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The Spectacle of a Good-Half Widow: Performing Agency in the Human Rights Movement in Kashmir

A woman sits in protest at one the busiest intersections in the capital city of Srinagar in the Indian controlled Kashmir. A voluminous scarf covers her hair, body and face, revealing only her eyes. Her gaze is downcast and tearful. In one hand she holds a photograph of a man with a name and date written across it, and in another, she has a placard which says, "Half-widow: Return my disappeared husband". The first time one beholds this spectacle, a lot of questions come to mind. Who is this woman, why does she mourn publicly and yet remains hidden? It is also important to ask, what she makes visible and invisible at the same time. What are the political and social circumstances that enable this spectacle? What becomes visible about gender and agency against the backdrop of patriarchy and state violence?

The woman described above is one of many in Kashmir. Her name is Sadaf, a half-widow and a mother of 3 boys. Half-widow is a category of women which has emerged in Kashmir in the last 24 years of armed struggle. The husbands of these women have been "disappeared" in the Indian counter insurgency actions. Approximately 8,000 to 10,000 Kashmiri men, including combatants and non-combatants, have disappeared so far. More than half of the disappeared men were married. The families of the disappeared, mostly mothers and wives have formed a group known as the Association of the Parents of the Disappeared (APDP). One of the first human rights group in Kashmir, these women mobilize demonstrations, pursue court cases, and collect documentation. They seek audiences with army or government officials, and scour prisons and morgues. The highlight of their movement is a ritualistic monthly sit-in which has become a "spectacle" of mourning marked by funereal silence and lamentation¹. In case of the "disappearances"- the invisibility of the body should have been the end of it, but it becomes the highest condition of visibility² (Feldman 1991:251). In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault (1976) marks the shifting of modern society from spectacle to surveillance.³ While the society of spectacle pivoted around public torture and execution as disciplinary norms, the modern penal system is based around surveillance. However, in Kashmir the spectacle is not eliminated. The enforced disappearance appears as an implicit part of the surveillance system through which the state seeks to discipline bodies and crush any form of autonomy⁴. However, through the politics of mourning, women perform a spectacle which no doubt reiterates the state's representational threat but also produces means of agency.

In this paper I focus on one individual activist's life to trace the micropolitics of this agency enabling performance. Agency can appear in various modes: at one end it is an active

¹ These are the two motifs of this women-dominated movement that the patriarchal systems, be it the state police, army or the government even male human rights activists, do not give much weightage to as a means to access justice. See following footnote

² He talks in context of the Blanketmen and other dissidents in Northern Ireland. Feldman Allen 1991 *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*. Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press

³ The word spectacle encompasses display and performance, or more negatively, images of violence and atrocity. The etymology of the word spectacle derives from the Latin root *spectare* "to view, watch" and *specere* "to look at." Further ahead, it is discussed in detail in relation to Debord and Foucault

⁴ Trying to see how spectacle and surveillance converge is by no means trying to find lacunae's in Foucault's analysis. I utilize Foucault's idea about spectacle and surveillance as a basis for thinking about the body and the meanings it holds for justice and resistance. Foucault has described theory as a "toolkit," since it is "not a system but an instrument," and thus we have to utilize such elements in careful consideration of our own motivations and those of Foucault. In that sense Foucault's analysis enables further understanding of the body and discipline as manifested in life situations elsewhere. For further reference see Michel Foucault, "Questions on Geography," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, 1980, New York and Daniel Punday, *Foucault's Body Tropes*, 2005 *New Literary History*, Vol. 31, No. 3, *Philosophical and Rhetorical Inquiries*

manifest form, on the other it can be more nuanced, hence different than just a simple notion of resistance to oppression (Das 2008)⁵. I use performance as a metaphor through which “one can consider things that are in-process, existing, and changing over-time, in rehearsal” (Phelan and Lane 1998: 365)⁶. Sadaf’s performative politics engages the dramaturgical elements of costume and dialogue, where the body becomes a performative site. I trace the discursive practices through which Sadaf produces the spectacle of, what she calls an “asal zanan” to allow her activism. “Aasal” in Kashmiri means good and “Zanan” means “woman”. An asal zanan is obedient, dresses modestly, she listens; as Sadaf succinctly puts it “yous ni boaznay yey” (that who is not visible). In this paper, I follow Sadaf’s performance as she subtly pushes the boundaries of the social and ‘political’⁷ norms, by foregrounding the performance of an “asal zanan”.

Performing Grief: Mourning

Sadaf’s husband⁸ disappeared in 2001. Under the proxy-militaristic authority, all means for finding Manzoor were inaccessible. With her parents dead and being estranged from her brothers Sadaf had no one to help her. Initially a few elders came forward but with time they backed off. Sadaf’s ritual of searching involved making rounds of government offices, army camps, police stations, interrogation centers and almost all jails in Kashmir and outside⁹. Rumors about sightings of Manzoor kept Sadaf endlessly busy. A year and a half of search yielded nothing. The few witnesses who had come forward recanted their statements after being threatened by the army. The court, police, administration and army became a rigmarole of paperwork, endless wait, referrals, and misinformation, not to mention sexual harassment.

Sadaf suffers from depression¹⁰. She often needs to be hospitalized for different symptoms like fainting or high blood pressure. She may come across as a hypochondriac because

⁵ There is no “preoccupation with explaining resistance and resisters” (Lughod 1998). Partly the reason being not to romanticize resistance only as being confrontational and also this strategy also allows looking at the how women’s agency emerges in a setting where non-hegemonic maleness permeates the very fabric of the society. Kashmiri men in the context of Indian occupation are disadvantaged. One specific critique that is often leveled against gender investigations is that men are considered only to the extent that their actions impact women. The reason for this mode of inclusion of men is mainly attributed to hegemonic roles of masculinity. This approach makes it difficult to appreciate the strategic and ideological linkages between the consequences that befall both oppositionist women and oppositionist men (Jones, 2001). In my project the concept of the noncombatant male, whose invisibility in literature on gender remains a concern for many scholars studying war and violence, is pivotal. Men are included primarily in the discussion through their disappearance/victimization. The relations of non-combatants with hegemonic masculinities become visible through examining gender issues in the militaristic process prevalent in Kashmir. Simultaneously their condition in war is juxtaposed with the progress and evolution of women’s humanitarian activities which has a bearing on the gender relations. The process of conflict, war and militarization has brought changes to the roles of women which have translated from personal to public as seen in women’s activism for the disappeared and also in the other humanitarian demands that women have been making day to day, since the start of militancy, which have been disparate, kneejerk and spontaneous mostly an affectual response to sons, husbands or brothers or neighbors, being arrested, or killed. Kashmiri men, apprehensive about the security discrimination meted out to them at the hands of Indian troops and they have in times of need encouraged and called out to their “Maji and Benni” (mothers and sisters), often from the loudspeakers of Mosques to come out and protest an arrest or a killing or any other form of abuse. Instead of men it has always been the women, who have in a very emotional response flocked to the streets to demonstrate and conduct “dharnas” (sit-ins). This leads the question whether we can pin down a universal category of “resistance” especially for women? In a situation of the Indian occupation in Kashmir, how can resistance take shape. India is a formidable country with a strong military presence in Kashmir. The notion of resistance in this scenario changes even for men so to speak. How can we understand the concept of resilience vs resistance in such a situation.

⁶ Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane, 1998, *The Ends of Performance*, New York University Press, NY

⁷ The definition of political for Kashmiri women needs to be further discussed which is outside the purview of this paper

⁸ Manzoor was a caring husband; concerned about every aspect of Sadaf’s life. Sadaf remembers when she would return home from hospital after deliveries, he would get her coordinated outfits complete with matching lipsticks. He would even cook traditional post-delivery dinners of meat cooked with dandelion greens

⁹ Another province of Kashmir

¹⁰ The episodes of depression play ritualistically in her life. Her general health is also failing. She will lie for days in a makeshift bed in her rented tenement; crying, refusing light with old photographs strewn around.

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every little ache and pain makes her worry and consult doctors. Sadaf's faith in Sufi shrines and faith healers has increased ever since Manzoor's disappearance. Her superstitions have also intensified¹¹. Sadaf's condition manifests a chronic mourning. It is distinct from melancholia, where there is a sustained and painful dejection (Freud 253). Even in the deepest depressive episodes Sadaf talks about the future and the need to "recover fast".

Initially people were sympathetic to her, but as her search grew, aspersions were being cast about "where she was going"¹² and "who she was meeting with". There were whispers about her dressing like a "Mahren" (bride). Her rosy complexion which had been her pride became a bane, for she was suspected of doing make-up, which did not "befit a woman whose husband was missing". Sadaf had not realized that she was expected to change her attire after Manzoor's disappearance¹³. She did not see herself as a widow who is expected to dress demurely and maintain a low profile. Sadaf was hopeful she would find Manzoor. She not only pursued the official and legal routes but sought spiritual interventions as well. She had pledged sacrificial offerings to renowned Sufi's shrines and faith healers in supplication for Manzoor's return. Legally Sadaf was not a widow till 7 years after the disappearance. She could not remarry or qualify for any widow-welfare programs. Islamic scholars in Kashmir have shortened¹⁴ the duration for remarriage to 4 years. The time duration, be in 7 or 4 years indicates a potential "return" which makes it hard to consider the men dead¹⁵. The fact there is no "dead body" also adds to the hope of the person being alive.

Sadaf also faced sexual harassment from most men. Be it in the army, police stations or the courts; anyone who was in position to help wanted to take advantage of her. She has once even been molested, but never told anyone. An Ikhwan soldier¹⁶ stalked her for a long time. Being in cahoots with army the renegade soldier had a lot of information about disappearances and killings in the area. He refused to divulge anything until Sadaf gave in to his demands. He would intimidate her by threatening and beating her sons. He also began harassing the locality, giving rise to rumors about him and Sadaf. Sadaf brothers pressurized her to give up searching for Manzoor and consider remarriage.

Mechanics of Agency

Sadaf was not convinced to stop searching for Manzoor. To counter the vilification, she decided to wear a Burkha¹⁷. Burkha is a knee length cape with a face veil, worn by many observant Muslim women in Kashmir. Despite changing her attire people's behavior continued to worsen. The rumors heightened about "why she had begun hiding her face?" Sadaf had not

¹¹ A throbbing of an eye can send her into panic. In many South Asian cultures, the throbbing of an eye is considered ominous or portentous depending on a person's previous experience. The day Manzoor disappeared Sadaf's eye had been throbbing. Ever since whenever her eye throbs, Sadaf shuts herself and her children in the house to stay safe from being forcibly disappeared.

¹² /khoras peth chane khor zerwan; Moves all the time

¹³ This is an indication of how men are viewed in relation to women in Kashmiri society. Man is considered to be "majaz", and "siras sarposh". My engagement is also with how does it change or gets modified in a situation when men need women to safeguard them from the army or claim them when disappeared. How does that create alternative spaces of expression and dissent and how does the larger feminist project impose on the women's local initiatives for human rights and justice.

¹⁴ To alleviate the growing issues of half-widows, but statistics show that 91% never remarried.

¹⁵ It becomes remarkable to note how society disregards legality in such situations

¹⁶ Militant turned government gun-man, also called as a renegade militant

¹⁷ A knee length gown worn with a cape and face-veil; unique to Kashmir

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given any thought to the Burkha's¹⁸ notoriety for being used as a cover by women who might be indulging in some kind of unacceptable behavior. In the 90's Burkha also became associated with women connected to militancy or to the army as informers. Sadaf realized that wearing Burkha had more harmed than helped allay the suspicions around her activities. After this incident, Sadaf chose to wear an Abhaya. A middle-eastern version of the Burkha Abhaya comprises of a long gown worn with a head scarf and an optional face veil. Once Sadaf had to visit an army camp after it was rumored that Manzoor might be there. An army camp is seen a terrifying place where even Kashmiri men fear to tread. It conjures up images of humiliation, beatings, torture, rape, and killings. Scared, Sadaf took her youngest son Raju with her¹⁹. She often took him along²⁰ to foreground her maternity and to minimize the focus on her "femaleness". While trying to quickly negotiate the camp dotted with bunkers and leering soldiers, Sadaf tripped several times over the billowing Abhaya. The army officer in the camp had no inkling about Manzoor and asked her to come again. On the next visit, stricken by the Abaya fiasco Sadaf chose to wear something that would allow her to walk fast without falling. She opted for a suthan which is a "jodhpur" style trouser, tight around the leg. She covered herself well with a scarf and a shawl. Sadaf learned that the officer had no information about Manzoor. Instead he instead dwelled on Sadaf's financial situation and her children. He tried to offer her money and openly suggested that she become an "informer" for them. This proposition thinly veiled the prospect that in time she may find Manzoor's whereabouts. While Sadaf's trip to the army camp yielded nothing, she had angered her neighborhood by wearing a "suthan". A non-traditional garment Suthan is commonly worn by Kashmiri women, but in Sadaf's case it became another transgression. Her brothers berated her for becoming "bolder, day by day". Sadaf felt unable to explain her choice of dress for it would lay bare the crassness of her fears inside the army camp.

The gossip and confrontations began to overwhelm Sadaf. After she became a member and an activist of the APDP, she moved to the city. She had trained as a beautician but decided to teach embroidery instead because the beauty trade was not considered "asal". After she lost the job, Sadaf was forced into beauty business but she goes to extreme lengths to camouflage the nature of her work²¹.

The discursive contentions around Sadaf as a half-widow in the environment of state terror and overall social distrust it instigates, brings the faultlines in the gender politics to fore. Sadaf cannot relegate herself to the category of a widow, which although a disadvantaged category, has a social precedent. Sadaf says, "suddenly everyone became my husband, even the military-wallas told me what to do". The "disappearance" of Manzoor's body makes Sadaf's body hyper-visible as "biopolitical" (Agamben 1998). Not a routine widow, her course is

¹⁸ Instead of the Burkha helping it made matters worse. Wearing a Burkha had become ambivalent although it had been quite popular with upper class women in Kashmir. Its use has steadily waned since the 1960's, as it gained notoriety for giving cover to women who wanted to indulge in socially unacceptable behavior. Burkha use became so rudimentary, that many wore only the cape and ignored the gown. There was a time when in Kashmir, the word "burka-wajin", (the one with the burkah), meant the woman was "up to no good". If a man was seen in a company of a burkha clad woman it became synonymous of hanky-panky. From a mark of piety the Burkha became a sign of potential wantonness. Many women discontinued its use because they claimed that "they had nothing to hide" or did not want to be confused with those who misused it.

¹⁹ since he was very young so there was little chance of her being detained or beaten, as the soldiers were wont to do for no particular reason.

²⁰ Over time she has realized that even this is not a sufficient deterrent for most men.

²¹ It is ironic that Sadaf has to face such a situation where she does not want to talk about her job lest she be seen in a less favorable light. In Kashmir some very popular beauty salons are owned by women from moneyed families and who enter this trade with pride. It is a fact that these women are often the proprietors and do not actually work as beauticians. It is not without reason that Sadaf hides her profession. For most people being in beauty business is an indicator of "shamelessness", and it is especially problematic for Sadaf whose husband is missing.

uncharted in both the political and social maze. She is part husbanded, part bereaved and the possibility for being either is real. She cannot have the luxury to mourn within her home because no one is dead yet; there is no “body”. Instead there is an unending mourning fueled by love, guilt, unanswered questions and hauntings that force Sadaf out of her home every single day. The social and political forces lay claim on her without offering any solution²². The Indian state’s violence in Kashmir has corralled Sadaf within a grueling routine, with no recourse to justice. The society has no precedence to deal with the contingencies produced by half-widowhood. While it is no excuse, it is easy to see how a social fabric, like that of Kashmir which is already worn-out from more than 60 years of militarization and 24 years of armed violence, comes apart. Gender inequities are exacerbated and biases are heightened and this works to the advantage of the state because it recedes as the “direct” aggressor while the social hierarchy intimately cracks down on the women. Enforced disappearances, thus, not only enable elimination of the politically deviant but also unravels the social fabric in unique ways, creating lacunae’s which can neither be filled nor kept empty; disappearing the community as it knew itself.

It is within this violence ridden sociality that Sadaf’s “spectacle” of the good half-widow is performed. It is not an episodic process but an ongoing one which involves the theatrics of mourning emphasizing a “complex transaction of body and language”²³ (2007:59). The first time I saw Sadaf at her home I did not recognize her immediately. She was a vision of youthful femininity in a red dress with her hair open. For her trip outside, she wore an ill-fitting dress in a print which is distinctive of older Kashmiri ladies. She topped it with a hijab (fitted scarf) and a shawl. Her feet hidden completely in black shoes and a large bag bulging with documents completed her look. The only parts that remained visible were a small triangle of her face and her two hands; the rest was purposefully hidden under the layers. Although socially and hierarchically women as a gender are invisible but bodily they are “visible”. Sadaf de-womanizes herself, so that she “appears” as “not seen”. Sadaf uses steroid ointments to tone down her naturally red cheeks to avoid appearing “made-up”. In the last 10 years she has not consulted a gynecologist despite having debilitating menorrhagia because it might raise questions about her going to a “pregnancy” doctor²⁴. Conversely, she does not mind highlighting her depression and other stress related conditions. The erosion of her health enhances the spectacle of the good-half widow, which is not to consider her very real ailments as imaginary. Sadaf always avoids getting into confrontations or even raising her voice, which is not a mark of “asal zanan”. On one hand Sadaf performs the use of deliberate silence and careful words and on the other hand she is a spokesperson of the APDP. It is under her name and signature that the issue of disappearances takes space in local and international media every month. This is a strange dichotomy which illuminates the nuanced performance that Sadaf utilizes to become visible an “asal zanan” activist and not be branded as “kharaab” (bad). Sadaf’s performance is layered, where motifs associated with “asal zanan” are made hyper-visible; dramatized through demure attire, tears, silence, muted responses, careful words, mental and physical ailments etc. The inner layer of her

²² Sadaf’s visit, and by implication any woman visiting army camps or police station or courts is seen as a potential danger; more than a man visiting these places would. I would like to think about this “fear” and retrace to its origin, asking why do we fear a woman’s vulnerability more? What does it say about a woman’s place and status in the society? Is it only have to do with woman’s vulnerability and weakness or does it also become telling about how important she is to a social fabric, in that her fall becomes more damaging than that of a man’s? In this there might be some answer for how these societies may be wound together which might be apparent to the western feminist project for women’s liberalization and may not even be part of the female consciousness in other parts of the world such as Kashmir. At one end of the spectrum is this “fear” and at the other end stands the free permission or rather “forced” permission when the men encourage women to go out and protest for “arrested”. What does this say for patriarchies that are mired in occupations and their constitution preceding it.

²³ Her agency in memorialization is also in being able to voice, show, and provide witness to the destruction. See Veena Das

²⁴ Gynecologists are seen more associated pregnancy than with female-health

actions as an activist is not foregrounded. The onus on what becomes “visible” and thus, important is palpable in Sadaf’s own thinking. Despite the unprecedented work that she does as an activist with APDP, Sadaf often reminisces how “modern²⁵” she was in her early life, how well she dressed²⁶ and how “she would listen to no-one”²⁷. She feels that in her current state she is not free “to appear as she likes” and hence, she is “listening” to everyone. Sadaf mourns the “disappearance” of her earlier self, but she is not entirely submitting to social diktats. Like the rest of the society she also associates “modern” get up to “not listening to anyone”²⁸. Sadaf also reveres the ideal of “asal zanan” and wants to be seen as such²⁹. Inside her home or the backstage (Goffman 1969), supposedly free from external surveillance, Sadaf dresses differently but nevertheless she is always in the process of perfecting her external appearance. Thus, the surveillance in the creation of the good-half widow is not only external but also internal and self-regulated. Sadaf’s childhood friend commends³⁰ her changing from looking like a Bollywood actress³¹ to someone who looks “older than her years”; which shows her loyalty to her husband. The micropolitics of performing the half-widow is portrayed as “listening to everyone” when in reality it is inverting society’s strangle-hold. Sadaf has tailored an aboveboard response to the state terror, which even the male activists largely have failed at and appears visibly palatable to the floundering patriarchy. In this vein, being an “asal zanan” remains linked to “appearance”³², and the “visibility” that Sadaf gains as an activist remains subservient to the performance of it. Performing agency in this mode is harder since it must remain apparently undetected and still do what is needful.³³ Sadaf’s agency cannot be bound in one rigid definition or made synonymous with the trademark “confronting” face of resistance.³⁴ The notion of agency in this regard encompasses more possibilities than just resistance to relations of domination, or subversion of norms³⁵. It includes conscious goal-driven activities, and the propensity to make choices between pathways of action (Strathern 1996). The capacity for action is also understood as that which the historically specific relations of subordination enable and create.³⁶ Sadaf apparently conforms to what the social mores demand of her. She molds her face and body, and bends like liquid metal running in the labyrinthine streams of sociality. However, she is in “action”, in a constant “performance” always, wherein her body remains central. Like a Bollywood starlet who takes items of clothing off one by one to gain visibility, Sadaf adds layers to become the spectacle in

²⁵ How does the idea of being modern come across in this context?

²⁶ She is wearing colorful dresses, makeup and her hair is open. Her dresses are both traditional and Western (which Manzoor liked). She is also wearing Mangalsutra which is a Hindu marriage necklace. She had taken to wearing it in New Delhi to dissuade proposing men. Even though a Muslim, Sadaf did not mind wearing a Mangalsutra which was a Hindu tradition as long as it kept the men away from her.

²⁷ The word modern as used by Sadaf strictly connotes a departure from traditional styles or values.

²⁸ A point of interest here is how does she view Manzoor’s authority over her dress and demeanor; was she not listening to him over the choice of her attire. It is also a question of the very act of submission; was done in coercion or voluntary. I do not see this as her following Manzoor’s diktat, but that she wanted to become like what he wanted and in that she was primarily following her own wish

²⁹ She longs for her husband to come back so that she can return to becoming a “wife” again and run her household just like any other woman. Whether after his return she will recede to being the old Sadaf is largely a hypothetical question

³⁰ sharafat: Which can mean nobleness, good character, passivity, docility, loyalty

³¹ Shilpa Shirodkar: A Bollywood actress

³² What does this say about what remains visible to us all the time? How we perceive that to what happens in the background.

³³ According to many feminist theorists, agency manifests solely through resistance to patriarchy. While that is one way of understanding agency, oppositional agency is only one of many forms of agency. See Ahearn, Laura M. (2001) ‘Language and Agency’, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30:109–37. Also how we can understand resistance in this mode and how we can factor in resilience

³⁴ Laura Ahearn in her review on agency says that agency can be defined in any number of ways; for some it is not transdiscursive, while some perceive it as a useless concept if not universally transportable. See Ahearn, Laura M. 2001. Language and Agency. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30:109–37.

³⁵ Refer to Veena Das’ notion of passivity becoming agency in case of the Sikh women protesting the 1984 massacre in India (2005; 2007; 2008).

³⁶ Mahmood, S. (2005). Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press & Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival, *Cultural Anthropology* 16(2):202–236

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order to attain the visibility that is necessitated and the invisibility she needs to sustain it. The spectacle of a good-half widow is a performance which accommodates both the power of social constraints as well as political constraints and the capacity to act situatedly against them (McNay 2003; Fraser 1992).