

PhD Research Proposal

Masuma Ali Khan

Remembering the Unforgettable: Narratives of Women of Kashmir

Description of proposal

Kashmiri women use memorialisation as a resistance method by holding on to memories otherwise repressed by the Indian state apparatus. They dwell upon past experiences while facing the challenges of disentangling the repressed memories and articulating them. The hegemonic state apparatus desires Kashmiris to suffer amnesia, but the only potent weapon they have, as an oppressed people, is memory (Parvez, 2011). Kashmiri women use vernacular memory to create alternative narratives of the past and present. This helps with the elicitation of everyday struggles that women go through; thus, memory practices provide access to the narratives of the past, which are otherwise marginalised in official narratives. The memory practices allow women to control their narratives and the knowledge of their past, where the enforced disappearances are termed as “missing persons”. To counter this, the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP), an organisation predominantly run by women, holds monthly sit-in protests in the middle of famous Pratap Park near the press colony. The choice of this park is politic as it is accessible to media and the press, making it easier for the members of the APDP to convey the message (Ather Zia, 2019). They use memorialisation as a resistance method by articulating the injustice on international forums, issuing calendars with a sketch and story of one missing person each month, and regular social media updates. Along with their children, the women sit with photographs of their missing members. Subverting the narrative of wailing discreetly, they weep loudly, making the disappeared appear through publicising their grief. Therefore, the state’s attempts to seize and erase memories of enforced disappearances are frustrated when the oppressed choose to use memory as a tool of everyday survival and resistance. Another form of resisting the forgetting in the everyday lives of Kashmiri women are the open doors of the houses, the reminder of disappeared persons who might return anytime. The doors deliberately left open by kins of the disappeared persons signify the continuous commemoration, a constant reminder of the disappeared person. In Kashmiri weddings, these women name slain militants and disappeared persons in the songs. Thus, the act of remembrance turns weddings into memorial sites where happiness intertwines

with grief. Considering women of different faiths, Kashmiri Shia women sustain the memory of the oppression in Moharram, the holy month known for observing grief in the memory of Imam Hussain. Traditionally, Kashmiri Shia women perform the act of reminiscing the tragedy of Karbala and the tragedy of Kashmir together by mourning publicly and raising the slogans of self-determination. This traditional mourning every year is met with reprisal and violence from the military forces (Ifsha Zehra, 2021).

State of the Art

Considering the control of Kashmiri peoples' memories, the repression of memory by the Indian state is experienced by all genders in Kashmir equally. However, this repression is doubly experienced by the Kashmiri woman since there is a double denial in acknowledging or listening to a Kashmiri woman's narratives because of the masculinization of the Kashmiri movement (Majumdar et al., 2014). A Kashmiri woman is denied the right to voice her memory by censoring her desire for agency to mourn or to voice out her experiences publicly based on her memory, first by the Kashmiri man and secondly by the Indian state.

These women have created spaces where women gather and provide basic support to the families of disappeared people. APDPs monthly sit-ins in the public sphere challenge both the Indian militarization and the internal patriarchy. The coming out of these women in Srinagar's public park signifies a search for enforced disappearances by the Indian state and, what Zia calls, 'a political conquest' (Ather Zia, 2013). Keeping in mind these subaltern groups, my research seeks to examine Kashmiri women's acts of remembrance vis-a-vis the Indian state's attempt to obliterate their past while fighting the internal patriarchy simultaneously.

Research background and Questions

The scholars have approached the commemoration culture of the Kashmir conflict in different ways. Many scholars (Inshah Malik 2018; Haley Duschinski 2018 et al.) have worked on the idea of memory and collective attempts at remembering deaths. They have focused on the culture of commemoration limited to funerals and graveyards. Manecksha's (2017) account primarily deals with the women's active and passive participation in the Kashmiri freedom movement. While focusing on the liminal state of waiting experienced by the APDP activists, Ather Zia (2019) explores the activist politics of Kashmiri women in a militarised and gendered

space. Drawing on from this scholarship, my project seeks to examine Kashmiri women's acts of remembrance through memory practices vis-a-vis the Indian state's attempt to obliterate their past and create a basis for truth and justice.

Not limited to a specific region, my project will open new opportunities for researchers to adopt the study in different situations where resisting "Forgetting" plays an important role. For instance, Palestinians, resisting change in their culture under Israeli occupation and Mothers of Plaza De Mayo, and Mothers of Srebrenica, where Mothers have been challenging dominant narratives sponsored by the Argentinian and Serb state whilst holding onto the memories of their kins killed in conflicts, many of whom are missing to-date. The proposed work will portray a significant and powerful image of a tug-of-war between the struggling to remember and the attempt of erasure of memory by the perpetrator and their sponsors.

Research Questions

1. How does voicing their memories help Kashmiri women struggle against the narratives created by the Indian state and the Kashmiri men, who render their participation less critical by controlling their tendencies to voice their memories through patriarchal control?
2. How do APDP activists negotiate their everyday within the militarised public sphere by holding onto the memories of trauma?
3. How do Kashmiri women resist the attempts of enforced amnesia by the Indian state through curfew, surveillance and internet siege?
4. How are Kashmiri women struggling against the Indian state and patriarchy simultaneously?

Research Methods

In this ethnographic study of Remembering and Forgetting in the context of Kashmir, I will investigate what methods APDP use to protest through remembrance. I will employ interview and life-history methods to guide the present study besides analysing memoirs and autobiographies like *Nigah-e-Anjum* by Zamarud Habib (separatist leader and social activist) and *Myaen Kath* by Shamla Mufti (former educationist in Srinagar Kashmir). I will use these methods to collect data on how women practice memory to resist oppression. In the life-history

method, I will ask open-ended questions to the participants and refer to some historical or key events to ease them into the interview. Kashmiri society is a patriarchal society where women's life experiences are trivialised. Parveena Ahangar, the chairperson of APDP, has compared her life before and after her son's disappearance on many occasions, stating that her life changed by moving beyond her 'domestic' sphere. The life-history method would foreground the reality of women's bodies caught in everyday violence.

My intended participants are APDP activists whose memorisation technique of resistance centralises the enforced disappearances. The organisation has more than 1000 members and the majority of them are poor, illiterate and based in rural areas. I will be recruiting three groups of participants, rural and urban, most appropriate for answering the research questions under investigation. I will establish a rapport with some of the key informants that have direct bearing on disappearances. The organisation that I am aiming for has allowed researchers like Ather Zia in the past to do their extensive ethnographic research; thus, they allow new researchers as well. Moreover, being a Kashmiri allows me to communicate the importance of research for their overall purpose.

In a conflict zone like Kashmir, people generally have trust issues. Therefore, I will recruit the initial participants through gatekeepers like Parveena Ahangar and use snowball sampling to include participants from diverse backgrounds based on their location.

Proposed timeline (in Months)

1-3: Literature Review.

4-5: Start working on my first chapter.

5-8: Literature on the general culture of commemoration and theoretical concepts used in my research.

9-10: Writing the first chapter and prepare a sample section for the fieldwork.

10-12: Plan field trip and start working on collecting data.

13-15: Prepare questions, Fieldtrip and taking notes.

16-18: Analyze the collected information and start working on the next chapters.

19-21: Fieldtrip and note-making.

22-24: Analyze the collected information and start working on the next chapters.

25-27: Prepare questions for email interviews with international organizations. Write emails to them. Writing the thesis and analyzing the data.

28-30: Writing the thesis and analysis of data + field trip (if required).

31-33: Finish my first draft.

34-36: Finalize and submit the thesis.

Expected Results

Women in conflict-torn areas have always been represented as ‘passive victims’ in dominant discourses. The impact that my project will have that an alternative narrative will be created where women will not be represented as mere recipients of action by the authoritarian states; rather, an alternative discourse will represent them as actors resisting via memory practices; and coming out in public spaces and mobilizing demonstrations; thereby challenging the traditionally held assumptions about the role of women in conflict-torn places like Afghanistan, Argentina, China, and Pakistan.

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