

**MOURNING TO RESIST, RESISTING TO BE MOURNED: KASHMIRI WOMEN'S  
RESPONSE TO ARMED CONFLICT**

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**Abstract**

*Conflict zones are habitually perceived or imagined as a male dominated site — and this is true for Kashmir as well — where the presence of women is not only undesired but also perhaps thought to be non-normative. It is the normative expectation that men will face the bullets publicly and women will mourn their death personally at home. Men are the visible heroes of conflict narratives — be it oral, written or visual — and women are the invisible helpless victims of conflict. But, the women of conflict torn Kashmir resist to be the silent invisible mourner: they mourn their loss publicly — “during the silent sit-ins in Pratap Park on the tenth of every month” — to magnify their power of protest and to resist state's attempt to forget their loss. In recent times Kashmir has also witnessed the emergence of female journalists and photo-journalists venturing out into the sites of encounter to record the conflict. Thus, the Kashmiri women are not only challenging the normative narrative of conflict by resisting to role play helpless mourners but they are also taking up the role to be narrator themselves because they believe conflict of Kashmir should have a female perspective. This paper, therefore, proposes to explore how the women of Kashmir respond to this almost four decades long Armed Conflict through their creative skills of words, photographs, designs and visible-nonviolent-sit-in-protests.*

**Keywords:** Kashmiri women, armed conflict, resistance, nonviolent-sit-in-protest, photo-journalism,

Kashmir is the name of a ‘terrible beauty’ which India wears in her crown. For ages India projected Kashmir as ‘heaven on earth.’ Films, literature, travelogues, and endless other references to Kashmir was always made in the currency of beauty and serenity. The sanctity of Kashmir was supposed to be preserved by the narratives of beauty. But after the Armed

Conflict of 1989, the narratives of Kashmir could not help but foreground the endless ripples of conflict, terror strike, killings and mourning. Thus, the narrative of Kashmir changed from that of beauty to that of terror and conflict. But what did not change in these near about four decades is the gendered perception of this conflict zone. Conflict zones are habitually perceived or imagined as a male dominated site — and this is true for Kashmir as well — where the presence of women is not only undesired but also perhaps thought to be non-normative. It is the normative expectation that men will face the bullets publicly and women will mourn their death personally at home. Men are the visible heroes of conflict narratives — be it oral, written or visual — and women are the invisible helpless victims of conflict. But, the women of conflict torn Kashmir resist to be the silent invisible mourners: they mourn their loss publicly — “during the silent sit-ins in Pratap Park on the tenth of every month” — to magnify their power of protest and to resist state’s attempt to forget their loss. In recent times, Kashmir has also witnessed the emergence of female journalists and photo-journalists venturing out into the sites of encounter to record the conflict. Thus, the Kashmiri women are not only challenging the normative narrative of conflict by resisting to role play helpless mourners but they are also taking up the role to be narrator themselves because they believe conflict of Kashmir should have a female perspective. This paper, therefore, proposes to explore how the women of Kashmir respond to this almost four decades long Armed Conflict through their creative skills of words, photographs, designs and visible-nonviolent-sit-in-protests.

Freny Manecksha, in her book *Behold, I Shine: Narratives of Kashmir’s Women and Children* (2017), begins with a brief history of the Armed Conflict of Kashmir and records the voice of women who have suffered and suffers the defilement and debasement of this prolonged conflict in Kashmir but are heroic in their dealing of the situation. In the chapter named “Maine Nazira, Aa Kha: Memory as Women’s Resistance”, Manecksha records and tries to analyze the role and importance of memory in resisting national forgetting. The chapter begins with the narrative of a mother of Kashmir — Parveena Ahangar — who recollects how in 1990 “[h]er son, the seventeen-year-old Javed Ahmad Ahangar, had passed the tenth class and had gone to his uncle’s house in Batamaloo where he hoped to pursue further studies” (Manecksha 78) and never returned back. The only definite information she received for the last time regarding her son was in the early hours of 17 August 1990, when there was a knock at her door and:

Parveena was told that her son, along with three other boys, had been picked up by the National Security Guard personel and taken to Hari Niwas interrogation centre. Parveena suspected that the troops were on the lookout for a militant who had the same name as her son and that they picked up

Javed, who had a speech impediment, because he had failed to answer questions with alacrity. (Manecksha 79)

It is near about three decades and still Parveena is not sure whether his son is living or dead, because there is no official declaration. But these wait of hers is not a solitary wait of a helpless, silent, weeping mother; she channelized her personal grief and hope into a protesting justice seeking voice by organizing the ‘families of the missing’ into an organization named Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP). With the help of human rights lawyer, Parvez Imroz, the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons was formed in 1994 and Parveena Ahangar is today “best known as the founder and chairperson of Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons, which makes her one of the most prominent Kashmiri women in resistance” (Manecksha 78). She resists to mourn silently as a helpless mother within the enclosed space of her home, because during her frantic traumatic search for her son’s whereabouts in various “jails and camps in Kashmir, Jodhpur, Hiranagar, Meerut and Delhi (Tihar) and the dreaded interrogation centres like Papa I and Papa II” (Manecksha 80), she realized the importance of visibility of grieving and the power of audible voice of mourning.

Immediately after her son’s disappearance, Parveena was shattered and devastated and helplessly “seesawed between hope that her son was alive and would be released, and the reality that he failed to appear even as the other boys were set free” (Manecksha 79). Within the confines of her home, her loss was personal, her lament invisible and unheard and her wait for her son seemed futile so she finally decided to step out of her home in search of her son and in pursuit of justice. The process began with the filling of an FIR and then the legal process dragged on for years but without any effective result. But, she resisted giving up all hopes for justice. She did not recover her son but she did get:

a profound understanding of the world of enforced disappearances and institutionalized denial of justice and custodial violence. Parveena recalled, ‘I met so many parents whose sons had suffered enforced disappearances after they were taken away by security troops. I met wives whose husbands had left home and never returned. And I realized that I was not alone. (Manecksha 80)

This very realisation empowered her and she began organizing the families of the missing persons and that is how Association of Parents of Disappeared Parents was formed in 1994. What is to be noted is the fact that had Parveena not stepped out of her home in search of her son, or had not many other women relatives of the missing ventured out of their private space in search of their dear and near ones in public spaces which are customarily not seen as safe or desirable for women to visit — like jails, camps, and interrogation centres — because they are thought of as ‘men-only-zone’ or may be ‘threatening-men-only-zone’ to be more specific, then perhaps Parveena would never have understood the power of visibility and

strength of voice. The visibility of the grieving parents, wives, sisters, children and relatives in these places gave her the strength to fight, to resist forgetfulness because she realized she is not alone. Their loss united them and they channelized that loss into effective protests for justice. The Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons' members decided to perform the memory of the enforced invisible member of their family only to make the grief of invisibility and unknowing all the more loud and visible. On the tenth of every month, the members assemble in Pratap Park for non-violent sit-ins protest:

In Pratap Park, protesters, *most of whom are women*, accompanied by their children or other relatives, sit with the photographs of the missing members. Sometimes they clutch these photos to their heart; at other times they tenderly caress the faces in the pictures [...] There is mourning and *loud weeping*. There are 'maternal, non-threatening, informal practices of grief' — singing snatches of a lullaby, or displaying of old clothes and belongings that had been lovingly hoarded and preserved. (Manecksha 84; emphasis added)

Deepti Misri analyzes these non-violent sit-ins protest as a "creative visual practice" which helps to magnify the power of protest. She reads this creative visual practice as an alternative narrative to the state's narrative of invisibility:

While the state rendered 'invisible' stories of enforced disappearances and custodial killings, the APDP countered the official narrative by its 'visual appropriation' of a prominent expanse like Pratap Park. Here, the deliberate movement of grief 'into the public visual sphere' redirects the gaze of tourists, passerby, Kashmiris themselves and not the least the state itself. (Manecksha 84)

Thus, the women of Kashmir mourns their loss publicly in order to resist national amnesia and by this act of theirs they declare their presence as strong activists and are not ready to accept the status of helpless victims whose condition is to be mourned ineffectually. Parveena's activism inspired many women to change the trajectory of their life from being a helpless victim to that of an assertive activist — especially half-widows — and thereby helped them to at least re-organise if not rebuild their lives.

Like Parveena and her association, some women are also trying to encounter this prolonged conflict in a productive way by using their skills of witticism, photography, and designing to counter the aggression and devastation of this ongoing conflict. Uzma Falak, a writer and a filmmaker notes how Kashmiri women began evolving a language of resistance by reinforcing it with humour:

"The troops couldn't understand Kashmiri, so women would make snide remarks or bait them with jokes. I heard accounts of how troops would be greeted with '*murga chor*' (chicken thief) — they had a reputation for stealing

poultry — and it would freak them out. *Yes, women could mobilize themselves and fight back with wit, despite all the surveillance*” (Manecksha 19; emphasis added).

A post-conflict designer like Mahum Shabir uses barbed wires and Kalashnikovs (Manecksha 8) as recurring motifs of the Kashmiri shawls she designs instead of the familiar motifs of chinar leaves and flowers, may be because she believes that those accepted traditional motifs are no longer the narrative of the present scenario and therefore if she uses them she will contribute to state’s project of unseeing — unseeing the reality of Kashmir and its people. She resists this process of non-recognition and unseeing by depicting the reality she witnesses. She resists through her weaves.

In its post-conflict period, Kashmir has also witnessed the emergence of female photojournalists venturing out into the sites of encounter to record the incidents of violence and its aftermath. Award winning photojournalist like Masrat Zahra and Sanna Irshad Mattoo, have taken up their cameras and have ventured out into the sites of encounter because they want to present a female’s perspective of the conflict. The journey of these Kashmiri female photojournalists is not easy because “locals mistrust them and security personnel view them with suspicion” (Quint 2019) because conventionally the conflict sites are reported by men and obviously from a male’s perspective. Thus, when one of Masrat Zahara’s photographs from the encounter site in Shopian was shared by her in her Facebook page on 18 May 2018, it immediately went viral and she was trolled as ‘*mukbir*’ (an informer) by many local Kashmiris. Masrat states that “people in Kashmir are not used to seeing female photojournalists. They haven’t seen woman among armed men and security forces. They haven’t seen woman in encounter site” and therefore women journalists and specifically photojournalists are always under the gaze of suspicion and mistrust. Sanna Irshad Mattoo also shares a similar experience: “I hadn’t seen many women in photojournalism. If something happened somewhere, if there was an encounter or a funeral somewhere and people saw you there among male journalists, it was new to them” (Quint 2019). But, people’s mistrust could not take away their self-trust of narrating an alternative narrative of the conflict. Their very presence in sites of encounter as potential visual narrators is a challenge to the normative gendered expectations of conflict zone and their photographs have already started gaining in international recognition for providing an alternative voice of resistance to this conflict.

Masrat Zahra is an independent photojournalist and documentary photographer from Kashmir. She completed her master degree in convergent journalism from the Central University of Kashmir. She has covered Kashmir since 2015, and her pictures of human rights violations and everyday hardships have received international acclaim. Her work has appeared in The Washington Post, Al Jazeera, and TRT world, among many others. She is

the recipient of 2020 Peter Mackler Award for Courageous and Ethical Journalism and 2020 Anja Niedringhaus Courage in Photojournalism Award from the International Women's Media Foundation. Zahra's work has also been exhibited in New York, Buffalo, India, Kashmir, and Paris. Masrat Zahra tweeted on December 2, 2022: "I am honoured to be one of the ten women photojournalists whose work covering conflict and war is being showcased in Paris, France, by CSE and Reporters Without Borders." But, sadly enough the photo narratives that won her laurels from around the world became instrumental in earning her the level of an anti-national in her homeland named India. In response to her internationally acclaimed work the Indian government charged her in 2020 under an anti-terrorism law (section 13 of the UAPA and section 505 of the IPC) for posting photographs on social media that glorify anti-national activities for which she faces up to seven years in prison. In an interview with Naseer Ganai for *Outlook* magazine on 13 June 2020 after being named the winner of the 2020 Anja Niedringhaus Courage in Photojournalism Award, Zahra said:

I am happy that the world recognises my plight and the plight of other journalists working in tough circumstances. The case against me was shocking. You cannot book journalists for the pictures they take. The pictures we take are the testimonials of people. They are the truth as it is. The awards and recognition might not change our whole situation, but yes, it makes us feel that there are journalist bodies that understand what we go through as professional journalists.

In this interview Zahra further states how the photojournalists in general and the female photojournalists in particular 'become stories' as they venture out in this conflict zone called Kashmir to record the 'other' narrative of this conflict:

In Kashmir, journalists have faced extreme harassment since [2019] – be it beating, intimidation, detention or denying the basic rights that include the Internet. The government tried to paralyse us in every way but we continued to produce stories despite all that — that is what journalism is, you do not make your circumstances stop you from reporting... As much as we try hard to keep on telling stories, we are also becoming stories, when we are beaten and booked under laws like UAPA.

In a fairly male-dominated space of professional photojournalism, Sanna Irshad Mattoo is also creating a niche for herself. Sanna Irshad Mattoo, the Srinagar-based photojournalist, recalls in her conversation with Shriya Zamindar how growing up and living in Kashmir changed her perspective to see and understand the world and how these sensibilities help her to bring in "a sensitivity to the field of journalistic imagery which often tends to be clinical and dissociative" (*Vogue India*). Shriya Zamindar rightly observes that "Mattoo's documentary-style images, while silent, speak loudly on the politically affected

landscape of Kashmir, capturing the stories of natives suspended in a traumatic time” (*Vogue India*). Her evocative images gained for her international recognition and awards but intriguingly enough the Indian government imposed repeated travel ban on her without any apparent reasons. On 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2022 Sanna Irshad Mattoo wrote on Twitter:

I was scheduled to travel from Delhi to Paris today for a book launch and photography exhibition as one of 10 award winners of the Serendipity Arles grant 2020. Despite procuring a French visa, I was stopped at the immigration desk at Delhi airport. I was not given any reason but told I would not be able to travel internationally.

J&K police did not comment on the issue. It was not known on whose request Ms. Mattoo was stopped from boarding an international flight. She again won the Pulitzer Prize in 2022 as part of the *Reuters* team of journalists who won the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography, 2022 for their coverage of COVID-19 pandemic in India. But, on 18<sup>th</sup> October 2022 India barred Sanna Irshad Mattoo from flying *to the US to receive the prestigious Pulitzer Prize*. Thus, the repeated harassment of these internationally acclaimed photojournalists of the valley actually foregrounds their struggle to register through their visual images the resistance to erase or forget the violence and violation of human rights in the valley.

All these real life examples, therefore, prove how the women of conflict torn Kashmir have used their creativity to effectively deal with this prolonged conflict. They have used their creativity to resist the project of unseeing and amnesia by recording their loss and by performing their memory publicly. They, therefore, mourn to resist forgetfulness of the state and resists to be mourned as helpless victims. Mourning empowers them and resistance unites them to survive this unending traumatic conflict. Kashmiri women’s response to the conflict is indeed creative, unique and powerful and needs critical academic attention, which it unfortunately lacks.

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