



# The Dialectics of Gender in Fragile and Conflict Areas- Case Studies of Women in Strife torn Kashmir: From Feminism to Humanism

Dr Twinkle Suri\*

\*Principal SPPND GDC Samba [twinklesuri514@gmail.com](mailto:twinklesuri514@gmail.com)

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## ABSTRACT

Women have been adversely affected in fragile and conflict hit zones. Fragility in the form of poverty, injustice, insecurity and desolation miserably hits women and violence and conflict abandons their livelihood, as they become vulnerable victims grappling amidst the most horrid conditions for survival. History bears testimony of the crimes committed on women and the trauma and turbulence they have undergone and endured in the fragile conflict environs both emotionally and physically and also, psychologically. My paper however, is a breakaway from the rampant discourse of women as victims, rather it talks about women living in these chaotic violent areas as victors, who live with a hope in the most hopeless conditions. The effort is to analyse the bold experiences of women in one of the protracted conflict in South Asia - Kashmir - caught between two nuclear giants India and Pakistan. Gender is a key component of conflict and peace discourse. The marginalisation of women in conflict and peace is all pervasive. Kashmir is a mirror image of this global scenario. My paper will reflect the ranges of women's experience in this conflict and strategies they have used to cope, to find a space constricted due to ongoing gun violence and radicalisation, thereby sharing and showcasing their responses to militancy, injustice and uprootedness, both as combatants and survivors. Lets empathise with these women in their own voices as they battle terrorism and terror attacks, discrimination, marginalisation and stigmatisation and emerge as victors and not victims who with their positivism and die hard attitude are ready to face challenges and are determined to come out of victimhood syndrome to lead a progressive and meaningful life. These empowered women talk of peace sans guns, life sans death, love and not hatred and education to create and enlighten and not to dismantle and destroy. Let's cherish the insightful sojourn of these amazons!

**Keywords:** Marginalisation, conflict, victors, empowered, militarism, peace, positivism, reconstruction, feminism, humanism.

## Introduction

Women have been adversely affected in fragile and conflict hit zones. Fragility in the form of poverty, injustice, insecurity and desolation miserably hits women and violence and conflict abandons their livelihood, as they become vulnerable victims grappling amidst the most horrid conditions for survival. History bears testimony of the crimes committed on women and the trauma and turbulence they have undergone and endured in the fragile conflict environs both emotionally and physically and also, psychologically.

This paper is a breakaway from the rampant discourse of women as victims, rather it talks about women in these chaotic areas as victors who live with a hope in the most hopeless conditions. The effort is to analyse the bold experiences of women in one of the protracted conflict in South Asia-Kashmir, caught between two nuclear giants, India and Pakistan.

## Understanding Kashmir Imbroglia

Noted scholar and writer, Asis Nandy describes Kashmir as a place that over writes everything that is written about it. In his view, this has nothing to do with its unique culture, geopolitical significance or its

breathtaking natural beauty but its pain. Like Palestine and Northern Ireland, Kashmir is a typically twentieth century problem that has gate crashed into twenty first century. All three are beneficiaries of partitions mindlessly implemented by a tired imperial power and are associated with gory, repetitious, gratuitous violence that wear outside observer and analysts but not those who participate in violence. That is the biggest tragedy of Kashmir (N.Khan 2010:169).

### **Genesis of Conflict**

The state of Jammu and Kashmir generally referred to as Kashmir has been in conflict ever since the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 into India and Pakistan because of denial of right of self determination to accede to either of the dominion. It will not be wrong if we describe this as an unfinished business of partition – as root cause behind ongoing conflict. This is one of the reasons that post-1947 history of Kashmir always contained seeds of conflict, main reason being linking of Kashmir to different models of state and nation building, adopted by India and Pakistan. The state of Pakistan was based on what has come to be known the two nation theory. In essence, it was promised on the notion that Hindus and Muslims constituted two separate nations.

The accession of the Muslim majority state of Jammu and Kashmir to India was never accepted by Pakistan as it amounted to an outright rejection of the two nation theory. For India, on the other hand, the accession of this state to Union of India was portrayed as the test of her secularism (equal respect for all religions) that formed the cornerstone of its project of state of nation building. Therefore, at stake, was not just territory and geographical space, but also as a symbol of two completely different philosophies that had formed the basis of state and nation building in India and Pakistan.

Though a separate ethno-national consciousness among Kashmiri Muslims remained palpably present in the post-1947 period, it was only after 1989 that widespread frustration among Kashmiri Muslims against policies pursued by New Delhi (capital of India) and some of their own leaders, erupted into the movement with strong secessionist overtones. In short, the conflict “of” Kashmir (a dispute between India and Pakistan) gave way to Conflict “in” Kashmir (a conflict within the territorial space in India).

As of now, one third of its territory comprising Mirpur, Poonch, Muzaffarabad and northern areas of Gilgit and Baltistan is controlled by Pakistan and two third consisting of Ladakh, Jammu and the valley of Kashmir by India. The two parts of the state, after Simla agreement of 1971, are separated by a line of control. Until 1971, this line was called Cease Fire Line. Kashmir conflict has an external dimension in which India and Pakistan are antagonists. Both countries have fought several wars over the territory since partition of the subcontinent and continue engaging each other in skirmishes across the line of control. The internal dimension of the conflict is the unnatural division of the state which has divided families and caused them immense miseries. The hostility along the line of control has wrecked havoc on the people living near the line and has forced displacement of innocent people and in most cases, deprived them of their livelihood. In 1989, the valley of Kashmir, part of the state under Indian control witnessed surge in insurgency aided and abetted by Pakistan. Since then conflict in Kashmir has gone through several twists and turns. Starting largely as a spontaneous revolt for independence in 1989, it soon transformed into a violent insurgency movement.

### **Militarism and Women in South Asia**

Gender is a key component of conflict and peace discourse. The marginalisation of women in conflict and peace is all pervasive. Women were and are the worst sufferers of conflict In South Asian states like Waziristan in Pakistan, Nepal, and Indian part of Kashmir or Bangladesh. They bear the brunt of suffering and humiliation caused by conflict while men appropriate its spoils.

Jeff Hearn in his book, *The Gender Of Oppression: Men, Masculinity and the Critique of Marxism* says that the state is the most fully developed symbol of patriarchal power,” those parts of the state that are more concerned with repression and violence are more fully male-dominated and male-numbered than those parts which are concerned with caring, welfare and reproduction, which are usually male-dominated and female-membered”(1987:94).

Women have borne the brunt of militarism in a several ways but especially because, combined with fundamentalism and national chauvinism, it has reinforced patriarchal practices. A macho barrack culture and political power has replaced traditional patriarchy as the most obvious way for men to masculinity and machismo.

The governments of South Asia spend more on their armed forces than on providing health and educational facilities for their citizens. In 2001, India and Pakistan possessed enough nuclear weapons to destroy each other in a matter of minutes, whereas women in all South Asia continue to walk for hours each day to obtain the family’s water supply. The emotional trauma and violence experienced by these third world women as they move from victimisation to consciousness not only challenges the stereotypical image of woman but also redefines and reconstructs the concept of feminism as a blend of multicultural voices that expands the traditional boundaries of a male dominated society and goes beyond the parameters of feminism towards the creation of a humane world order.

### **Women Caught and Marginalised In Crossfire in Kashmir**

Kashmir has been, for two decades, a key issue on the political map. Caught between the crossfire, ordinary people in the valley have borne the major cost of conflict and women and children are its worst victims. Rough estimates of the number of orphans in valley are said to be between 10,000 to 20,000. Twenty six years of conflict has deeply affected people's livelihood and living environments, their health, their eating habits, their work and workplaces, their access to education. The impact of these things is felt most sharply in the lives of women, and yet few discussions on Kashmir pay attention to this. Women are the chorus at peace rallies, the front line of the humanitarian story but they are not on the dais, they do not determine the agenda, in the end, they remain invisible. Feminism is an exploration of genuine female experience (unfiltered through a male perspective) from a feminist and a political point of view. It reiterates that a woman's experience is distinguishable from a man's in 'culturally definable terms'. The mind of the man and the mind of the woman is the same but it is this business of living which makes women use their minds in ways that men don't have to think about.

Despite the huge magnitude of impact of violence on women, it is unfortunate that their voices on different issues concerning them and their families are not recorded or documented and therefore not heard; there is hardly a chronicle of women's resistance and reconciliation or peacemaking effort, as if it made no difference. Conflict has badly affected them physically, psychologically, socially and also economically. The representation of women in legislature, administration, judiciary and other known organs of the government is abysmally low and hence they find it difficult to register their opinion on various issues. Part of the difficulty of making women's activism in peace building and reconciliation visible and also mainstreaming gender in the political activity of peace agreements and the actual planning for a society's reconstruction is that women themselves see their activity as non political and an extension of their domestic concerns- 'stretched roles'. Moreover, their language of support and resistance flows from their cultural experience, especially of being disempowered. Since women's activism in building peace and reconciliation challenges the traditional notions of political action, it gets undervalued and grounded in the informal space of politics, and as post conflict politics moves into formal space, women's innovations get marginalised. Increasingly, women peace activists are emphasising the importance of women making the transition from informal to formal space of political structures.

### **Feminism for the South Asian Woman**

Feminism for the South Asian woman is not simply a phase of protest against institutionalised sexism or racism, but it is a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward....a search for identity (Showalter 1977:13). These women fracture the concept of monolithic feminism and posit a communal and humanistic ideology. Moving forward has been an integral aspect of post-colonial society and the South- Asian woman burns brightly with the sentiment. Instead of just focussing on personal growth, she believes that true beauty is in encouraging growth around oneself and improving a community. Simon de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, Germaine Greer are radical feminists who denounce sexual politics which has treated women like the second sex. Radical feminism identifies the enemy as man and sees woman as a victim of an unjust system. It calls upon women to deny their femininity, become like men to be equal to them and create a sexless society. But to a feminist of colour, emphasis on biology as a source of women's oppression is a self-limiting doctrine because it will make women like men and destroy the value of women as they are. A coloured feminist rejects the label of a victim, she is a fighter and her feminist discourse is a valorisation of her heroism.

Feminism for these brave hearts is not a narrow enterprise that simply protests against gender inequities, it looks beyond it to the creation of a more humane and just social order where the rights of every man, woman and child are secured, "the coloured race is just like a flower garden, with every colour flower represented." (Walker 1983) That is why it is more appropriate to use Alice Walker's all encompassing term "womanist" to define her, "womanist is to feminist what purple is to lavender, a womanist is not a separatist like a feminist but is committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male or female." (Walker 1983:95) The coloured woman envisages feminism as a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualise a humanist vision of community.

In the words of Virginia Woolf, a woman writer must "...illumine her own soul with its profundities and its shallows, with its vanities and its generosities and say what your beauty means to you or your plainness." (1966) It reflects the ranges of women's experience in this conflict. How has the conflict affected them? How have they learnt to live with continuing violence? What strategies have they used to cope, to find a space to share or express the agony, they are going through? What is the impact of conflict on their health and education? I would like to share the bold responses of a few such women from the fragile and conflict hit areas to militancy, injustice and up rootedness both as combatants and survivors. Let's hear them aloud as they talk about their experiences and the strategies they have used to cope, to create a room of their own amidst the ongoing gun violence and radicalisation (Woolf 1966).

We need to empathise with these women in their own voices as they battle terrorism and terror attacks, discrimination, marginalisation and stigmatisation and finally emerge as victors and not victims and who with their positivism and die hard attitude are ready to face challenges and are determined to come out of victimhood syndrome to lead a progressive and meaningful life. These empowered women talk of peace sans guns, life sans death, love and not hatred and education to create and enlighten and not to dismantle and destroy. I call these unsung heroes-Kashmir Crusaders, who silently carved for themselves, a small neutral

space to craft peace and reconciliation in the region. Though there are many women who fought against all odds to ensure their survival with dignity, I have deliberately chosen four case studies-representing different sections of society.

### Case Study One

This is the story of a first ever woman victim of Kashmir gun violence. Her husband, Squadron Leader Ravi Khanna was among 4 Airforce officers killed by an armed insurgent group fighting for independence of Kashmir - in January 1990.

**Alas! a woman that attempts the pen Such an intruder on the rights of men, such a presumptuous creature is esteem'd the fault can by no virtue be redeem'd.**

Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea.

### Scribbling Peace

Meet **Nirmal Khanna** - first ever victim of Kashmir separatism that manifested into a violent expression. Sixteen years back, the woman who lost her husband, Squadron Leader Ravi Khanna to the bullets of militants, hardly carries any grudge against those gunmen who snatched away the most beautiful years of her life. Unlike many politicians who often object to separatist participation in Roundtable conferences, Nirmal Khanna, the first ever victim of Kashmir violence asserts that everyone needs to take corrective measures to ensure a better future for Kashmir. The pain of losing her dear husband to the brutal bullets may have taken away the smile from her face but not a humane heart, a heart that continues to beat for Kashmir and for the people living in Kashmir. She sees a brother even in the killer of her husband who had lost the right path and widowed his sister.

Nirmal Khanna can hardly forget that fateful winter morning, sixteen years ago, when her husband, Sq.Ldr.Ravi Khanna along with his colleagues while waiting for their airforce bus at the Rawalpura bus stand were suddenly fired with bullets. At around 7.30am, a maruti gypsy and a two wheeler carrying four to five militants opened indiscriminate fire leaving about thirteen IAF personnel in a pool of blood, three of them dead and ten injured. Death knocked this brave officer leaving behind his young widow and two children. After losing her husband and best friend and guide as she fondly recollects, Nirmal, a mother of two children who are pursuing higher education outside the state saw a true companion in pen. Whenever she feels lonely, she scribbles some couplets; her maiden poem was a dedication to her husband titled, Sq.Ldr.Ravi Khanna Ki Paushak (Sq.Ldr.Ravi Khanna's Uniform) wherein she elucidates that Sq.Ldr.Ravi Khanna's misfortune was that he was in uniform. Even as those gunmen defended the killings of IAF personnel as not innocent but enemy agents, Nirmal hardly wants them to feel sorry for the past. Having witnessed an entire era of conflict unfolding before her, Nirmal understands the importance of dialogue. When her husband was assassinated, it was the guns that did all the talking, today she sees roundtable as a medium and window opening space to people with different identities and ideologies for a better future, something every Kashmiri should take a lesson from.

### Case Study Two

The story of a woman police officer whose valour and confidence had labelled her as the most wanted officer by the terrorist groups.

**Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high ..Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake. Rabindranath Tagore.**

### From a veiled head to a khaki cap: Redefining the Self

**Shahida Parveen's** "her story" encapsulates her odyssey from a peppy petite girl struggling her way through a strenuous childhood, shaky education, inflexible orthodoxy and traditions to a compelling profession and eventually an inter-faith marriage. In spite of the adversities back home, her passion to read and write empowered her towards a progressive career as she fondly recollects having absorbed her primary lessons sitting silently by the side of her friend who was home tutored. And then, a sudden shift from her mother's dream of seeing her in a bridal outfit to a khaki uniform, as she embraced the latter. She began her crusade with a team of five men grappling in the most dangerous situations and carrying out the most daring operations in Rajouri, which at that time in the late nineties was an extremely disturbed militant hit zone.

Shahida had robustly embarked on the pious mission of serving her nation; fighting negativity, battling militancy, facing canons and strategising search operations at the dead of the night to ensure that her people sleep safe and secure. Posters on the walls, protests and strikes against Shahida, walk outs in the Assembly sessions; she was fighting a dual battle-as a woman police officer who was seen as a competitor to her male colleagues confronting gender bias and the second as a woman who was labelled as a modern extrovert trying to break away from the customary traditions. There was a time when the house was flooded with marriage proposals but today 'marrying her was akin to a death warrant' for most men. The gulf between a veiled head and a khaki cap was colossal and she epitomised khaki. Shahida Parveen is an improvement, a departure from submissiveness and marginalisation to realization of the self. She embodies an unusual mental strength

and triumph of spirit, a spirit that pervades her not just physically, as a police soldier but also mentally as a triumphant woman at a time, when everybody expected her to break down and crumble.

She reminisces a visit during one of the joint operations by a young army officer who desired to meet this woman police officer most wanted by the militants, whose photograph he had procured from a slain militant's pocket. Much to Shahida's amusement, the officer reconfirmed if the frail looking woman was the same as in the picture and was impressed to see the strength behind the frailty combating militants all by herself. And eventually, their togetherness in a few joint operations beautifully culminated into an inter-faith marriage as she transcended from Shahida Parveen to Shahida Parveen Ganguly. As on now, she feels proud to be his soulmate. Shahida flaunts in the myriad roles, she plays-as a police officer, as a wife of a gallant army officer and as a mother of two growing boys. Together, they discuss and deliberate and practice and preach the nuances of human values lost so badly in the quagmire of terrorism.

### Case Study Three

Alam Ara Janbaz, a sufi singer who believed that her voice was her strength and it was her unflinching belief in self and the depth of her voice which made her challenging sojourn an insightful and cherishing experience.

**Be still,sad heart!and cease repining Behind the clouds is the sun still shining.**

H.W.Longfellow

### Reclaiming Her Glorious Heritage

Let me take you all through the kaleidoscopic journey of Alam Ara Janbaz who grew up in the foothills of a suburban town, Kishtwar under the insightful guidance of her father's sacrosanct melodies which empowered her to realize the world in the right perspective. She eventually became the voice for her father's poetry and was widely appreciated and acknowledged as a versatile singer by various channels. A sudden militant attack tore away the happiness her family and left them uprooted and shattered, grappling in the most miserable conditions. The terror attack was an angry reaction to the publicised documentary of her father which was misinterpreted as a commercial to mint money. Frightening nights, threatening calls, pelting of stones, hazardous posters on the street walls, and announcements in the mosques all directed her to abandon singing.

Music was a God given gift she had inherited from her father, a talent which had sustained and nourished her all these years; more so, she was a Sufi singer and a loved teacher to her students who would eagerly await her lessons in Urdu and Social sciences. The unceremonious departure from the town eroded the happiness of the family and she along with her doctor husband and two little sons were rendered jobless, homeless and hapless. Deserted by family and friends, it was only her self-confidence and the staunch support of her husband that they started anew. Hurdles and rough ridges, they crossed all, Saraswati-the Goddess of Music was her inner strength which propelled her towards a fearless and progressive tomorrow.

Alam Ara believes that today women need to restructure and remodel their lives from being meek and vulnerable to resilient women who can take complete charge of their lives. It is her firm belief that those who follow the righteous path can never deviate in the wrong direction. She recalls an instance when she was offered and showered unusual affection and sympathy in return for undue favours both as a singer and as a woman. She bounced back and retaliated angrily at this vulgar display of power. She exhorts that women need to shout and shout aloud to ensure that they are listened.

Today, she and her husband have rebuilt their lost paradise. They have an abode of their own-an abode of love, trust, care and compassion. Her children have inherited the talent and nobility of their mother and are beautifully carrying forward the family legacy; her elder son is a maestro in tabla and the younger one is an exception in guitar. Happiness for Alam Ara remains an unending journey, she wishes to be reborn as a woman, Being a woman is God's beautiful gift and I wish to be reborn as my father's daughter and continue to sing in praise of Allah spreading his universal message of love and brotherhood!

### Case Study Four

The chronicle of Gulnaz Begum encapsulates the voluptuous struggle of a woman who has battled and survived a brutal acid attack on her face for an unreasonable cause of running a beauty Ceylon.

**I ain't goodlooking and ain't got waist-long hair I say I ain't goodlookin and ain't got waist-long hair But my mama gave something that'll take me anywhere.**

Mary Washington

### Transcending Barriers

Let me introduce you to Gulnaz Begum, the ravishing pretty woman with a fair complexion and chiselled features who was left half dead, groaning in pain after a horrid acid attack on her face. Her only fault was that she was running a beauty Ceylon in her hometown, Kishtwar to meet her ends and fend for her jobless husband and two minor daughters. Her attackers punished her for her unacceptable courage as she was the first Muslim woman who had dared to open a Ceylon in her hometown which was her only source of income to sustain her family. In this most humiliating and unfortunate accident, her right eye was completely damaged and gone and a major part of her face was burnt. Gulnaz recalls the nightmarish evening when she

was returning home from work after a strenuous day and fell prey to the evil designs of her culprits. They caught her unaware in a by lane and in the most horrendous and terrifying accident threw acid on her face. The most beautiful woman of the town was left abandoned, groaning and twisting in pain with no help or sympathy from anyone. She was advised to be silent and behave like a passive reactor to the situation which had crippled her life and thrown her in a handicap on a hospital bed in Srinagar. She recalls, as I finished with my bowl of soup, the stainless steel mirrored an ugly half burnt face with a badly damaged eye..my spine wrecked and blood congealed, I shivered with fear to see this most petrifying brow..Ahhh! it was me, Gulnaz and I threw away the bowl and shouted and cried and cried till Abba held and hugged me.

Life was never the same again for Gulnaz. She underwent four surgeries, her home was in shackles, she had to sell everything for her family's livelihood and for the education of her daughters. She had lost faith in the judiciary and even police and the so called religious preachers who labelled her as a bad charactered woman. What held her strong was her faith in God and the support of her family. She fought back fearlessly, refused to be cowed down with threats and resumed her work as she was the only bread earner of the family. The acid marks have distorted her face and an artificial eye is the make up to her face. Though she dreads to see herself in the mirror, she still remains the most beautiful woman for her husband who pampers her with a variety of glares to ornament her face. Though she feels guilty for not being able to cook for her daughters, they in turn look after their mother and support and love her unconditionally. They assure and also aim to become doctors so that they can cure and heal the pain of their mother. Gulnaz on her part wishes to open a boutique in addition to her Ceylon to make her family more comfortable.

Gulnaz, synonymous to the pride of a garden unfolds hope and optimism to all those women who aspire to make new beginnings. She has flouted all false conventions and challenged the radical thinkers who deter peace and harmony. This woman with a golden heart wishes to help women in distress, especially the acid victims. She basks in glory as she walks with her head high, flaunting her beautiful pair of goggles when her culprits now change their track on a gaze. That's her story, a story that moves your heart, a story that angers a woman and also a story that boosts and motivates a woman.

### Conclusion

The four women discussed in this paper are trendsetters to draw inspiration from and to be followed in mind and spirit. They talk about gender issues and the trials and tribulations they transgress at multiple levels; the intangible trammels they throw away, the oscillation between tradition and modernity, the moribund nature of patriarchal society, paucity of economic opportunities, burden of large families and also sexual exploitation. These kaleidoscopic manifestations seem to converge at a single point which may be defined as the symbiosis of feminism for the South Asian woman. Nirmal Khanna, Shahida Parveen Ganguly, Alam Ara Janbaz and Gulnaz Begum portray a journey of initiation to mature womanhood. The image of the journey is a personal and psychological one and it follows an evolutionary spirit as it moves from victimisation and stigmatisation to consciousness. None of these women dabble in day dreaming or wait for a magic wand to whisk away all forms of oppression; they light the spark of self-help and self-knowledge. These women living in the fragile conflict zones create a woman-centred world within the wider political, economic and cultural world shared by men, thereby subscribing to a multilateral growth that incorporates the woman, her family and the male relations.

Having moved into the next millennium, the choice rests with us women as to what kind of a world we would like to fashion? Will we spend another century fighting a war of the sexes where men are on the other side of the fence? Or have we learnt a lesson from history that oppression is self-defeating? The solution is simple, it lies in the importance of women to have a room of their own and create an idiom so that they are heard loud and clear; more so empowering women so that they play pivotal roles in peace talks and post conflict reconstruction and also work towards accomplishing their vision of an evolved and humane society free from all levels of inequities.

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