless marginalized women, such as survivors of sexual violence (mostly at the hands of the Indian military and paramilitary forces), currently living in the Kashmir Valley who see themselves as agents of political action. Khan places these voices at the center of her narrative, and what we have as a result is the beginning of an urgent political and cultural discourse of sovereignty starting from the margin. She includes personal interviews with women who have been sexually violated and brutalized by the Indian military forces. Silenced by the government and alienated from their own community for being “dishonored,” some are traumatized and unable to speak while others fight to be heard (121-27).

As the second half of the title suggests, the story of Kashmir in recent history has mostly become a story of an unrelenting and brutal proxy war between India (represented by its military and paramilitary forces for the alleged protection of Kashmiris) and Pakistan (represented by the Pakistani border control forces and militant groups receiving direct and indirect support from Pakistan Intelligence Agencies). Khan complicates this paradigm a step further through a global level analysis by showing how one of the fallouts of the cold war during the 1970’s-80’s was that the Soviet Union extended its support for India’s military presence in Kashmir in 1962 by voting against the plebiscite in Kashmir (84), and in more recent history, the post 9/11 discourse in the U.S. has been also been replicated and deployed by India to bolster the presence of the Indian military in Kashmir (163-64). The demand for a plebiscite in Kashmir which India, Pakistan, and the U.N. have come close to supporting at different times has always been put aside since one of the main conditions for it as delineated by the U.N. is the withdrawal of troops by both Pakistan and India. However, as this condition has never been met by either of the two neighboring countries neither has the promise of plebiscite ever been realized (34). Moreover, Khan provides a fascinating history of every election held in Kashmir since 1948, and we find out that on most occasions the results were engineered through extensive booth capturing and intimidation, often with interference from India.

Where then does Khan locate a resource towards cultural and political self determination in Kashmir? We get her response through the course of the book, in terms of how she unpacks “Kashmiriyat”: a modern national consciousness first forged by Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah. Since the thirteenth century Kashmir has been placed under Hindu rule, Buddhist rule, Muslim rule and Dogra (Hindu) rule (1-2). While each rule brought its own share of violence and political exclusions, perhaps most so under the last Dogra rule during which the Muslim majority population in Kashmir were excluded from most governmental, police, and

military offices, the effect of the varied cultural and political histories in the region has culminated in a syncretic cultural ethos powerfully present until the 1970s and in decline ever since. The particular formulation of Kashmiriyat that Khan inherits from her grandfather is not one of abstract ideals but rather comes in the form of very specific political measures:

[...T]he eradication of a feudal structure and its insidious ramifications; the right of the tiller to the land he worked on; the unacceptability of any political solution that did not take the aspirations and demands of the Kashmiri people into consideration; the right of Kashmiris to high offices in education, the bureaucracy, and government; the availability of medical and educational facilities in Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh; the preservation of literatures, shrines, and historical artifacts that defined an important aspect of Kashmiriyat[...] 40

At the same time, it is also a cultural consciousness whose defining characteristic is that it celebrates the plurality of religious and ethnic identities in Kashmir (R.L. Hangloo qtd. in Khan 42). Khan invokes the poetry of Lalla-Ded, a fourteenth century ascetic poet, whose works have come to signal the long history of the cultural syncreticism in Kashmir. She shows how Lalla-Ded's works perform a powerful critique of patriarchal structures and traditional gender norms while calling for religious and political enlightenment.

For Khan the freedom of Kashmir and the emancipation of its women citizens are not two separate issues but very much a part of the same. One of the most compelling chapters in the book titled "Negotiating Boundaries of Gender, Community, and Nationhood" focuses on the lives of women currently residing in Kashmir. As she tells us, the study of escalating violence committed against women by the Indian military especially in last three decades (123-27) and by Pakistan-backed militants during 1940's and 1990's (29-30 and 107-08) has to be undertaken through an intersectional analysis of nation, womanhood, sexuality, religious identity, and "communal honor." In offering us a vision of women's agency in contemporary Kashmir, Khan takes us through their multiple different forms of political participation; ranging from *Dukhtara-e-Milat* (Daughters of the Nation) a reactionary group policing women's behavior, clothing, and company, to survivors of sexual violence and intimidation who refuse to stop seeking justice, and figures such as Begum Akbar Jahan and her organization *Jammu and Kashmir Markazi Behboodi Khwateen* (1975).

In her conclusion, Khan re-invokes her maternal grandfather's demand for a Kashmir that is determined by its own citizens and not the military strengths and garrisons of its powerful neighbors. Ashish Nandy's Afterword titled

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“Negotiating Necrophilia” draws our attention to some of the terrible outcomes of the years of violence in Kashmir, such as the vast human rights abuses in Kashmir, the high number of casualties, comprising not only those whose deaths are officially recorded but even higher numbers of “unofficial dead.” Showing the historical turn of certain political formations, Nandy comments on how the Kashmiri Pandits driven out of their ancestral homes have since joined hands with Hindu right wing parties in India. As Nandy says, the fallout of the sixty years of direct and proxy war between India and Pakistan has led to an intensified militarization of the two countries contributing to a culture of impunity in both states and escalating violence in other regions of the two countries. Khan’s book makes an important contribution to postcolonial and feminist scholarship on South Asia and it would be of significance to both scholars and non-specialist readers interested in the history and current reality of the growing violence against Kashmiri citizens today.