

TERRIBLY VICTIMISED GENDER OF KASHMIR CONFLICT: A WOMEN-CENTRIC PERSPECTIVE OF NAYEEMA MAHJOOR'S *LOST IN TERROR*

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ABSTRACT: *Jammu and Kashmir has been a bone of contention between India and Pakistan since the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. This picturesque valley, which has since been under the domain of India, has seen many uprisings. The movement for freedom 'Azadi' has left a deep imprint upon the minds of the inhabitants, but mostly it is the women of Kashmir who have been the worst hit victims. There have been many books depicting the Kashmir issue from a man's perspective but hardly any from the women's point of view depicting their suffering and misery. Logically only a woman can better express the traumas of women. Fortunately this need was fulfilled by Nayeema Mahjoor in the form of her novel Lost in Terror, perhaps the first novel, which shows the another side of the conflict 'women side' by realistically narrating the sufferings which a Kashmiri woman goes through. The present paper attempts to make an assessment of the miseries and problems Kashmiri conflict –torn women have to face. It will also deliberate on how Nayeema has become the representative voice of the women community, most importantly so because she herself has been a victim like thousands of others, which strongly authenticates her narration as first hand and valid.*

KEYWORDS: Jammu, Kashmir, Conflict, Freedom, Women, Victims, Misery

INTRODUCTION

The tragic incidents and gory happenings in Kashmir lead one to think that the callous and cold nature of India towards Kashmir issue could result in a big damage to the overall development of India and its existence will be in danger and peace can't be expected to stay permanently in the country. Balraj Puri too shares the same view thus:

If the nation continues to remain desensitized to the human tragedy that is Kashmir...and the mounting toll of precious human lives, which according to an official estimate exceeded eleven thousand between 1990 and 1994, (though non-official estimates are much higher) then the very existence of India as a civilized entity will be gravely threatened. (Balraj Puri:p-3)

In Kashmir life has turned into a nightmare. The valley that was once famous for its beauty has grown bleak. Where life thrived, death stalks with sombre feet. It is indeed sad to realise that this conflict has already taken innumerable of lives. The magnitude and sheer brutality of state-directed violence in Kashmir like killings, mass rape, enforced disappearances, and torture is too serious to compare with any other conflict zone as Pankaj Mishra says:

Once known for its extraordinary beauty, the valley of Kashmir now hosts the biggest, bloodiest and also most obscure military occupation in the world. With more than 80,000 people dead...the killing fields of Kashmir dwarf those of Palestine and Tibet. In addition to everyday regime of arbitrary arrests, curfews, raids, and checkpoints

enforced by nearly 700,000 Indian soldiers, the valleys four million Muslims are exposed to extrajudicial execution, rape and torture.

(Pankaj Mishra:Introduction. *Kashmir the Case for Freedom* (p-01).

There are various novels by Kashmiri novelists writing in English which depict the repercussions, costs and effects of the gory incidents mentioned in the above cited passage on people of Kashmir but Nayeema Mahjoor in her novel *Lost in Terror* has given the voice to the unvoiced miseries of Kashmiri people in general and women in particular in a heartrending and disturbingly painful manner.

DISCUSSION

Nayeema Mahjoor, a native Kashmiri was the former BBC and Radio Kashmir broadcaster is currently Chairperson of the State Commission for Women and affiliated with Peoples Democratic Party . Her first foray into fiction, *Lost in Terror* is dedicated to “those women who lost everything – from their dignity to their relations – but never lost hope for a better tomorrow” juxtaposes some inspiring and some heart rending stories of women victims of conflict most of which are based on her personal memories and experiences. Undoubtedly women of Kashmir have been the worst hit casualties of the conflict. But in male dominated Kashmiri English Fiction there was no women perspective with regard to Kashmir conflict where the women sufferers could get a voice to their plight. Having no one to voice their pains, Nayeema strongly felt a need to provide an indelible and far reaching mode in the form of this novel as she herself says:

“Usually it’s always a man’s perspective which has been penned down when it comes to the Kashmir issue. I was witness to the situation prevailing in the early nineties, like other women who were at the forefront of every misery. I took the challenge to tell story of women who were voiceless and helpless. To highlight their misery at home and outside was my sole objective,”(N.Mahjoor,E-mail interview with IANS.Covered by Somrita Ghosh)

The novel judges Kashmir after late 1980s through the eyes of a woman and attempts to exposes the human rights violation of women which are constantly increasing. Its heroine is a modern Kashmiri woman who aspires for freedom but finds the human cost of the conflict too much for her.

Having the combination of anecdotes and personal memories beautifully knit together it is a novel that reads almost like a memoir and thinly disguised autobiography succeeds in putting the tragic case of terrorized women of Kashmir caught up in a whirlpool of contradictory pulls and pressures. It is an insightful story of countless daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers whose lives were and are being tortured in different ways due to the conundrum in Kashmir.

The book is cast in the background of the uprising against the armed forces in Kashmir in the late 1980s which narrates the tale of a young, educated, career conscious woman who finds herself sucked into a maelstrom of misery and pain. It “elucidates the bravery and valour of Kashmiri women, “who lost everything from their dignity to their relations,” but hold strongly to the ray of hope that tomorrow will be better than today. Nayeema very successfully weaves the thread of untold stories, and depicted the pain and agony being borne by the people of

Kashmir.” (Yasmeen: 2017) Nayeema consolidates numerous stories of women’s struggle in the book, and candidly starts with her personal life; the story of a young, educated, career-oriented woman braving the turmoil but at large presents a woman’s perspective and story of their sufferings in the Kashmir conflict.

Having been either a first-hand witness or victim of some of the gory incidents that marked the tumultuous and violent years of insurgency and counter-insurgency Nayeema has been able to trace the individual trajectories by exploring significant yet sorrowful and tragic incidents in the lives of these women. She explores the story of the people who are affected by the conflict for decades. The book is replete with the tragic stories of many women victims who suffer at every stage and in every role of their life. They are miserably hit by the conflict directly or indirectly. Nayeema vividly narrates the episodes primarily, the latest turbulent period in the history of the struggle for freedom that started in the late 1980s when life in Kashmir was always on the verge of death. There was no surety whether one may live the next moment of the life or not because the soldiers had let loose the reign of terror and death. People were killed day in and day out without any fault of their own. Death was on prowl. The sense of insecurity haunted the life of the people of the valley thus:

To reach home safely was a miracle, and to find every family member safe at home was a bigger miracle. It was very rare if we didn’t have to pass through crackdown, cross-firing or search operation on our way to work and back. (P-100).

The conflict had adverse impacts upon the dignity, honour and security of the people of Kashmir. The people of the valley were made to suffer at every stage of their life. The soldiers took abundant liberty in unleashing the reign of terror. The youth of the valley were tortured, maimed, or killed in broad daylight. But the sad state of the affairs is this that the mothers of the young boys became the indirect targets of the physical violence. Most unfortunately they had to offer the heavy price in the form of laying down their honour and dignity before the soldiers for the safety or release of their sons and at times of daughters too which in turn led to their physical, psychological and social breakdown. The soldiers were merciless and turned deaf ears to the pleas of the hapless mothers of the valley.

The soldiers were...dragging the teenage boys by their hair;[...]the mothers were begging the soldiers to release their sons, touching their faces and shoes and crying their hearts out to have mercy on them...[Their] cries fell on deaf ears though. There was no sign of mercy and no let-up in the terror.(p-101)

Kashmiri people have been the victims of the enforced disappearances. The whereabouts of such people are not known to anyone. More unfortunate side of these disappearances is that it is the women have been badly affected either in the form of a mother, sister or wife. The novel describes the disappearance of Sadia’s son Aziz and her transformation into Saidamach(The insane Sadia) thus :

For the last three years she had hardly slept. She would wake up in the middle of the night crying and screaming. Almost every night she had terrifying nightmares. Hassan took her to a psychiatrist for treatment. The drugs had little impact on her mind. Her situation become worse and the psychiatrist left her on her own.(p-263-64)

The novel told in first person is a running commentary on every significant event in early militancy as far as it has impacted on all the women community. The writer has brought to the surface in her narrative how Ikhwanis made life miserable for people especially for women.

They were always a threat for the property of people and dignity and honour of the women. Women were sexually victimised. The writer describes the situation thus:

The street had turned into a hotspot for looting, hooliganism and plunder. Most of the girls were confined to their houses due to increasing incidents of teasing, extortion, bullying and even sexual abuse. The locality became stigmatized in society. Girls from this area, earlier considered amongst the finest in the valley, were now being turned down by suitors for marriage.(p.232)

Nayeema has been very realistic in narrating the plight of the conflict torn women of the valley. Women suffer from every angle; either they are labelled as supporters or spies. One such victim was her 25-year-old colleague Shiasta, murdered by masked gunmen on unfounded charges of “spying for the security forces”. Shiasta had been ordered to smuggle a few AK47 rifles to Anantnag, which she refused to do. This invited the wrath of the militants who took her denial to be support for the state. Shaista’s family had to face the inhuman treatment in the form of total rejection by her own people because they considered her a traitor. They spat on Shiasta’s mother, ridiculed her sisters and did not let her mother bury her in their ancestral graveyard Nayeema further describes, how Shiasta’s killing led to her family’s ostracization and banishment from her own society

Not a single relative or neighbour had dared to offer their condolences, share the bereaved family’s misery or cry with them...Shaista’s family was suffering the pain , disgrace and humiliation all alone.(p.119-120)

As the conflict raged, the brutality inflicted upon innocent civilians, by both militants and the Indian security forces, only worsened. The military occupation has had damaging psychological and emotional impact on the people in Kashmir especially women who having witnessed the violence all around them left them in the deep gorge of serious traumas. Such incidents have developed mental ailments in one and all but women have been the worst victims both physically and psychologically. The narrator describes the situation as this:

I lost count of the incidents of murder, rape, kidnapping and crackdowns that occurred all around us. Not a single day passed without a violent incident...We relived and remembered every incident in our hearts and minds. We would discuss it every day. There was a report in most newspapers that some survey had been done by a non-local NGO, which stated that over 50 percent of the women in Kashmir were suffering from severe mental ailments, mainly depression...These women never laughed or wept, sighed or whispered... ‘Our men are killed, humiliated, arrested and maimed. That is the reason for depression amongst women’. (p-103).

Apart from the innumerable cases of enforced disappearances, torture, custodial killings and cold-blooded murder. One incident of the brutality that Nayeema narrates is the killing of a young man, the son-in-law of her father’s neighbour and close friend, Moulvi Sahib. It was a crackdown and people in her locality were parading for identification. Moulvi Sahib’s newly-wed daughter Fareeda “the beautiful queen of mohallah” was crying and pleading with the soldiers to not take away her husband, who was being dragged towards an army vehicle. As Fareeda and her father begged them to release him pleading his innocence, but “One of the soldiers came close, kicked Moulvi in the face and dragged him by his long, white beard; the other soldiers punched his abdomen.(p.150).In between this tussle, the soldier guarding the vehicle shot Fareeda’s husband, “the bullet pierced his chest. He fell to the ground like the leaf

of an autumn tree, blood gushing out.”(p-151). He was soon dead in Fareeda’s lap. She cried “What have I done to deserve this fate? Why this punishment”(p-152). Fareeda was totally broken and life for her has been made a burden. Innumerable women of Kashmir have met such fate as they were made widows soon after their marriage. The narrator describes the shock and helplessness of Fareeda in heard rending words:

Fareeda was crying, talking to her dead husband as if he was listening to her.[She] had placed her dead husband’s head in he lap. She was not letting people come near her...She was stroking his hair, kissing him on his forehead and whispering in his ears. ‘How can you get freedom without me? You come back or take me with you. You cannot leave mere here alone’.(p-152)

One can glimpse the volatile situation gripping the valley, and its impact on the lives of the inhabitants. While Shaista had died a “traitor” to the cause, Fareeda’s husband died a martyr. In thus trying to portray the tragedy that being a civilian in Kashmir inherently is, the author equates the violence inflicted by the militants and the Indian forces.

Nayeema laments the negligence and assumed ignorance on the part of the international community towards the human rights violations in Kashmir .What was going on in the valley should have arrested the attention of the outside world but they too seem to have turned a blind eye to all the violence unleashed on Kashmiri people by Indian forces. Even the biased media was not impartial and authentic in their details. They have not been reporting the violent incidents but, by applying the different colours to the incidents , they have proved themselves to be the other form of violence on the people of Kashmir. She says:

I didn’t know much about the outside world that seemed to have forgotten Kashmir. The international community was perhaps wrapped up in its own issues and hardly knew what we were going through. The government–controlled media was tight -lipped on the issue of crackdowns, disappearances...Instead every violent incident was classified as a ‘law and order’ issue.

The novelist doesn’t merely describe the tale of one woman or a family; but encircles the lives of all those who are caught in this crossfire.

CONCLUSION

The brutality of the soldiers is displayed in the novel in the realist way. But mostly Mahjoor has been enunciating the plight of the womenfolk, be it Sadia whose son went missing and was later found to have joined the fighters; Shaista who lost her honour and life due to her refusal to facilitate the fighters; Auntiji who found tortured body of her young son; or Fareeda who lost her husband soon after marriage. The stories of all these women, along with the story of the protagonist give a clear message that it is the womenfolk who have to bear the brunt of any movement or war. They are made to suffer at any stage of their life and in every role. Nayeema gives a critical insider’s account of the armed iteration of the Azadi movement depicting the pains of women who turned out to be the worst casualties of the conflict.

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