

## Book review: Amya Agarwal: Contesting Masculinities and Women's Agency in Kashmir

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AMYA AGARWAL, *Contesting Masculinities and Women's Agency in Kashmir*. (Cambridge Elements: Politics and Society in Southeast Asia / Men and Masculinities in a Transnational World). Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2022. 176 pages, \$90.00. ISBN 978-1-7866-1239-7 (hb)

From the perspective of an academic, much has been said and written on Kashmir, to such an extent that the topic is somewhat saturated. There are hundreds if not thousands of research papers covering every aspect of the Kashmir conflict, especially from the perspective of human rights and issues of sovereignty. Generating literature and documentation on such a sensitive topic is no doubt an important value addition but so is documenting the everyday reality the conflict from different perspectives. Such nuances tend to get eclipsed in the pursuit of more conventional topics.

In this context, the book *Contesting Masculinities and Women's Agency in Kashmir* by Amya Agarwal provides a fresh perspective and breathes new life into the Kashmir conflict. The book interprets the conflict from a fresh lens of critical masculine studies and a feministic approach. The author highlights the presence of multiple masculinities in Kashmir, describing this as a “mosaic of masculinities”, including the masculinities of various identities, such as state and non-state actors, human rights workers and civilians (p. 12). The book then explores the interplay of women's agency with all these mosaics, particularly with that of the militarised masculinities.

Agarwal's analysis identifies nationalism and religion as core elements in the shaping of militarised masculinities among both state and non-state actors in Kashmir. The masculinity in the case of state actors is moulded by associating the idea of the nation with femininity, where the role of the male soldier is seen as protecting her (the nation). In the case of non-state actors, in contrast, masculinity is shaped by the notion of political resistance in Islam. Interestingly, introducing an element of novelty in the case of state armed forces, the author tries to move away from the hegemonic notion of masculinity based around the idea of violence. She attempts to understand the construction of the masculinity of state forces through military training, Bollywood movies, songs and slogans, which sexualise weapons and equate the nation with a feminine identity whose glory must be protected by the male soldier.

The author attempts to look beyond the elements of hegemonic notions of masculinity traditionally associated with violence, but during the process ends up concentrating on those very elements – such as force, violence infused with notion of bravery, sacrifice and protection – that form a part of the hegemonic or idealised masculinity. In her interviews with retired and serving officers of the Indian Army, Agarwal carefully navigates and observes how the idea of an ideal masculinity is quite different from the lived experiences of the armed forces serving in Kashmir. In her interviews the personnel exhibit an emotional discomfort

with violence contrary to the perception of ideal masculinity, in which the display of emotions is looked upon as feminine. The soldiers also mention using nationalist discourse as their coping mechanism. As for the non-state actors, i.e. the Kashmiri rebels, the author locates the genesis of their “militant masculinity” in the Indian State’s denial of self-determination to the people of Kashmir and in the suppression of dissent, as well as the human rights violations committed by the State in Kashmir. Such attempts to suppress the voices of young Kashmiri men force them to feel vulnerable and humiliated, as they are prevented from exercising their masculinity and agency. Therefore, it paves the way for them to join the militancy to reclaim their lost masculinity, exercise agency and find a sense of higher purpose. In addition to oppression, other factors such as the economy, politics and religion also play a major role in shaping this militant masculinity. The author explores two militancy models based on the changing political situation and the understanding of religion in Kashmir, and explores the idea of the masculinity and agency of militants who have surrendered.

Towards the end the author sheds light upon the contribution of Kashmiri women in shaping militant masculinity, particularly through the domestic space and reproductive politics. In shaping militant masculinity through domestic space, the women have made the militants a part of their daily domestic lives by acting as carriers of weapons for them and tending to their injuries, in addition to providing food, financial assistance and shelter during raids or engagements. On the other hand, the author identifies mothers as central figures in reproductive politics as the mothers of martyrs, who have made the supreme sacrifice of losing a son and in so doing reinforce and nurture militant masculinity. The book illustrates how femininity is an essential feature in the construction of militarised masculinity and thus opens new avenues for future research as it breaks away from notion of viewing Kashmiri women solely as victims.

Agarwal delves into the intricacy of the everyday lives of the wives of former militants and half widows and the challenges they face, categorising the women according to the status of their husbands, some who returned, some who never did and some who were forcibly disappeared. An underlying feature in all cases is the non-traditional roles that the women undertake in the absence of men. These women face multiple financial and legal challenges, as well as the need to redefine their social status. The author also brings in a contrasting perspective, by looking at women who navigate their political space in a hybrid way that both diminishes and upholds patriarchy. She cites an interview with a political Muslim-Kashmiri woman from the separatist camp, who, when exercising her agency, upholds patriarchal notions (p. 115). Similarly, the case of Zoya, whose sole impetus for joining separatist politics, a male-dominated field in Kashmir, was to bring women’s issues to the table, highlights how separatists refuse to acknowledge women’s issues.

It is pertinent to point out that the author has placed the genesis of the Kashmir conflict in the binary of India and Pakistan, which diminishes Kashmir's own political history and provides a myopic view of the situation. Though Agarwal has been meticulous with her research methodology, positionality and ethics, the book fails to acknowledge the fact that interviewing army officers – whether active or retired – is a privilege associated with her own identity. Moreover, it is quite surprising to see the author talk about femininity and masculinity in Kashmir without referring to the works of Ather Zia, an eminent Kashmiri Anthropologist based in the United States, particularly her book *Resisting Disappearance: Military Occupation and Women's Activism in Kashmir*, in which she showcases the construction of a Kashmiri Women Activist identity, her resistance and her everyday life. It also highlights the experience of Kashmiri men as well, particularly what makes them the perfect “killable” body. Zia's work mostly revolves around memory, agency and resistance.

Nonetheless this book is an essential read on the Kashmir conflict, as it contributes significantly to the scholarship on Kashmir, particularly masculinity studies, an area which has thus far remained under-researched. As an ethnographic study, the book has engaged multiple stakeholders in Kashmir, taking its cue from the theoretical insights from various conflict zones as well as from feminist approaches and critical masculinity studies, making it a rich resource for scholars across multiple disciplines.

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MAHMOOD KOORIA, *Islamic Law in Circulation: Shāfi'ī Texts across the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean*. (Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. xv, 446 pages, 1 map, £105.00. ISBN 9781009098038.

How to narrate the history of Islamic law as both a process and a system of knowledge while remaining sensitive to the peculiarities of historical contexts? Mahmood Kooria's *Islamic Law in Circulation* provides a remarkable answer to this conundrum, by tracing the history of a specific family of texts belonging to the *shāfi'ī* school of Islamic law – from its origins in thirteenth-century Damascus via Mecca to Muslim societies around the Indian Ocean and to the offices of European colonial scholarship and officialdom in the twentieth century. The book reads as a travelogue, mapping the authors, their texts, their contexts and the routes along which texts were transmitted. What emerges is an intricate tapestry of engagements, challenges, negotiations and conflicts that reveal the