

Affective Politics and Disappearance in Kashmir. Review of Ather Zia. *Resisting Disappearance: Military Occupation and Women's Activism in Kashmir*. University of Washington Press, 2019, pp. 267.

During fieldwork along the Line of Control (LoC) - the de-facto border that divides Kashmir into India and Pakistan¹ - I attended a *ghaibana janaza*. This is a particular type of Muslim funeral (literal translation as a *funeral in absence*) for those who, in all likelihood, have passed away, but their bodies are not recovered. For example, people who may have drowned or burnt to death, leaving no bodily trace behind. In this instance, it was the *ghaibana janaza* for Mirza *sahib*, the husband of Gul Nisa, who disappeared some twenty years ago while assisting Kashmiri *mujahids* (freedom fighters) cross the LoC into Indian held Kashmir. These crossings were frequent during the peak of the armed insurgency against Indian occupation. Since the residents of Neelum were well-equipped in navigating the *pahars* (mountainscapes), many volunteered to help the *mujahids* overcome the forced separation of the heavily guarded LoC. Mirza *sahib* was one such volunteer. Gul Nisa explained this was her husband's modest way of contributing to the struggle for freedom and dignity of his Kashmiri kin across the LoC. However, one day, Mirza *sahib* did not return. Twenty years have passed, and his family has no information on him. He could be dead. Or he could be alive, languishing in an Indian prison or forced to live under another identity across the LoC, unable to return home. Despite the lack of any evidence, Mirza *sahib's* family finally concluded that he is dead. They wanted to have a funeral for him before Gul Nisa, now old and ailing, also passes away. For Mirza *sahib's* family, the funeral is not an indication of giving up hope, rather, realizing that perhaps there is *another* way for Mirza *sahib* to be reunited with Gul Nisa. By declaring Mirza *sahib* as deceased, they wanted to ensure that

¹ See, Aijazi, O. (2018). "Kashmir as Movement and Multitude." *Journal of Narrative Politics* 4(2), 88-118.

when Gul Nisa passes away, she will have the comfort and certainty of knowing that her husband will indeed join her in the afterlife.

In *Resisting Disappearance: Military Occupation and Women's Activism in Kashmir*, Ather Zia takes up the question of the disappeared across the LoC in Indian held Kashmir, where since the 1990s, thousands of men have been abducted by the Indian military, which enjoys unchallenged impunity for its countless human rights violations. Zia does so through her engagements with members of the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP), female kin of Kashmiri men (fathers, husbands, sons, brothers) disappeared by Indian government forces. Zia asks: How is memory produced under repressive politics? What forms can memory take, and what does it inform? In her pursuit of addressing these questions, Zia shows us that the search for the disappeared is no ordinary venture, but an affective journey where the memory of the disappeared and any attempts to trace them, transform every attempt at living into continual acts of politics.

Affective Politics

Zia invites the reader to enter the realm of affective politics. She takes us to the monthly public sit-ins staged by the women of APDP, which resemble public funereal gatherings. These gatherings are sites of remembering, a way to keep the memory of the disappeared in continuous public circulation, for bystanders, human rights workers, the Indian state, journalists, and even the police, which surveils them and eventually disperses them. The sit-ins, like other places of congregation, such as weddings, are also sites where the public and private merge. For example, at a wedding, gathered women shift from singing wedding songs to remembrance songs for the disappeared and killed during the decades long Indian military occupation. Conversely, at an APDP sit-in, women break into a lyrical exchange inspired by traditional wedding singing. The moments of coming together fostered around the APDP but

not exclusively, also serve as sites of intergenerational memory, passing onto young Kashmiris the pain, sweat, and burden of life under occupation, an unwavering Kashmiri historicity, and determination to hold ground. But also, memories of their loved ones, whom they only enjoyed a fleeting glimpse of, if at all, in their young lives. For the women Zia writes about, these constant public and private instances are modes of keeping the disappeared alive imbricated in the efforts of tracing them.

Zia reminds us throughout the text that these rituals of mourning and remembering constitute affective politics that speak back to military occupation and keep in circulation demands for Kashmir's sovereignty. These are also accompanied by more conventional attempts to seek redress through the legal system. Zia demonstrates that by dwelling in the interstitial spaces of experience, we can potentially unlock new language for equity and justice. For example, she sensitively describes Zoonah's daily ritual of leaving the entrance door of her home slightly ajar just in case her missing son returns and Raheem's purchase of large numbers of inauthentic teacups (*dhabba* cups) to expedite serving *chai* to Indian soldiers during raids. It is in these interstitial spaces where I find Zia's writing to be the strongest, and this is where the book can be further mined for its contributions towards affective politics.

The individual and collective journeys of the book's many protagonists poignantly capture the lived intensities of the impossible search for the disappeared. Impossible in the sense that chances of success given the impunity Indian forces enjoy are little, yet this is all that family members can do, and in the work that goes into it, such as amassing *parchis* (notes) and *kaghzaat* (paperwork) in distended files, the disappeared are kept alive and new formations of striving, justice, and law are formulated. In these ways, I find Zia's offerings as good companions for other writings on memory, affect, law, and justice such as Nayanika

Mookherjee's *Spectral Wound*,² Jenny Edkins' *Missing: Persons and Politics*,³ and Kamari Clarke's recent *Affective Justice*.⁴ Nosheen Ali's *Delusional States*⁵ also comes to mind.

Ethnographic Authority

In the opening chapter, as many ethnographic books do, Zia tries to establish her ethnographic authority by revealing herself as a Kashmiri, though different from her interlocutors, given her various stances of privilege (e.g., urban, middle-class, educated, and now living in diaspora). This difference is also picked up by others; for example, at a security checkpoint, unlike some of her companions, Zia does not need to prove her identity, because she is “*Amreeki*” (American expatriate). While Zia feels dismissed, this form of dismissal is probably wished by most Kashmiris, who have to constantly show their identification to simply exist and stay alive. In some parts of the book, though fleetingly, Zia also alludes to her experiences of coming of age in the Kashmir Valley, for example, how she too remembers the chilling sensation of the “midnight knock” (late-night raids by Indian forces which never end well). However, what remains missing for me, is her own relationship to the question of enforced disappearances and Kashmir's sovereignty more broadly as an academic, writer, and diasporic Kashmiri. One can read between the lines to pick up Zia's intense devotion to her homeland and its people, but it would have been more powerful to read Zia's articulation of this devotion. It would also have been useful to read Zia's thoughts on how she now understands her form of allegiance with the women of APDP, which is now principally through the lens of an academic. This is not to say that this is a lesser valuable

² Mookherjee, N. (2015). *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories, and the Bangladesh War of 1971*. Duke University Press.

³ Edkins, J. (2011). *Missing: Persons and Politics*. Cornell University Press.

⁴ Clarke, K. M. (2019). *Affective Justice: The International Criminal Court and the Pan-Africanist Pushback*. Duke University Press.

⁵ Ali, N. (2019). *Delusional States: Feeling Rule and Development in Pakistan's Northern Frontier*. Cambridge University Press.

relationship, but it is a *particular* kind of relationship, which sets Zia apart from other allies of APDP and the women themselves. There are also times in the book when the book's protagonists refuse the author's desire for engagement. For example, Zia writes that none of the women allowed her to take unsupervised possession of their files and *kaghzaat* (paperwork) maintained on the disappeared. A sustained engagement with these refusals could have further strengthened Zia's position as an author and ethnographer.

Zia does let the reader know that her participants are aware that her work will not directly aid in the search of their loved ones, but as a reader, I am pressed to ask: what does an academic book open, what does it foreclose? And how does one negotiate the limitations of the academic form within the praxis of solidarity? I ask these not to doubt the author's intentions, but because these are questions that vex us all.

When Anthropology and Ethnography are Insufficient

I can sense that Zia has recognized that the experiences of her interlocutors, as well as her own, far exceed the repertoire of ethnography (and I would say anthropology), hence her inclusion of photographs and poetry. Zia decides to qualify her poetry as ethnographic and introduces ethnographic poetry as "ethical surfeit," a form of witnessing, "where reason seeks the logic of surplus and escaping measured words" (p. 27). I was reminded of Juliane Okot Bitek's *100 Days*⁶ on the Rwandan Genocide as I read Zia's poignant, poetic interludes. But I am not sure why ethnographic poetry, or any form of poetic expression, is seen as a mere accompaniment to the ethnography, when it is ethnography in its richest of forms in-itself. I suspect this is where Zia's desired/assumed identity of an anthropologist let's her down and in a certain way betrays her ambitions of the book, which I think would make even a stronger contribution if it further freed itself from the conventions of ethnographic writing and

⁶ Bitek, J. O. (2016). *100 Days*. University of Alberta Press.

anthropology's disciplining forces. However, in most places, Zia does justice to her protagonists and is able to think with the ethnography in productive ways. For me, the book also raises questions about the best way to engage with ethnographic material, and more importantly, affect. The answer is not always anthropological analysis. In some ways, I am slightly surprised at why the author did not choose to take more inspiration from literary ethnography.⁷

To illustrate this point further, take Jabbar's account regarding his disappeared brother Mohsin (chapter 6). Zia leaves the entire narration untouched, fearing (and rightfully so as these passages are some of the best in the book) that if she modified Jabbar's words, the richness, complexity, and offerings of his narrations would be compromised. She also leaves the entire story italicized. I think there is something to be said here regarding form, the ethnographer's desire for authority, and also their humility.

Gendered Resistance

To qualify the activism of the women of APDP as politics, Zia copiously uses the language of resistance and, specifically, gendered resistance. I find this emphasis to be unnecessary given the works of Saba Mahmood, for example, have long dispelled assumed hierarchies in political action. However, the glossing over of politics as only that which produces liberal change continues to hold ground in some circles, and it is perhaps against these approaches that Zia writes. At some level, I can appreciate Zia's attention to gendered politics, given the particular calibration of social space in Kashmir under military occupation and the author's inheritance as a Kashmiri woman. What however got in the way for me as a reader, was the unsatisfactory treatment of patriarchy in Kashmir and its transmutation into a form of subalternity under military rule, which singles out men for physical punishment, enforced

⁷ See, e.g., Ghodsee, K. (2011). *Lost in Transition: Ethnographies of Everyday Life after Communism*. Duke University Press.

disappearance, and murder (though Zia reminds us that this does not mean women are safe from assault or sexual violence). Zia writes: “The overarching Kashmiri patriarchy is the subaltern within the Indian masculine militaristic apparatus. Within the subalternity of Kashmiri men, Kashmiri women form another layer of “feminine subalterns” (p. 224). While I am sympathetic to Zia’s struggle to articulate the double burden of women activists in Kashmir, who in addition to their political work, also have to maintain the posture of *asal-zanan* (the good woman), I wonder if the alignment of patriarchy in Kashmir can be more productively expanded within the panopticon of military rule, to argue that perhaps the surveillance of women’s bodies is also an embodiment of coloniality.

Islam: An Un-decided Relationship

I could not help noticing the persistence of Islam, or if one wants to avoid that term for its religious studies connotations, the “Muslimness” of the book’s many protagonists. For example, frequent visits to spiritual healers or offering of alms (e.g., *taherr*, rice cooked with turmeric) are much more than mere identity makers but part of affective investments in life. One place where Zia does center “Muslimness” is in her discussions on the killable Kashmiri body, which is principally male and Muslim. However, Zia seems to have an undecided stance with the question of “Muslimness,” which, to me, requires more careful centering. I suspect Zia’s hesitation in doing so can be partly attributed to the trickiness of centering Islam within Kashmir, whether one should talk about it in South Asian terms, West Asian terms, the Islam of the courts, the Islam of the people, or in terms of Muslim – Pundit identity politics.

Conclusion

Resisting Disappearance destabilizes a line of thinking that would consider APDP as a failed organization, as rarely if at all, has its work produced the disappeared. Instead, Zia demonstrates that APDP constitutes a form of the social in itself in a climate of erasure, one that is fecund with sisterhood, politics, and life-making. *Resisting Disappearance* is triumphant writing, which carefully opens Kashmir through sustained attention to affect. This is the type of book that you will want to read it one sitting.

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