Resisting Disappearance. Military Occupation & Women’s Activism in Kashmir, by Ather Zia

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Like many scholars researching the Kashmir conflict, I visited the office of the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) in Hyderpora, Srinagar, in 2014 and interviewed the organisation’s co-founder and main spokesperson, Parveena Ahangar. The large room was full of papers and there were some student interns from Delhi, Mumbai and elsewhere helping with a project to document disappearances in the Kashmir Valley. Within the male-dominated context of the conflict – in which India, Pakistan and UN resolutions would often pop up in interviews and conversations – I found the atmosphere very dignified.

Resisting Disappearance: Military Occupation & Women’s Activism in Kashmir by Ather Zia examines APDP activism by focusing on how women, normally of a very modest class background, have emerged into the public space of a conflict-ridden context. They have done so by navigating between a patriarchal society that assigns very limited roles to women in the public space, the highly factionalist Tehreek (nationalist movement) and the pervasive militarisation of the Indian state in the region. Yet the women have been able to carve out a space of their own, what Zia refers to as a ‘female consciousness’. Their activism, which operates at the limit of what is socially permissible, is capable of bringing change to society, which Zia aptly documents throughout the different chapters of the book.
The disappearance of men, mostly husbands and sons, and the search for them was and is a central element in the setting up of APDP, in which men play a secondary role. Zia’s book investigates APDP’s activism to demonstrate how women have become ‘agents of change’ insofar as they can renegotiate the boundaries of the permissible. APDP women are mothers, wives and daughters of those who have disappeared as a result of India’s militarisation in Kashmir with the implementation of the draconian Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act (AFSPA) of 1990, that resulted in mass human rights violations. The fate of the ‘disappeared’, a term used in the Kashmir Valley, is similar to other experiences from the Latin American context and in particular to the case of Madres de Plaza de Mayo who first challenged the Argentinian dictatorship and later the official politics of memory of that period.

The term ‘disappeared’ is not without ambivalence: on the one hand, it may refer to someone who simply vanishes from a place and, on the other, it can mean to cause someone to disappear. APDP activities centre around this second meaning, enforced disappearances, and the women thereby directly challenge the Indian state. Zia’s extensive ethnographic work informs all seven chapters of the book and focuses on the emotional and material consequences of this ‘vanishing’ in the lives of ordinary Kashmiri women. Each chapter starts with a photograph taken by Yawar Nazir Kabli to illustrate APDP’s activism and with a poem by Zia. The poems are the result of antropoesía, a term that Zia borrows from the work of Renato Rosaldo and which she defines as a sort of exchange during the ethnography of participant observation through which the ethnographer-cum-poet carries a wound ‘that is simultaneously in the body of the other and reflected in yours’ (p27).

Resisting Disappearance, as the title indicates, explores the strategies deployed by APDP women to redress this condition, ‘to make the disappeared appear’. Chapter 1 examines the politics of mourning by resorting to the metaphor of the open door to express the possibility that the disappeared may return. The open door functions as a way of ‘affective law’, a quest for justice that involves both search and mourning, in which the spiritual experiences of searching can amount to a form of healing. The second chapter contextualises militancy within the historical development of the Kashmir conflict and discusses how the Kashmir (male) body has become the object of state violence. Then, by examining APDPs activism during its monthly protest at Pratap Park in Srinagar, Chapter 3 draws attention to how the women, whose activities were previously confined to the private space of the home, have negotiated their visibility in the public space under the concept of asal zanan (good woman).

The notion of asal zanan is further developed in Chapter 4 when Zia examines the role of Kashmiri women in civilian resistance and APDP’s character as an apolitical organisation. Chapter 5, which is perhaps less conceptually linked to the main theme of the book, centres on the consequences of militarisation, particularly in rural areas. This militarisation is characterised by the doubled-edged sword of the military both as a coercive and humanitarian force that destroys the social fabric. Chapter 6 analyses the importance of the ‘file’ (eg documentary evidence) through the extraordinary account of Jabbar who, along with his mother, searched for his missing brother for nineteen years. In a context in which written documents are scarce, the search resulted in a sort of living archive that not only reflects the trajectory of the disappeared but has the potential to speak for them. Zia writes: ‘The power of the file is paradoxical: it has the potential to hold the government and its machinery accountable, but at the same time
it cannot bring anyone to account’ (p183). Finally, the last chapter discusses the politics of memory through the experiences of APDP women to illustrate the collapse of a differentiation between public and private space. The dynamics of the conflict has caused the army to invade the private sphere of the home, and this has also given women more mobility to move between the private and public.

7 Throughout the book, Zia explores the dilemmas that APDP women face in their search for disappeared men in order to comply with the roles of a patriarchal society and to protect themselves, and others, in a militarised context. By stepping out into the public space, APDP women have become visible, even hypervisible, but they have sought to downplay this visibility by adjusting to the codes of asal zanan. Their way of handling this adjustment is discussed mainly in Chapters 3 and 4. Parveena Ahangar explains her activism after the disappearance of her son as a result of her becoming a match, a woman who has lost her mental balance or who exists outside normal conventions (like the famous Kashmiri mystic Lal Ded). Likewise, Sadaf, the wife of a disappeared, has learnt after a long experience how to hide her source of income from work as a beautician, which may be seen socially as inappropriate, and how to highlight her mental stress-related issues in order to enhance her suffering. The patriarchal gaze cast on women’s bodies and sexuality by men – whether soldiers, renegades, neighbours, friends – is pervasive. Motherhood and old age, as Zia shows, is earnestly deployed for activism because it ‘enables bypassing social restrictions on women, especially those who do not have a husband’ (p102).

8 Zia’s ethnographic work is impressive and the result of long-term engagement with APDP. It is also part of emerging research by Kashmiri scholars who ‘in their capacity to speak for themselves’ are challenging narratives of the dispute, which have become dominant in the last three decades. These narratives essentially frame the Kashmir conflict as a question of identity, a religious fundamentalist threat and a conflict, like many others in Muslim majority societies, in which women are completely absent. Zia’s work re-inscribes the conflict as a political issue that challenges India’s enduring militarisation over the region. Perhaps a more critical reflection on the historical aspects (mainly in Chapter 2) – such as ‘what the majority of Kashmiris preferred’ in 1947 in terms of their region’s future, the controversial role exercised by Pakistan in the Kashmir Valley and the reification of the boundaries of the former princely state, to name a few – would have better contextualised the Kashmir struggle. The author draws from research on similar women’s movements elsewhere and particularly on the case of Northern Ireland, though the case of Chechnya may also have been relevant.

9 The strength of the book lies in its in-depth exploration of women’s lives in Kashmir society under militarisation. Through the study of APDP’s activism, the reader can understand the broader and often complex dimension of unarmed resistance. The book documents the subtle ways through which women become agents of change. This is a major achievement because the author is aware of social class constraints and the ways they permeate Kashmir society and understandings of the conflict. Zia intimately records this transformation through accounts of personal biographical trajectories, in some cases of well-known figures such as Parveena Ahangar, and she does this with great tact.
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