



IN TIMES OF CONFLICT AND CURFEWS: KASHMIRI WOMEN, MEMORY POLITICS AND THE PARADOX OF LOVE IN MEHAK JAMAL'S *LOAL KASHMIR: LOVE AND LONGING IN A TORN LAND*

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Abstract

*This paper examines Mehak Jamal's *Loal Kashmir: Love and Longing in a Torn Land* (2024), a collection of stories that foreground love, intimacy, and longing amid the crisis of Kashmir's conflict. Moving beyond dominant narratives that reduce Kashmiris to victims or militants, Jamal situates women at the centre of memory-making and affective survival. Through narratives of waiting, ritual, letter-writing, and queer desire, Kashmiri women emerge not as passive sufferers but as agents who transform intimacy into resistance. The paper explores three key axes: women's negotiation of patriarchal and militarized constraints, the politics of memory articulated through silence and disconnection, and the paradox of love as both fragile and resilient under siege. In engaging feminist memory studies, postcolonial affect theory, and Kashmiri literary traditions, the paper argues that Jamal reclaims love as a counter-archive, making intimacy itself a deeply political act of survival and resistance.*

Keywords

Kashmir, Women's agency, Memory politics, Paradoxical love, Affective survival, etc.

Full Article

Conflict zones rarely produce love stories. They are often remembered for statistics of violence, curfews, blockades, and loss. Kashmir, in particular, has become over determined by militarized images of insurgency and counterinsurgency, erasing the textures of everyday life and reducing its people to either victims or perpetrators of violence. Into this fraught landscape enters Mehak Jamal's *Loal Kashmir: Love and Longing in a Torn Land* (2024), a collection of interwoven stories that foregrounds intimacy, longing, and desire amid conflict and curfews. Jamal's intervention is radical not because she denies violence, but because she insists on telling stories of tenderness and vulnerability within it. As she notes in interviews, the collection emerges from a commitment to make Kashmiri life "collectively undeniable" through the medium of love:

Initially, I thought the book would centre around romantic love. But as people started reaching out with their stories, I found other forms of love just as compelling—between friends, between a parent and child, and even for the homeland. There's a story of a woman who longs to return to Kashmir but can't. That longing is also a kind of love. These diverse narratives created a fuller, richer tapestry. *Lōal*, for me, isn't just romance; it's about yearning and loss in all form (Anjum, <https://thefederal.com>).



At the heart of *Loal Kashmir* lies a paradox: love flourishes even as it is endangered by surveillance, curfews, and enforced silences. To write of love in Kashmir is not to romanticize suffering but to reclaim a space of humanity often denied to Kashmiris. Women in Jamal's stories embody this reclamation most powerfully. Whether queuing for hours to make a single phone call, performing wedding rituals in blackout conditions, or writing letters that substitute for silenced voices, Kashmiri women emerge as custodians of memory and as figures of agency whose affective practices sustain life amid precarity. Jamal states:

[M]any stories centre on female agency—women who take the initiative to find love, reach out, or even break patriarchal norms. One woman, after a decade-long relationship, couldn't marry because of her strict father. When she finally did, she said she found freedom in marriage—a complex, but deeply personal perspective (Anjum, [https:// thefederal .com](https://thefederal.com)).

This paper argues that *Loal Kashmir* interrogates the politics of memory to narrate women's stories and posit love as both fragile and resistant. It explores three interlinked axes: first, how Kashmiri women negotiate agency within patriarchal and militarized constraints; second, how Jamal constructs memory politics through silence, disconnection, and affective archives; and third, how love itself becomes paradoxical—at once imperilled and resilient—in a conflict that constantly interrupts intimacy. In doing so, the paper situates Jamal within broader feminist memory studies and postcolonial theories of affect that seek to humanize experience against the grain of official erasures.

To situate *Loal Kashmir* within the intellectual and historical landscape, one must recognize the fraught terrain of Kashmiri memory and the gendered dimensions of its articulation. Since 1989, when insurgency escalated into a full-blown armed conflict, Kashmir has been characterized by a dense mesh of militarization, surveillance, disappearances, and recurrent lockdowns. The abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019 further deepened this condition of siege, cutting Kashmir off from the rest of the world through the longest communications blackout ever imposed in a democracy. Narratives of love, intimacy, and women's everyday struggles risk erasure under the heavy burden of political discourse.

Against this backdrop, Kashmiri literature and oral testimony function as what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory"—a form of remembering shaped by both direct and inherited trauma (Hirsch, 5). Jamal's *Loal Kashmir* participates in this archive of counter-memory by refusing silence and by foregrounding affect as a mode of historical testimony. Within this matrix, the role of women is central yet under-documented. Kashmiri women have historically borne the double burden of militarized violence and patriarchal expectations. They occupy a liminal space between mourning and waiting. They are custodians of domestic survival, ensuring continuity amid scarcity. Yet, mainstream narratives of Kashmir often marginalize women's voices, portraying them either as passive sufferers or as symbols of Kashmiri honour. This reductive framing obscures women's agency and their roles as active chroniclers of trauma. In Jamal's work, women emerge not as metaphors but as narrators and subjects in their own right, transforming ritual into resistance under curfews and performing joy in the face of surveillance. The stories foreground what anthropologist and feminist theorist Veena Das terms the "everyday as event"—the idea that ordinary acts (cooking, queuing, writing letters) become politically charged in spaces of sustained violence (Das, 6).



Loal Kashmir therefore situates women as keepers of memory and as interlocutors of silence. Their practices of archiving voice notes, preserving love letters, narrating dreams of reunion provide a counter discourse to attempts to render Kashmiri suffering unspeakable. The paradox here is that women's most intimate expressions of love and longing simultaneously become political gestures of resistance. Jamal makes visible what stands invisibilised in official histories: that the memory of Kashmir cannot be disentangled from the embodied experiences of its women. One of the most striking features of *Loal Kashmir* is its centring of women's voices and practices of survival in a conflict zone that continually threatens to obliterate intimacy. In Kashmiri literature and reportage, women have often been depicted as passive figures-mother, widows, or nameless bodies subject to violence. Jamal disrupts this trope by presenting women as active agents, whose everyday acts of love and care challenge the twin forces of militarism and patriarchy. Her women are not exceptional heroines but ordinary figures who render the act of sustaining life itself into a mode of resistance.

In the story "Fight or Flight" (231-244), Jamal narrates the ordeal of a mother who waits eight hours in a queue to make a sixty-second phone call during the communication blackout of 2019. At first glance, this may appear as a story of deprivation, a vignette of suffering. Yet, when read closely, the mother's persistence reflects agency in its most radical form: she transforms the deprivation of time into a gift of connection. The act of waiting becomes a calculated strategy, an assertion that her child's voice, however momentarily heard, cannot be silenced by surveillance. The mother emerges not as a silent victim but a strategist who manipulates time and space to ensure connection(s) that "can be formed in the strangest of places. No amount of darkness can truly kill the will to reach out to another person" (Jamal, 244). Here Jamal posits how women navigate structures of power not by direct confrontation but through endurance and resourcefulness. The mother is not a mere victim of circumstance; she is an archivist of affect, compressing love into sixty seconds that become priceless. This aligns with feminist readings of everyday resistance, where small acts of care and survival destabilize the logic of domination.

Another memorable story, "I Will Walk to You If I Have to" (Jamal, 154-174), revolves around Beena and Sakib's wedding, which unfolds under curfew and internet blackout. Weddings in Kashmir, traditionally expansive celebrations of community and kinship, here become improvised rituals under siege. Jamal describes how women in the household adapt, reimagine, and insist upon joy despite the suffocating curfewed environment. The bride's family ensures that music is played, food is shared, and rituals are performed even when the communication blockade attempts to foreclose celebration. Women, in this narrative, assume the role of cultural preservers, maintaining continuity in the face of disruption. Their determination to conduct a wedding under lockdown demonstrates what Veena Das has called "the descent of the extraordinary into the ordinary"—the way violence infiltrates daily life, and how the ordinary becomes a site of political contestation (Das, 6). By performing rituals of joy, Kashmiri women resist the erasure of their cultural and emotional lives, asserting that love and community will not be extinguished.

Jamal's stories also explore how women transgress boundaries of nation, religion, and familial expectation through love. The narrative of Laila, a Kashmiri woman who falls in love with Mahdi, a Palestinian, in "Kashmiri in Gaza" (Jamal, 67-77), speaks to the solidarities and parallels between contested geographies. Laila's love is not merely personal but geopolitically charged: her desire for Mahdi becomes an act of defiance against the insularity imposed by conflict. She dares to love across borders, embodying a cosmopolitanism that militarization and patriarchy seek to foreclose. Such narratives highlight how women's intimate choices become politically subversive. Love here is not an apolitical emotion but a transgressive act that challenges patriarchal family structures, religious conservatisms, and the territorial logic of the



state. Laila's agency is expressed in her willingness to claim desire in a world that demands silence and obedience.

In *Roohani* (175-193), Jamal explores queer desire and identity in Kashmir. Queer narratives in militarized zones are doubly suppressed—by the violence of occupation and by heteronormative cultural expectations. To read this story is to realize that love's forms in Kashmir cannot be reduced to mother or wife, victim or widow. Love here claims other names, other bodies, unsettling the binaries of agent and sufferer, hetero and queer, silence and speech. Rabia / Asad is not only a figure of suffering but also of radical affirmation who insists upon being spoken, written, and remembered, complicating the idea that Kashmiri women's agency can only be articulated through heteronormative familial roles.

These stories show that women's agency in *Loal Kashmir* is not expressed through spectacular gestures or overt political protest, but through affective labour—the work of caring, connecting, and remembering in the midst of violence. This reframes the discourse on agency itself. Instead of equating agency with resistance in a masculinized sense (armed struggle, public protest), Jamal illuminates a subtler, feminized mode of resilience. By queuing, by cooking, by writing letters, by daring to love, Kashmiri women preserve life where death and erasure are intended. Such acts might appear fragile, yet they constitute the politics of survival. Women transform vulnerability into strength, and emotional labour into defiance. Jamal's women are thus not only characters but also figures of epistemic resistance: they make visible experiences that dominant narratives erase, and they claim the legitimacy of feeling in a space where there are attempts to discipline bodies and silence emotions.

Kashmir is not only a conflict-ridden space but also one where memory stands contested. The very structure of the collection mirrors the politics of memory. Jamal organizes the stories around three temporal markers- 'Otru' (Day Before Yesterday), 'Rath' (Yesterday) and 'Az' (Today)-that map not linear chronology but fragmented and recursive experiences of time. It mirrors instead the fractured temporality of Kashmir, where the past leaks into the present, where waiting elongates time unbearably, where memory is serrated and recursive. Women live in this temporal dissonance: waiting for disappeared loved ones, waiting for the phone to ring, waiting for curfew to lift. Time stretches, shrinks, fractures; but memory persists. *Loal Kashmir* explores this contested terrain of memory through the intimate practices of love, longing, and affective labour instead of its preservation in official archives and public monuments. In narrativizing these experiences, Jamal emphasises how women's temporal consciousness is conditioned by political violence. This violence interrupts temporal continuity, making the past erupt unpredictably into the present.

Silence in *Loal Kashmir* is not simply an absence of speech. It takes on weight and becomes a collective condition. Lovers cannot call, mothers cannot reach, letters are delayed for weeks. Yet silence is not absence; it is presence, heavy with the unsaid. A single minute of speech carries the burden of months of waiting. An unsent letter shelters feeling until it can find its way to the beloved. Jamal reclaims silence as an archive: not only a tool of repression, but also a vessel of memory. In "Fight or Flight," for example, the mother's sixty-second phone call condenses an entire world of love into hurried, truncated speech. The silences surrounding that minute of connection become as significant as the words themselves. Similarly, in the story of delayed love letters (*Love Letter*, 11-18) that eventually save a boy from a crackdown, silence itself becomes a mode of resistance: the unsent letter preserves feeling until it can finally be delivered, transforming into an archive of both love and survival.

From a theoretical standpoint, this recalls Michel-Rolph Trouillot's idea of silencing the past—the notion that silences are actively produced by power (Trouillot, 29). Yet Jamal reworks this paradigm by suggesting that imposed silences can be re-appropriated by women as affective



repositories. Silence in her stories is not only the product of repression but also the vessel of memory, storing unspeakable love until it finds voice. Communication in *Loal Kashmir* is consistently portrayed as laborious, tenuous, and precious. Letters must be hand-delivered across curfewed streets; phone calls require hours of waiting; messages are smuggled through unreliable networks. These acts of connection, always already precarious, take on heightened political meaning. They transform women into archivists of affect who painstakingly preserve relationships against the entropy of disconnection. These instances exemplify what Marianne Hirsch calls the connective tissue of memory where personal recollections gain meaning only in relational networks (*The Generation of Postmemory*). By foregrounding women's labour of connection, Jamal insists that memory in Kashmir is not static but processual, sustained through fragile yet persistent acts of care.

Perhaps Jamal's most radical contribution to memory politics is her insistence that emotions themselves constitute historical testimony. Sara Ahmed reminds us that emotions are "sticky" and circulate across bodies, attaching to histories and places (Ahmed, 19). Mainstream historiography often privileges facts, statistics, and 'objective' data over feelings, dismissing love and longing as apolitical or private. Yet in *Loal Kashmir*, emotions become a crucial mode of counter-history. A tear, a love letter, a whispered promise—all testify to a reality that official records cannot capture. Kashmiri women in Jamal's narratives perform memory publicly and privately, weaving absence into presence. The paradox is that their memories, dependent on precarious letters, fleeting phone calls, whispered confessions, are fragile and yet indestructible. It is so because they are continually renewed through love. *Loal Kashmir* demonstrates that memory politics in Kashmir cannot be reduced to the grand narratives of insurgency or counterinsurgency. The everyday practices of love and longing become the carriers as well as archives of memory, emerging from the peripheries of history as central to its preservation. *Loal Kashmir* demonstrates that memory politics in Kashmir cannot be reduced to the grand narratives of insurgency or counterinsurgency. Memory persists in emotion and finds a dynamic archive in the fragile but persistent practices of women.

To write about love in Kashmir is to confront a contradiction. Love is fragile, always at risk of rupture. But it is also resilient, persisting despite curfews and checkpoints. It sustains even as it wounds. Jamal's narratives unfold within this paradox, showing that in Kashmir, to love is itself a form of survival and resistance. In Kashmir love circulates within what Michel Foucault called the "microphysics of power" (Foucault, 26), where domination operates not only through overt violence but through the regulation of daily life. The control of communication and movement transform love itself into a fragile endeavour. Lovers risk suspicion at checkpoints, letters are vulnerable to interception, and intimate gestures are constantly under surveillance. The fragility of love is thus not natural but manufactured; a byproduct of political structures being designed to control and regulate community. Yet, paradoxically, this fragility produces an acute urgency. Jamal's stories foregrounds love not despite danger but because of it. The scarcity of opportunities magnifies its value, rendering each gesture of affection profoundly charged.

This further reflects what Lauren Berlant has called "cruel optimism" (Berlant, 24)—attachments that are both sustaining and debilitating. In Kashmir, love sustains life under siege, but it also risks heartbreak, loss, or death. Lovers are sustained by longing, yet their optimism is always shadowed by the possibility of rupture. Jamal captures this cruel optimism by showing how desire is intensified by its impossibility: the more love is obstructed, the more it insists on being felt. Jamal's women do not merely endure; they actively preserve love as a refusal of erasure. Its persistence is meaningful because it is constantly threatened. Jamal's insistence on portraying love challenges dominant narratives of Kashmir that focus exclusively on violence, insurgency, and geopolitics. While these dimensions are undeniably real, they risk reducing



Kashmiris to statistics or political symbols. *Loal Kashmir* counters this by humanizing Kashmir through the affective textures of love and longing. To narrate a love letter that saves a boy from a crackdown is to assert that emotions matter as much as events, that tenderness is as historically significant as violence. This reorientation resonates with feminist theories of the personal as political. By narrating the intimate, Jamal politicizes love, interlinking it to the structures of power that shape it. In a context where official histories often erase the everyday, love becomes a counter-archive—a way of remembering that resists state-sanctioned forgetting.

Another dimension of the paradox is that Kashmiri love is simultaneously universal and singular. Stories of longing, heartbreak, and resilience resonate across cultures; readers from outside Kashmir can identify with the emotions Jamal describes. Yet the specific conditions of militarization, blackout, and curfews render Kashmiri love unique. A wedding without phones, a love letter delayed by weeks, a relationship sustained by whispered conversations in blackout nights—these are not universal experiences but distinctly Kashmiri ones. The paradox, then, lies in this doubleness: Kashmiri love stories are at once relatable and irreducibly situated. They invite empathy while insisting on the specificity of Kashmiri suffering. Finally, the paradox of love in conflict generates an ethical imperative for readers and critics. To acknowledge its resilience is to affirm the agency of Kashmiris, particularly women, who preserve emotional life against erasure. Jamal's work thus demands that we read love not as a distraction from politics but as its very heart: the intimate is political, and to love in Kashmir is to resist dehumanization. In *Loal Kashmir*, love emerges as a paradox that both reflects and resists conflict and by foregrounding this paradox, Jamal not only humanizes Kashmir but also emphasise that in a conflict zone like Kashmir, love is not an indulgence. It is survival, memory, resilience and defiance.

In *Loal Kashmir* Jamal does not deny violence. Her narratives reveal that love in Kashmir is never untouched by politics. Moreover, by centring women and queer voices, Jamal reclaims the emotional domain as a site of agency and posits that there is more to Kashmir than just narratives of violence and even in the midst of conflict and crisis this 'more', marked by an inexplicable hope and tenderness, breathes. By narrating love, Jamal contributes to the politics of memory, ensuring that the affective dimensions of conflict are neither erased nor depoliticized. Mehak Jamal's *Loal Kashmir: Love and Longing in a Torn Land* is, therefore, not merely a collection of stories about romance; it is a radical intervention into the politics of memory and representation in conflict literature. Jamal's women preserve memory, sustain community, and humanize a landscape too often reduced to violence. In reclaiming love as a site of defiance, the collection offers not only a literary intervention but also an ethical one: a reminder that amid conflict and silencing, the act of loving is itself a refusal to be dehumanized.

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