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Fixing Ruptured Masculinities: Reflections from Kashmir

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AMYA AGARWAL, FEB 26 2019

The predominant practice in the study of gender in conflict, particularly in South Asia, is to mainstream gender where the focus is mainly directed towards the needs, roles and position of women. As a result, the influence of gender on men and the construction of masculinities is often overlooked. However, a comprehensive understanding of the gendered character of conflict requires an exploration of the co-existence of multiple masculinities and their impact on performances of state and non-state actors. At the same time, the interjection of a masculinities discourse also enables a nuanced examination of women's agency as it highlights the dialectical relationship between masculine and feminine categories in conflict. For instance, masculinities in conflict, on one hand, shape the practices of womanhood and motherhood, but on the other hand, they are also shaped and reinforced through such performances. Also, the crisis of masculinity is a significant factor that triggers the politics of hegemonizing masculinities.[1] The constant crisis of violent forms of masculinity (represented both by the state and non-state actors), for instance, results in a politics of competing and contesting masculinities.

The conflict in Kashmir is a suitable example to understand how the politics of ruptured masculinities has created a cycle of violence and human rights violation. The rupture is a result of the repeated crisis of masculinity faced by both the Indian state and the militant groups. Psychological warfare manifested through methods like sloganeering and graffiti, further perpetuates the need to prove manliness. As a result, both the actors use aggressive and violent measures to fix the rupture and reassert their respective masculine power. Whenever there is a threat to its masculine existence, the Indian state uses violent counter insurgency measures to reinforce and uphold the binaries of the hypermasculine state and the effeminate Kashmiris. Such binaries reflect the heterosexual metaphor for the divide between the colonizer and colonized used by Nandy and further extended by Suleri in her analysis of the homosexual decorum. (Nandy, 1983) (Suleri, 1992). Mrinalini Sinha also attempts at bringing together the formation of 'English' masculinity and Bengali 'effeminacy' within the same field of analysis (Sinha, 1999). This offers a significant parallel to study the performance and practice of the Indian state in Kashmir as an extension of the Victorian masculinity; where the primary objective is to wield authority through the creation of a submissive and feminized Kashmiri local population.

Pulwama: Hypermasculine Reactions and Appeals

Recently, the valley witnessed a suicide attack in Pulwama carried out by a nineteen-year-old boy Adil Dar, who was recruited to Jaish-e-Mohammad's fidayeen squad. He rammed an explosives laden vehicle into the Central Reserve Police Forces (CRPF) van killing forty-four CRPF soldiers. The popular media in the country represented by TV, radio and social media networks was quick to adopt a rather aggressive stand and screamed for vengeance. Appeals to the state to "teach these terrorists a lesson" and "go to war" was the common rhetoric perpetuated by the channels. The spread of these messages can be viewed as a desperate call to strengthen the hyper-masculine state in Kashmir, which is challenged by the resistance forces.

It is important to note that the saffron shade of the hyper masculinity of the state is also a significant characteristic of the present political discourse in the country. The current right-wing government attempts to tie the security issue of the country with its Hindutva politics. Parashar explains quite succinctly how the currently ruling BJP wields a

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Hindutva masculinity which is nurtured by post-colonial anxieties and a crisis of masculinity. (Parashar, 2018) And as the next general election comes close, the adoption of a violent retaliation and revengeful approach by the state may well please the popular sentiment. This is because 'violence fighting violence' is an integral part of the contemporary nationalist discourse. Those speaking against the use of hard masculine measures to tackle conflict are often rendered as 'anti-nationals' and are even trolled on social media networks. Response of the mainstream Indian masses on the facebook page of Jaish e Mohammad includes violent abuses, threats of rape and throwing challenges to prove manhood. These represent a tilt towards hyper masculinity becoming the norm- both in the practices of the state and in the popular sentiment.

Emasculated Kashmiri Youth and Fatal Reassertions

Three decades of emasculation of locals in Kashmir has resulted in resentment especially among the young boys. Their participation in stone pelting movements of 2008, 2010 and later in the protests of 2016 following Burhan Wani's death, resulted in harassment by state security forces and the police. This led to an increase in the number of boys joining the militancy. Detailed testimonies of boys associated with the stone pelting movement are discussed in a separate article which talks about the new wave of militancy in Kashmir (Agarwal, 2018). Adil Dar, the boy responsible for the Pulwama attack was, according to his parents, asked by the Special Task Forces (STF) to make a circle around their jeep with his nose on the ground, as a punishment for participating in the 2016 protests. (Zargar, 2019). State repression through aggressive bullying, violent counter-protest measures and use of pellets has failed to completely subordinate Kashmiri local population and has instead triggered stronger reassertions.

A significant number of the educated youth now reassert their lost masculinity by joining militancy, crossing the border to receive training in weapons and eventually picking up the gun. There are several militant organizations active in Kashmir and an increase in the number of boys joining them. The arrival of the Jaish-e-Mohammad in the valley can be traced back to the early 2000s with two similar cases of suicide bombings. In 2000, Afaq Ahmad, a seventeen-year old drove a Maruti laden with explosives into one of the gates of the Badami Bagh cantonment, in Srinagar. The same year, another attack on Badami Bagh by a suicide car bomber, this time a twenty-four-year-old British national, Abdullah bhai. In 2005, Yasmeen Akhtar, the wife of a Pakistani militant blew herself up in Awantipora (Zargar, 2019). The strategy used by the Jaish e Mohammad is one of hostile territorial demarcation to prove that the Indian security forces are not welcome in the valley.

Similarly, many other militant outfits operate in the valley and the young boys are keen to pick the gun. In my interviews with eleven young educated boys in South Kashmir, in the summer of 2015 (a year before Burhan Wani was killed), they showed keenness to join the militancy because of unavailable platforms to address their grievances. While initially they were against picking up the gun like their fathers, but participation in stone pelting episodes (which according to them was the only way to vent their frustration) resulted in relentless harassment, detention and interrogations. The new wave of militancy comprising of young educated boys is a result of being subjected to regular intimidation and coercion. They are not fearful of death and in the last four years a number of militants have died. Their funeral processions, which are attended by locals in large numbers, become important sites for mobilization of young boys and their mothers which helps in strengthening and validating the resistance movement. Women actively participate in the funeral processions. Burhan Wani's funeral involved a transformation of the grieving culture by bringing more women into the public sphere (Malik, 2018). They sing songs of glory, freedom and martyrdom to infuse masculinity into the bodies of dead militants and provide meaning to their death.

Toxic Cycle of Competing Masculinities

The conflict in Kashmir entails a pattern of crisis and a resulting reassertion of the masculine. The fixing of ruptures and chasing an ideal masculine imagery by both the Indian state and the militant groups has resulted in a toxic cycle of competing masculinities and unending violence. Three decades of this cycle has resulted in loss of a number of lives- of army personnel, Kashmiri militants and civilians. It has also led to innumerable human rights violations in the form of rape, physical and emotional trauma, enforced disappearances, pellet injuries, detentions and so on.

It must be noted, however, apart from the violent, there is a mosaic of overlapping and paradoxical masculinities in

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Kashmir. Islamic masculinity represented by religious and separatist leaders, victimized masculinities of ex-militants and torture victims; and a softer form represented by 'soft' military men and male human rights activists. The existence of a web of these 'multiple ways of doing male' (Connell, 1995) thus calls for revisiting the conflict through a detailed exploration of interaction and politics of these masculinities.[2] The complexities of the conflict often get overshadowed by simplifying and reducing it to a dispute between nation-states. Instead there are multiple stakeholders involved, both visible and invisible. While some are victims, but many are also gaining from the conflict both monetarily and in terms of power. Also, the study of the gender dimension of conflict in Kashmir cannot be separated from the country's mainstream hypermasculine narrative on conflict and war which is effectively capitalized by the present government. In contemporary Indian politics, the popular choice for the leader entails assertive, aggressive and courageous qualities and a rejection of softer and submissive ones.

Viewing the conflict as a complex politics of contesting masculinities helps in addressing the ongoing slaughter of lives resulting from the need to wield masculine power and control. A façade of nationalism, security and religion is successfully curated under which the masculine politics dances relentlessly.

Notes

[1] Crisis of masculinity means 'a fear of loss of male power' due to social transformations and usually leads to a backlash where traditional gender roles are more strongly reinforced. See work of Chris Dolan and Henri Myrntinen on crisis of masculinity in the context of sexualisation of weapons, where weapons support the masculinity under threat.

[2] Drawing from the work of R.W. Connell and S.M. Whitehead cited in Ken Harland, Karen Beattie and Sam McCready (2005). Young men and the Squeeze of Masculinity: The Inaugural Paper for the Centre for Young Men's Studies Occasional Paper no. 1, Belfast, Centre for Young Men's Studies.

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