Besieged by Patriarchy, Bewildered by Conflicts: Exploring the Plights of Kashmiri Women in Nayeema Mahjoor's *Lost in Terror*

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Abstract

The prolonged armed conflicts in Kashmir, which have been ongoing since the 1990s, have been affecting the lives of the Kashmiris immensely. Women are the worst sufferers of these brutal conflicts due to their social vulnerability. Stifled by the globally ubiquitous patriarchy, these conflicts add to their misery as they lead to the growing militarization of the territory, which as an institution is equally patriarchal. Keeping in mind this triangulation of state militarization, the patriarchy and oppression of women, this paper will seek to explore how militarism and patriarchy comprise an oppressive force against women in a conflict zone through the reading of the novel *Lost in Terror* by Nayeema Mahjoor.

Kashmir, Conflicts, and Women

The complex history and the troubled relationship Kashmir has with India since its accession in 1947 has resulted in the growing political tension and turmoil in Kashmir which reached its peak in the 1990s with the armed uprising in the valley. These prolonged armed conflicts in Kashmir, which have been ongoing since the 1990s, have been affecting the lives of the Kashmiris immensely. Many women, particularly those from marginalized communities, suffer the most during these brutal conflicts due to their vulnerable position in society. Stifled by the globally ubiquitous patriarchy, devoid of any voice and agency in a patriarchal social structure, they have been silent sufferers throughout their lives. The ongoing armed hostilities intensify the suffering of Kashmiri women, as the region transforms into one of the most militarised zones in the world, resulting in heightened violence and oppression. Due to this extreme military occupation, Kashmir has been transformed into a space where the distinction between home and battlefront is blurred due to the intrusion of violence and repression into "social and cultural interstices and private spaces" (Kazi 99). The methods and instruments used by the Indian state to curb the rebellion have "morphed into random and indiscriminate targeting of Kashmiri bodies," thus becoming "gendered and sexualised" (Kazi 99). The interlocking nature of militarism and masculinity serves to exacerbate their oppression. In Kashmir especially, this oppression has become even more grave because of the impunity granted to the armed forces by the Indian state in the form of various laws which enable them to commit acts of indiscriminate violence and terror. The present paper, in its attempt to unravel this triangulation of state militarization, patriarchy and the oppression of women, will seek to explore how militarism and patriarchy comprise an oppressive force against women in a conflict zone and how this has been reflected in contemporary Kashmiri literature. Through the reading of the novel *Lost in Terror* by Nayeema Mahjoor, the paper will seek to explore the oft-mooted questions of women's suffering in conflict zones like Kashmir and expose the male hypocrisy of efforts to 'protect' women, which often end up threatening and silencing

them instead. Set against the backdrop of the armed uprising in the 1990s, the novel depicts women's experiences in a tumultuous period in Kashmir's history. Through the characterisation of the unnamed narrator-protagonist as an educated working woman in a traditional Kashmiri family, the novelist showcases the suffering of womanhood and exposes how patriarchy and militarism go hand in hand to inflict immeasurable physical and psychological harm on the female body and mind.

Patriarchy, Militarism and Gender

Patriarchy as a power structure and an ideology provides context and justification for the institutionalised discrimination and violence against women. The values, customs and laws propounded by the patriarchal society allow it to maintain the overall subordination of women and their domination by men. Militarism, as an ideology rooted in power and oppression, is intricately linked to patriarchy. It derives its foundation in patriarchal values, which in turn reinforce and legitimise the effects of militarisation (Burke). As a patriarchal institution, militarism is closely tied to the production of masculinity and femininity, reinforcing and perpetuating the stereotype of women as subordinate, subservient and in need of protection. This elaborate gender ideology and social structure are essential for militarism to sustain itself. As Cynthia Enloe argues in her book *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarisation of Women's Lives*, such sustenance is performed through the acquisition of "manpower" through combat in the battlefront (211). Enloe argues that male soldiers are always eager to participate in combat to prove their "manliness" and to justify the superiority of maleness in the social order (211). Anuradha Chenoy, a renowned academic and critic, also points to this inclination towards aggressive masculinity in militaristic ideology when she observes that:

> Militarization constructs a particularly aggressive and homogenized form of masculinity that connects it to force and power. Such a concept of power spills over into public spaces and impacts social relations. In the process of militarization,

> women are easily slotted in unequal, traditional, and sexualized roles. (Chenoy 100)

Under militarism, stereotypical feminine traits like compassion and cooperation are considered weak and are defined in opposition to stereotypically masculine traits like strength and aggression (Burke). This hierarchical relationship of masculine and feminine traits has led Enloe to underscore that the oppression of women under militarism is a fundamental part of it and not just one of its many consequences (qtd. in Burke). In the context of post-1990 Kashmir, this is very much evident in the sexual exploitation and gender-based violence that the Kashmiri women often face in their day-to-day existence.

Patriarchy, Women and the Impossibility of Rebellion

The protracted armed conflicts that have plagued the valley in the 1990s have brought significant changes in traditional gender norms and roles associated with Kashmiri women as they have "transformed into protestors, prisoners, widows, writers, rape survivors, civic activists, mobilisers, mukhbirs (informers), prostitutes, and a whole host of other roles shaped by a military occupation" (Kazi 102). Yet, despite this, contemporary Kashmiri society is still predominantly patriarchal, allowing women minimal space to thrive and prosper. As the unnamed female protagonist of Nayeema Mahjoor's *Lost in Terror* observes: "Despite the government constantly boasting about having raised the literacy rate for women to 60 per cent, our society still looked at daughters and daughters-in-law as the personal property of men […]" (16). Challenging this oppressive social structure is deemed rebellious across various religions and cultures, often resulting in punishment for those who speak out. The protagonist of the novel is one such woman who dares to challenge and question this oppressive social structure and faces its consequences. She is an educated and career-oriented married woman, torn between the maelstrom of patriarchy and the violent armed conflicts that plague the valley. Born into a comparatively

liberal atmosphere, she is brought up to be an independent woman by her father, an approach which comes into constant conflict with the dominant patriarchal social structure. Because of this defiance of the patriarchal norms that restrict women from getting an education, her father becomes isolated and abandoned. Her father's unwavering support and benevolence for his daughters have taught her to question the social norms and stereotypes. However, as she leaves her father's house to marry a man, she finds herself no longer able to enjoy the freedoms she once had as she becomes further entrenched in the patriarchal structure of the family. Her husband, Asad, is a staunch supporter of the armed rebellion in the valley. He aspires to liberate Kashmir from Indian rule, yet his dream of independence does not extend to his wife; instead, it restricts the freedom she previously enjoyed. Although her in-laws permit her to work, her husband and his family increasingly control her every movement, leading to her growing frustration. Her grief due to this prolonged subjugation is evident when she says:

> For everything, I had to ask for permission from someone. Can I go for a stroll in the morning? Can I buy my shoes in the market? [...] if he was not present in the house, his brother would step up and place restrictions on me, even within the four walls of the house. (15)

She recounts an incident in which she got caught up in a crackdown while she went out to meet her father at his house without informing her in-laws. At the moment of her capture, she finds herself more concerned about the fact that her in-laws will come to know of her clandestine visit to her father than the crackdown itself, because she thinks the situation at her home is more petrifying than what she has experienced on the street. This revelation by the narrator exposes her vulnerability as a Kashmiri woman in this patriarchal social set-up where she is not allowed to make simple decisions such as choosing to meet her father without the permission of the male members of the family. Being a working woman, she might be financially independent, but the men in her family and society control every step of her life. This constant control of

her life constricts her movement and curtails her freedom. The collective effort of the men in her family to exert control over the narrator can be seen as a means of enforcing the exile of her father. By refusing to impose similar restrictions on his daughter, he inadvertently challenges the family structure that relies on the complicity of all its members to effectively police women. This control and subjugation are further justified in a highly militarized space like Kashmir by the perception of threat, thus reinforcing the "gendered stereotypes sanctified by religion, custom and traditional mores, which constrain women" and "disallow them from participating in the public sphere beyond their routine, mundane roles" (Jamwal 125).

In this oppressive patriarchal social structure, women have been systematically deprived of power and decision-making roles, expected to endure their suffering in silence. Questioning these exploitative norms is often viewed as an act of rebellion. Consequently, the narrator's persistent questioning of and resistance to these hierarchical and exploitative social norms is taken as a challenge to the patriarchal status quo. This perception is evident in Asad's treatment of the narrator. In one episode, the narrator recounts an incident when Asad orders her to cook for a group of militants taking shelter at their house in the middle of the night. The narrator is a sensible woman, who is well aware that such an act would bring with it the unwanted attention of the armed forces who are constantly surveilling the surrounding area, which would put everyone in the house at risk. Yet when she voices her opposition to Asad, she finds her sagacity unrecognised as she is instead threatened by her husband for her refusal to follow his orders. What Asad says in this context exposes the power dynamics of Kashmiri society, where women must bear all the suffering silently without any question. He says: "You know what your problem is? You have become too big for your boots, and it is entirely my fault that I let you open your big mouth. I will deal with you [...]" (44). Asad's statement exposes the hypocrisy of the patriarchal structure in which men claim to be the 'protector' of women while, at the same time, threatening them with severe consequences if they do not obey their orders silently and without question. Any resistance from the narrator's end to her husband is considered a challenge to the

hierarchy of patriarchal domination and submission and is met with brutal consequences from Asad, as he believes it to be "insulting and a challenge to his manliness" (40). Due to this constant assault on her body and mind, the narrator is worn down to the point of non-resistance as she loses her sense of dignity and self-respect in her relationship with her husband. She says: "my guilt overpowering my timidity had made me undignified in my own eyes" (41). The pressure to conform to patriarchal structures of gender domination shapes the narrator's sense of self-worth, infusing her own felt sense of dignity with patriarchal ideology.

The narrator recounts another incident in which Asad sought her help to release his brother, who was arrested in a raid by the army for his association with militancy, and asked her to talk to Haleem, the home secretary. She refuses initially (because she had a romantic relationship with the officer) but has to succumb to his arrogance and dominance. He says: "Do what you are told and don't ask questions, ever. We do not have this custom of women asking questions when their men give them orders. They just obey" (82). The arrogance with which Asad speaks to her exposes his hypocrisy, as he, in the same breath dreams of liberating Kashmir from Indian rule while depriving his wife of what limited freedom she has. It also suggests the impossibility of rebellion against this oppressive social structure as it shows the narrator, with her unrelenting will for change, is silenced by her husband who should be trying to abolish this system. Even though he is the one who seeks her help, the arrogance and authority with which he speaks define her subordination and subjugation. In this context, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's observation aptly captures the voicelessness of women in this hierarchical patriarchal social structure. She asserts: "There is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak" (Spivak 310). The hegemonic social structure of patriarchy in Kashmir deprives women, the sexed subaltern, of their voice and agency, as sexual difference becomes one of the vectors of their oppression.

The narrator's prolonged subjugation in her relationship with her husband exposes the hollowness of the marriage system, which often turns out to be a form of instituted oppression for women. As she silently suffers in a marriage devoid of love and mutual respect, she ponders

over her liberation, which she realises could be achieved through the end of her marriage. Comparing her subjugation with the occupying state of Kashmir, she says:

> In our society, the husband was the sole proprietor of the woman he was married to- just like how the government treated Kashmir as her property. My motherland and me, we were both enslaved by our oppressors, though each of us never realized it. (41)

The lack of love and respect in their relationship brings them near separation. Yet, ultimately, the narrator is unable to break free of this entanglement due to the taboos and stigmas attached to divorce. The biggest obstacle to separation for the narrator is, curiously, her liberal father, who has always told her that "marriage is a sacred relationship based on mutual love and trust," and that she should address her dissatisfaction through "compromise" and coping with her situation (16), methods which ultimately help sustain her subjugation. Her father's advice is doubly significant here as it exposes the deep-rooted nature of the vulnerability of women in patriarchal society. Even the narrator's father, the man who always taught his daughters to use reason and to question everything, ends up surrendering to the social norms that are derogatory and demeaning to her self-esteem. The narrator's horrible situation in which she must live and cope with her oppressor fills her mind with destructive thoughts, and she ponders over her existence, which is reduced to non-identity. She contemplates: "Why am I alive, why don't I die? So many people die every day in Kashmir, why am I not among them? Am I a piece of dirt or filth that everybody wants to get rid of?" (222). And she ends up regretfully saying: "this was a man's world for sure, and women were made to endure and obey" (223). This oppressive structure of marriage and kinship, where her opinion is completely ignored, suggests that she is merely an object of exchange between her father and husband.

The imposition of rigid gender roles is one of the ideological manifestations that allow men to maintain this power dynamic. Women

are kept confined within the four walls of their household and assigned the task of looking after their families and taking care of the household, while men take the responsibility of "protecting" them. These gender roles are so deeply ingrained in the narrator's psyche that when Asad, on occasion, comes to the kitchen to help her with her chores, she becomes apprehensive. It is believed to be quite "unusual" for men to do household jobs, as they consider it "below their dignity" (46). These gender norms are ingrained in such a way that any deviation from them could lead to the offender becoming the subject of ridicule and laughter. Because of this, the narrator says sarcastically that her in-laws would laugh at him if they found out Asad was cleaning dishes in the kitchen. Due to the same rigid attitude, the narrator has to face constant harassment in her field of work, the media, which is considered a male domain. Her intrusion into that domain, like her acts of disobeying her husband's orders, is taken as a challenge that disrupts the norm. The narrator's sister-in-law, Faiza, is met with the same fate as she struggles for higher studies in her tradition-bound family only to ultimately abandon her dream of becoming an interior designer after her graduation as her family does not allow her to pursue the career she wants to because they believe it to be inappropriate for women. Instead, they are desperate to get her married as soon as possible so that she occupies herself with taking care of her family as a wife. Women are systematically excluded from positions of power as they are associated with the concept of the family's "honour." This idea of "honour," which needs to be protected by any means lest it bring shame to the family, allows men to continue with their oppression. The narrator observes: "Daughters were considered the repository of the family's honour. And they were expected to uphold that and the values of society. Male members zealously 'protected' them at every moment of their life" (15). With this pretence of protecting women, men restrict their movements and restrain them from aspiring to liberation. This argument of "protecting" Kashmiri women is also given by the Indian state, which claims to "protect" and "liberate" them from an "Islamist and/or militarist patriarchy" (Kazi 102). The state, like the patriarchal social order, only uses protection as a pretence to camouflage the everyday violence,

brutality and dehumanisation that women are subjected to in an extremely militarized setting (102).

Militarism, Masculinity and Violence against Women

The prolonged conflicts in Kashmir have led to the growing militarisation of the territory, making Kashmir one of the most militarized zones in the world (Roy). The narrator observes: "Overnight, the valley had become a garrison, as we had been pushed into a war: on the one hand, there were soldiers who were everywhere, and, on the other, there was an invisible enemy […]" (32). The conflict caused what little freedom women had to shrink even further. One of the fundamental values of militarism, as observed by Colleen Burke, is "domination or 'power over the other', and through the glorification of the ideal of masculinity and the belittlement of femininity, women become the 'other'" in a militarized zone (Burke). This polarisation between "us" and "them" provokes militaristic ideology to perpetrate indiscriminate violence on the "other." This is evident when an ideologically militarist person fights for the freedom and honour of "his" women while raping and murdering "their" women (Burke). The increased rates of gender-based violence in Kashmir explicate this tendency. The legal immunity provided to the armed forces under the *Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1990*, which was implemented to legalize warrantless arrests of anyone merely on the basis of suspicion, emboldened the armed forces to unleash a reign of terror throughout the valley. This lack of accountability creates a culture of impunity where "people [were] unable to report to or engage with an institution which would otherwise provide them with redress" (Batool 138). In the novel, the narrator records the testimony of a woman who has been subjected to sexual assault and rape at her home by the security forces. The violence on her body destroys her psychologically, and the ignominy and shame that the assault brings leaves her traumatised for the rest of her life. In a social structure where blame and shame are directed towards the victim, sexual violence against women becomes a tool for breaking a woman's sense of self (Batool 134). The survivor of rape, in this case, in order to avoid the social stigma,

shame, and ignominy attached to rape, attempts to commit suicide by jumping into the river. Somehow, she survives and takes shelter under the burkas. Despite burkas being considered a symbol of patriarchal subjugation, she finds them to be a symbol of protection. For her, wearing the burka becomes a necessity to subvert her trauma. She says:

> Since then, I ran at the sight of security forces. [...] My only protection for the last three years has been the burka that you all loathe. I cannot sleep except in a burka, and I cannot even go to the toilet, because every time I take my burka off, I feel terrified that the soldiers will reappear and tear me into pieces. (248-49)

The burka, thus, becomes the means of her protection from the traumatic memories that keep haunting her and enables her to escape the shame that they bring.

The sexual violence that women face during conflicts does not only impact the victims, but also has a larger political implication. This state-sponsored, organised violence on the female body is perpetrated to create a culture of terror that subdues and demoralises the population of the community to which she belongs. Samreen Mushtaq's observation in this context rightly captures the intention and impact of this systematic and organised violence on women in conflict zones like Kashmir. She says: "It is a war between 'us' versus 'them' and, therefore, as a means of defeating the enemy, women's bodies are used like slates to convey the message of victory of the 'self' and the defeat and 'dishonour' of the 'other.' Such violence is not indiscriminate but systematic and deliberate" (Mushtaq 77). The gendered edge to this use of violence against women by the armed forces in the valley is also perpetrated to suggest that the Kashmiri men who are supposed to "protect" these women are incapable of protecting them. The sexual subjugation of women is thus coded with a message of political domination and control over individuals as well as the entire community. Kashmiri women are thus "raped not only because they are women; they are also raped because they belong to an 'other' (Kashmiri) ethnic group" (Kazi 104)

Limiting the definition of violence to only rape or penetration would negate the myriad other kinds of violent experiences that Kashmiri women are subjected to in their day-to-day existence (Batool 135). Ranging from everyday harassment on the streets to sexual exploitation during search operations, Kashmiri women become victims of masculinist and institutionalised oppression which is perpetrated with impunity. Fareeda, the narrator's next-door neighbour, has constantly been harassed by the armed forces at her home. Her victimisation is aggravated when her husband is brutally killed by the army before her eyes only a few days after her marriage while she pleads for his life. This leaves her traumatised for the rest of her life, and the memory of this horrendous incident constantly haunts her. She complains: "The sight of my dying husband keeps appearing in my mind each time I close my eyes" (206). Prior to her marriage, Fareeda had spent all her life under strict family restrictions, compromising on everything, and after these long years of her subjugated existence, she has again become a victim of the militaristic culture prevalent in Kashmir.

While much of the patriarchal dominance and oppression is done onto women by state actors, the culture of patriarchy also depends on non-state actors. The growing militarization of the territory also gives rise to state-sponsored non-state actors who perpetrate indiscriminate violence and terror among the people. Among these non-state actors are renegades, or the *Ikhwanis*, surrendered militants who now act on behalf of the state forces. They exploit their position of power because of the impunity allowed to them by the army and are often involved in incidents like looting, killing, extortion and sexual abuse. To abstain from these dreadful situations caused by these non-state actors, "most of the girls [are] confined to their houses due to the increasing incidents of teasing, extortion, bullying and even sexual abuse" (232). The narrator documents one such incident when a renegade stationed near their house harasses her sister-in-law Faiza incessantly and advances his proposal to her. Neither she nor her family can refuse the proposal immediately out of fear. She only escapes marriage narrowly when that renegade is killed in a fight with the militants. Faiza might have escaped the misfortune for that time, but that incident permanently impacts her

mind and disturbs her for the rest of her life. These offences committed by these non-state actors on behalf of the state go unchallenged and unquestioned. A report by the Center for Women's Global Leadership (2011) suggests that the "State may commission non-state actors to commit violence on its behalf, thereby absolving itself of responsibility and accountability" (LaForgia 8).

Apart from depicting the state-sponsored violence committed by the army and its allies in Kashmir, the author also portrays the atrocities perpetrated by the militants, particularly on women. The narrator documents the killing of Shiasta, a young artist who performs in plays, by the militants for refusing to smuggle guns to some other parts of the valley. Her gruesome murder is justified by accusing her as a traitor and informer for the government who betrayed the "Azadi Movement" (freedom movement). The killing of Shiasta is set as an example for others to abstain from disobeying their orders or opposing their views. Her family has been ostracised from society because of this tag of "traitor", and no one, not even her neighbours and relatives, dares to come to her funeral to share their sorrows with the bereaved family. She is not even allowed to be buried in her ancestral graveyard. This shows the vulnerability of women in conflict zones where both parties claim to be protecting them and fighting for their liberation but end up suppressing, threatening, and even killing them. These competitive and aggressive masculinities upheld by the military and the militants in the valley expose the precarious existence of Kashmiri women in a hostile socio-political milieu.

Conclusion

The prolonged armed conflicts in Kashmir since the 1990s have resulted in the growing militarisation of the territory that completely disrupted normalcy, giving way to a chaotic political situation in which women suffer the most. Militarism promotes the so-called masculine traits like aggression and dominance as necessities of war, necessities that require a gender ideology to sustain them. This system of systematic control and rule needs someone to be dominated, and in a conflict zone,

it is the women who are affected the most due to their vulnerable position in the social strata. At the same time, patriarchy dictates that women are supposed to be "protected" by men, thus allowing men to restrict and control women. Therefore, women are subjected to oppression from both directions. The interwoven triad of militarism, masculinity, and patriarchy profusely impacts women, and they become the victims in both institutions. In her novel, Nayeema Mahjoor brings out this dual oppression of the Kashmiri women in the 1990s by highlighting their plights in a patriarchal social setting accompanied by extreme militarism, an ideology equally patriarchal in its functioning. The hegemonic gender ideology in both these institutions as depicted in the novel unfolds the male hypocrisy that claims to be 'protecting' women but ends up threatening and silencing them. The author, through the portrayals of her female characters, unfolds this increasing social vulnerability of women in this prolonged armed conflict and exposes male chauvinism on the one hand and the brutality of the conflicts on the other hand. She lays bare the interrelationship between patriarchy and militarism and explicates how these two different ideologies comprise an oppressive force against women in a conflict zone like Kashmir, resulting in their precarious existence in an oppressive socio-political setting.

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Biography

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