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Between Silence and Survival: Psychological Resilience among the Marginalized Kashmiris

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Abstract— *For many years, Kashmir has been an area characterised by political instability, ongoing conflict, and the psychological effects of extended violence. The lasting effects of trauma, the subduing of lived experiences and the normalisation of fear were created by this complex socio-psychological experience. In all this pain and misery arises an indistinct yet deep kind of resilience, the potential of both the individuals and communities to survive, adjust and even thrive in the face of ongoing marginalization. This research examines the ways in which the people of Kashmir, especially its marginalized groups, use activism, cultural expression, communal support, and resilience as coping methods to balance survival and silence. The transition of Kashmiri experience from victimhood to power is illustrated in this study, so it places this study within the major theme of "From conflict to thriving" tracing on various angles from psychology, sociology and cultural studies. It investigates resilience in the mind as a coping mechanism and an act of resistance. Resistance acts as a transforming power that proclaims humanity when confronted with demeaning situations, strengthening personal identity and preserving memories, which proves that resilience goes beyond mere courage or tolerance. Collectively, this essay discusses the politics of healing, resilience, and marginality. The paper rethinks what it means to "live" in situations of complete alienation by looking at the overlaps between community action, cultural preservation, and personal steadfastness. Kashmir remains a place of struggle, but it is also a symbol of the people's unyielding vitality and fury.*

Keywords— ***marginalization, conflict, psychology, trauma, resilience.***

I. INTRODUCTION

Kashmir's narrative often gets lost in political noise, but underneath that uproar lies a more profound reality shaped by everyday people whose lives have been turned upside down by conflict in ways that are too vast and personal to capture completely. In the first section, the emphasis is on the political, social and economic circumstances of Kashmir's marginalisation which includes frequent curfews, mobility limitations, disappearances and systematic voice suppression. These factors cause collective trauma, which shows up as (PTSD) post-traumatic stress disorder, hopelessness, anxiety and grief. This claim is well supported by scientific data; Research by Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), Kashmir's Department of Psychiatry, and various independent scholars consistently shows alarming levels of trauma: nearly 45% of adults in the region suffer from major depression, while over 70% experience psychological distress, with young people particularly impacted. PTSD linked to the conflict, anxiety disorders, and stress-related health issues have become sadly common in a society where witnessing violence, being displaced, and living in uncertainty is a norm that spans generations. Conflict deeply disturbs the family structures and generational heritage which is evident through the haunting reality of unmarked graves in Kashmir, where not only adults but unclaimed children are buried. The social scape of valley is changed by the continuous violence, a lot of children have grown without fathers, innumerable families are dependent on humanitarian aid and an economy once

bloomed on agriculture, craft and tourism has suffered a lot due to shutdowns, communication blackouts and continuous instability.

Amid this adversity, resilience emerges through cultural, social, and psychological dimensions:

1. Cultural resilience: Through the preservation of Kashmiri poetry, language, handicrafts and folklore, identity and unity are maintained. Trauma is jotted down as artistic expression, silence becomes screams and grief becomes symbolism through poetic expression. A spectrum of emotional survival is demonstrated by historical figures like Habba Khatoon and modern poets like Naseem Shafaie, Agha Shahid Ali, Zaffar Iqbal, and Madhosh Balhami. Balhami claims that "when they burnt my words, I learnt to write on smoke," despite the fact that his house and "30 years of manuscripts were destroyed" in a gunfight in 2018. These artistic endeavours are good examples of how loss may be transformed into resiliency.

2. Social resilience: The Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP), established by Parveena Ahangar " the iron lady of Kashmir" showed how by empowering families and young people, personal grief could be transformed into public engagement through the documentation of disappearances and the pursuit of justice, which in turn shows the rise of agency. Women's collectives, support groups and non-profit organisations provide support and preserve unity.

3. Psychological resilience: people use coping mechanism to process trauma, maintain hope and reinterpret meaning. According to post-traumatic development theory adversity may improve moral clarity, empathy and value systems. Some examples of prospering in the face of hardship are youth led programs in education, art collectives and mental health awareness, challenging the myth that people affected by conflict are powerless.

Using frameworks from resilience theory (Ann Masten, Viktor Frankl) and trauma studies (Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub), the study investigates the relationship between trauma and resilience. It makes the case that Kashmir's cycles of loss and recovery have produced a special ability for moral agency and emotional endurance by examining psychological research, literary works, and oral testimonials. Activism, poetry, and art all are linked with psychological health, offering both individual comfort and group approval.

In conclusion this study shows how amid conflict, resilience works more than just psychological healing it represents a moral position, cultural continuity and the active reclaiming of narrative agency. By Habba Khatoon's historical lament, Parveena Ahangar's current advocacy and Madhoosh Balhami's inventive tenacity, it is evident that Kashmiri voices demonstrate silence does not equate to surrender. By claiming their identity, hope and agency young people, communities and artists turned survival into thriving. Even in the face of extensive pain, the history of Kashmir demonstrates that human spirit can continue to be irrepressible, creative and unbroken.

II. METHODOLOGY

As the themes involve lived pain, memory and emotional endurance in conflict torn Kashmir so this study follows a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology to explore psychological elasticity, trauma and survival in Kashmir. This research prioritizes methods that respect human experience over statistical abstraction. Secondary sources like psychological surveys, sociological studies, human rights reports and ethnographic writings published by MSF, APDP, JKCCS and independent Kashmiri scholars are also analysed in this work. The everyday realities of Kashmiri youth, orphans, families of the disappeared and survivors of repeated cycles of violence are contextualized by the help of these materials. It also shows the prevalence of PTSD, anxiety disorders, depression and the socio-economic disruptions.

A crucial technique for interpreting poetry, oral histories, interviews, personal essays, and cultural narratives is textual and theme analysis. The Kashmiri poets Agha Shahid Ali, Naseem Shafaie, and Madhosh Balhami function as emotional repositories which preserve artistic expression alongside grief and longing, and resilience, and memories. The combination of war-destroyed homes and family accounts from APDP members and reports about unmarked graves demonstrates how people manage grief, and silence, and survival during long periods of military control. The stories demonstrate how people use psychological methods to develop emotional endurance through their use of optimism, and faith, and community connection, and creative meaning-making. The research explores the relationship between pain and strength by using key elements from resilience theory together with trauma studies. The research method allows scientists to examine Kashmir beyond its depiction as a suffering area because it shows how people create new identities and discover meaning during times of upheaval.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. The psychological effects of long-term conflict on people and families in Kashmir lead to specific ways of coping which they develop through their experiences.

2. The process of resilience formation occurs through cultural elements and social structures and individual strength which youth and poets and families of disappeared and violence survivors develop.

3. The combination of community memory and artistic expression and daily survival methods enables people to endure emotionally while creating opportunities for personal growth.

IV. DISCUSSION

Literature from Kashmir has historically functioned as a sanctuary for emotional expressions which official historical records have failed to document and the present-day conflict has strengthened this function. The traditional poetry of Kashmir serves two purposes because it performs emotional healing while creating a social record which replaces official historical records when these records become unavailable or unreliable. The poets in this study include Habba Khatoon, Naseem Shafai, Agha Shahid Ali, Zaffar Iqbal and Madhosh Balhami who create an intergenerational network that transforms their experiences of loss and longing into new forms of resilience. The research shows that Kashmiri people face discrimination that exists as an actual social reality rather than being a symbolic representation. The space exists as a real environment which develops from missing elements and monitoring activities and psychological distress and financial instability and ongoing life unpredictability in conflict regions. The following discussion demonstrates that these gaps produce a strong desire to build new things while preserving memories and achieving success. Habba Khatoon established the foundation for Kashmiri emotional expression through her sorrowful songs about separation which later developed into the early emotional structure of Kashmiri suffering. The poet's voice reflects the most profound injury of the contemporary conflict through her words about women who remain stuck in time because they must await their missing husbands and absent sons and unreceived death certificates. Through her sorrowful state of unrest Habba established the emotional basis which modern female poets continue to draw from while transforming in their poetic works. She creates a foundation for contemporary poets who study trauma by presenting a way to express both desire and destruction in their work.

This lineage becomes unmistakably political in the work of Naseem Shafaie, one of the most prominent contemporary Kashmiri women poets. Shafaie focuses her poetry on the subtle effects of violence rather than its dramatic displays. The daily ritual of a mother folding her son's clothes continues even though she doesn't know if he still exists. The child learns to stop crying because he understands that making noise will bring him danger. The house stands tall yet it seems to carry the weight of fear. The poet creates images which reflect the actual experiences that human rights organizations document through the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) which Parveena Ahangar established. APDP conducts monthly sit-in protests at Pratap Park to demonstrate their shared sorrow through mothers who maintain pictures while they wait for their children to receive official recognition instead of closure. Shafaie uses this location to present a space where mourning gets stuck between two worlds because the living and the dead exist side by side and people must show their sorrow in public because their private grief remains unacceptable and their bodies serve as records when traditional documentation falls short. The Kashmiri women's experiences during the violent Kashmir conflict have become the central subject of Naseem Shafaie's extensive body of literary work which she has written from her personal perspective as a woman. Her poem, Akh Aes Paadshah-Bai (Once There Was A Queen), is about a Kashmiri mother who loses her sons one by one. In another poem titled Tchandaaw (Search), she depicts the pain of those who lost their husbands and sons to disappearances. She reveals that her written work draws its essence from the Valley's prolonged period of unrest which caused women to suffer the same level of anguish as men. A proud daughter born of Kashmir’s soil, she eloquently calls herself the admirer of the Valley’s beauty and the confidant of its despair. Having witnessed the atrocious episodes of its history, Shafaie says that “through the tears I shed for my motherland, I find inspiration to write.”

If Shafaie writes from within the wound, Agha Shahid Ali writes from its distance. His exile transforms Kashmir into a landscape of memory and myth, yet his poems are never nostalgic in a sentimental sense. The poems convey a mourning process which focuses on the disappearance of language rather than specific events. The Country Without a Post Office presents unopened letters which resemble dead bodies while fearful silence fills the air and broken communication systems cause language to falter. Shahid’s work reveals how conflict dislodges not only people but also speech. His portrayal of Kashmir as a “post office burned down” resonates with actual periods when communication blackouts severed families, heightened anxiety, and left youth emotionally unanchored. The poetic style of Shahid develops through his experience of exile which results in a fragmented representation of his homeland that shows both his affection for it and his inability to reach it and express its beauty. Agha Shahid Ali tends to turn the violence of war into shockingly

personal imagery so the reader can penetrate the feelings of survival. One of the most powerful moments appears in "A Country Without a Post Office," where he captures the urgency, grief, and abandonment felt in Kashmir during the years of intense violence:

"Don't tell my father I have died," he says,
and I follow him through blood on the road
and hundreds of pairs of shoes the mourners
left behind, as they ran from the funeral,
victims of the firing. From windows we hear
grieving mothers, and snow begins to fall
on us, like ash. Black on edges of flames,
it cannot extinguish the neighborhoods,
the homes set ablaze by midnight soldiers.
Kashmir is burning. By that dazzling light
we see men removing statues from temples.
We beg them, "Who will protect us if you leave?"
They don't answer, they just disappear
on the roads to the plains, clutching the gods."

These lines compress a decade of fear into a single tableau: the abandoned shoes of mourners, the ash-like snow, the burning homes, and people fleeing with their gods. The boy saying "Don't tell my father I have died" embodies the countless young men whose deaths remain unreported, denied, or buried in unknown graves. The imagery of the disappearance (men just slipping away, gods being carried away, neighbourhood on fire) that Shahid gives reflects the reality lived by the families that had been linked to APDP as they waited to see their sons. The poem transforms into a witness and a funeral, it draws into the psychological space of Kashmir the combination of memory, grief and fear. However, in this destruction even the act of writing by Shahid is a statement of culture retaining the voices that would otherwise be lost. Where Shahid's voice trembles with distance, Zaffar Iqbal writes from intense proximity. His poetry is filled with immediacy of the streets of Kashmir, street demonstrations, raids, broken windows, and funerals. He captures the moral exhaustion of a society which is forced to re-create the same hope which violence kills so many times over and over. In his poems, it is common to hear the young boys wandering through a world that has playgrounds and military bunkhouses and in which childhood is shrouded in the uniform. Using him, we understand that marginality is not simply about political exclusion, but also about the conditioning of the emotions, growing up in a locality where laughter is a visitor who might momentarily come in. His work is in line with psychological research indicating a high prevalence of PTSD, depression, and anxiety among the Kashmiri youth, who are not facing some extraordinary incidents but are feeling the content of their daily life. Zafar Iqbals poetry is consequently a document of the psyche, the fear of mornings, the weariness of living in the prospect of loss, the gradual loss of faith in the security of this world.

The most striking example of poetry as lived testimony comes from Madhosh Balhami, whose case occupies a central thematic space in this study. After his house was destroyed in a 2018 gunfight, he reflected, "Kaem khandar banai yeth lali zaras, yi kyuth tufan aaw saenis shehrus / Who turned into ruins this garden of tulips, what kind of storm has hit our city?" On political change: After the abrogation of Article 370, he wrote a verse about the changing political landscape and the resulting fear, asking, "Badla hai rajneeti ka andaaz meri jaan / Mehfooz ab na jaan, na izzat, na aashiyan / Kisko sunaayein apni bebasi ki dastan / Rukta nahin iss desh mein hinsa ka toofan" (The winds of politics have changed / Life, dignity, home are not secure / The storm of hatred doesn't stop). His poetry becomes emblematic of Kashmiri resilience. The Year before war sirens would alarm Kashmir A 34-year-old poet called Madhosh Balhami had adopted a careless routine. It was 1998, and he would flake off to his prison cell in the Central Jail at Srinagar and compose poetry at length. In January of the same year, he was arrested, on grounds of his activism, and writing poems. But prison-weaving posed a great challenge on him, how to carry them out of the jail, and, most to the point, what to do should the jail officials inspect his handiwork. He would place the mystic poems at the head of the stack of papers, and insert in between two or three poems of political interest. In this manner, the couplets delivered by the captive would easily avoid the cell shadowing. At the time of being released out of jail in 2000, he had all the poems, which were written in hard labour, in his bag, which he sought to publish one day. But in March 2018 when his house was razed to the ground in a gun battle between three militants and armed forces, he wrote:

"My entire corpus turned to ashes in front of my eyes, my hard labour of three decades," the poet laments.

"My poems were like my children. However, I didn't grieve over it; I grieved over the human loss. Death of a human being is more sorrowful than losing your poems."

And death is from where Madhosh traces his journey as a poet.

"I wanted to preserve the poems for the generations to come, to let them know how a Kashmiri lived in the times of repression, and what injustices and zulm(oppression) was committed on a people," he says.

He describes him as a resistance rhymester which is cognizant and notes every mood of the people.

"I have never seen my people smile," the poet says. "I can't write about flowers, flowing streams and beauty of Kashmir. I don't see beauty, I see blood everywhere. I see the landscape in fetters."

"Most of the poets didn't write because they didn't want to displease the state," the poet says. "They wrote Sufi poetry and penned paeans to win state sponsored awards and perks. It is the tragedy of Kashmiri literature."

"Apne qom kay dard kay qarb say be parva ho kar, Mera adeeb, mera shayir gyaanpeet ki talaash mein" (Staying indifferent to their homeland's agony, my writers, poets are in search of literary award.)

In commenting on his poetry, Kashmiri novelist Shahnaz Bashir, says that Madhosh's poetry is a break with the traditional poetry of Kashmir literature, in the sense that the poet is explicitly political, and is lamenting our situations and condition. However, since the gutted down house, Madhosh has not written as much as he used to do, particularly the political poetry. Recently he has been producing religious eulogies in honor of martyrdom of Imam Hussain[R.A] who was the grandson of Prophet Muhammad [Pbuh] and in Islamic tradition, fought against injustice and was martyred at Karbala, Iraq in seventh century AD. Celebration of valour of Hussain in the face of tyranny is the dominant theme of these poems. "These eulogies are thematically exploring the idea of injustice and tyranny," Madhosh says. "In a sense, the story is the same. I find Kashmir in Karbala!"

Balhami loses personally, but he is representative of a group of people whose memories, photographs, houses, gardens, and flesh have been burnt in fire after fire. His reaction, though, is indicative of not letting violence serve as the determinant of expression. His graves and grief haunt his poetry, which as the author asserts, even when the archives are burnt, the voice remains. In a place where physical history is weak, literature is the most permanent kind of legacy.

The Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) as the venture of Parveena Ahangar, who became the mother of the disappeared teenager son, represents the most powerful manifestation of Kashmiri resistance today. Over the decades APDP has turned the personal loss into political claim by documenting the forced disappearances, storing the testimonies, monthly silent sit-ins and by simply insisting the memory in itself is a form of resistance. Although enforced disappearances are perpetrated against men, there is an indirect, long-lasting, albeit less direct, effect of the tactic on women. Among the effects of the loss of the young men is through the half widows of Kashmir. They are those women whose husbands have been enforcedly disappeared rendering the women neither wives nor widows. Due to the vagueness surrounding the disappeared persons, the half widows lead a life full of psychological, social and economic insecurity. A half widow leads life in a parallel with no definite wait that is eventually taking its toll in the form of stress and other mental illnesses like, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The half widows themselves, and their children are amongst the greatest casualties of the war. War widows in Old Wars would be proud of their widowhood as a status in life, which cannot be granted to these widows (or half widows) of New Wars. In an environment of the uncertainity, APDP has provided families with more than just a space to seek justice; it has provided them a place of psychological steadiness, a place of community wherein everyone can share grief, legitimize and conserve it. Their practice illustrates what resilience theorist Ann Masten refers to as ordinary magic: how communities, despite sustained misery, can make strength out of relationships, support and solidarity and how suffering can be allowed to turn into silence. The same concept of making meaning out of darkness is also evident in Viktor Frankl concept of meaning-making during dark times, which is evident in the insistence of the APDP that even naming the disappeared is a dignified act of purpose-making.

Nevertheless, there are also resilient people in Kashmir and there are also profound psychological wounds that trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Dori Laub can analyze. The concept of trauma presented by Caruth as an experience that is not claimed, an incident that comes back in its fragmented forms reflects the experiences of generations of Kashmiri people who experienced violence, midnight raids, loss, and the fear that is shadowing daily activities. The focus of testimony as a process of self-reconstruction by Laub is also echoed in the stories of the surviving victims where most of them finally come to live in the present as they talk, write or recall. Kashmir literature has a combative way of working with these structures: in Curfewed Night by Basharat Peer, memory is depicted as a wound; in The Half Mother by Shahnaz Bashir, the mother is destroyed by loss; Mirza Waheed's The Collaborator is that of a youth haunted by the bodies of people he cannot inter, and Rahul Pandita, in Our Moon Has Blood Clots, addresses the subject of exile as wrought by a legacy. Such works serve not only as narratives, but as testimonies to recover voices that are frequently relegated to the fringes of official histories.

However, in Kashmiri culture, psychological misery is often explained in moral or spiritual terms, and not in clinical terms. This cultural framing is manifested even in such everyday phrases as: Yeli ne cxe imanae chu, avae

chuy depression (Your faith is weak, that's why you have depression); Cxe chuy ne Khudayas peth bharosae (You don't trust Allah); Yeli ne namaze pareith, adee kya gase? (When you don't pray, that's why you feel this way). These expressions demonstrate a community bargaining mental health by inherited beliefs which are at times comforting, and on other occasions, intensifying silence in relation to psychological pain. They demonstrate that there is no conflict between resilience and trauma: the same society where people possess a great deal of endurance is unable to define the emotional cost of warfare.

The strength of Kashmir is, then, not a romantic abstraction, or even a mere survival instinct, but a re-construction of self and community in silence, out of the gaps caused by history. And maybe this is where the Kashmir game is still going on: on the shaky ground between remembering and refusing to surrender.

V. CONCLUSION

The case of Kashmir, its war, its broken families, its catalogue of silence and survival, are demonstrations of the extent to which trauma and endurance originate within the cultural and psychological landscape of the territory. By looking through the voices of such organizations as APDP, by looking through the lives of those who have lost their loved ones and who have strived to find them, and by looking through the voices of those who have tried to put into words the suffering of the people, Kashmir is revealed as not only a place of political struggle, but a place of great human continuity. Cathy Caruth and Dori Laub trauma theories can be used to interpret the fragmented, repetitive, and usually silent nature of Kashmiri memory, whereas the resilience frameworks of Ann Masten and Viktor Frankl can be used to understand how meaning, connection, and shared strength can help individuals and communities to overcome decades of adversity.

These experiences have been passed on through the hands of Kashmiri writers, poets and eyewitnesses and literature has become a potent instrument of memory and defiance. Their works are a witness of what no one will probably talk about: it is a mental load of the youth, the perennial sorrow of families, the silent endurance of mothers and the great streams of emotional power that submerge daily life. Meanwhile, the individual cultural beliefs about mental health show how the trauma is perceived and bargained into the social context, making clear how merciful and limited the communal understanding can become.

Ultimately, the Kashmir story is not just the story of loss. It is, too, a story of survival - of voices that keep on speaking, writing, meeting, and remembering even after decades of confusion. The narratives of the region help us to remember that resilience does not mean that we are not hurting but rather we have chosen to continue creating meaning in the aftermath. And in its present remembrance, Kashmir simply tries to affirm that it is a human being, and trauma should not be the ultimate language of this community.

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