



RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERSONAL AND POLITICS IN GURMEHAR KAUR'S WORKS

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Abstract: This paper examines how “personal is political” in the political scenario. It looks into how words of art used for the purpose of protest plays a major role in showing a difference of political understanding. Such ways do make a huge difference in a generation that is more millennial in its thoughts and doing. A budding writer and activist Gurmehar Kaur faced odds when she decided to speak against violence inside of DU campus (2017). Her first book *Small Acts of Freedom* was an answer to what she stood for and what she stood against. This book spans seventy years from 1947-2017, a personal experience of three generation of women who lived a life that is not mainstream heroic, but it was an art of protest and bravery. Gurmehar’s first book is a protest of words against what people misunderstood. Her second book the *Young and the Restless: Youth and Politics in India* features eight young leaders who vary from a diverse political spectrum of India. All of whom have suffered backlashes for what they deemed humanely correct. This paper will deeply analyse the first book and show how a personal struggle can evolve if nurtured to make a difference and share a political experience for the larger good; from the second book this paper will focus on one young leader, Shehla Rashid and deciphering how her struggle for politics though different from Kaur’s yet has found it a form of expression. The resulting conclusions will not only be backed by the above selected books but also the interviews uploaded online by the young leaders. This also

challenges the belief of how age is proportional to wisdom. This proves how art irrespective of its form can make a difference in the world of politics.

Keywords: student activism, personal, political, organized expression.

The title of this paper states that there is a clear relation between personal and politics as shown to us in Gurmehar Kaur's books. The affirmation of the relationship of the two did not really come to me because of her books but due to two very distant personal experiences that led me to becoming a politically vocal person.

The first incident dates back to 2015, I was freshly minted out of a convent boarding school. I was seeing the world for myself and also the world of social media. I put up a display picture on WhatsApp of a silhouette of a girl's face donning a maangtika and tagline of the picture said 'not here to make round rotis.' The photo in all of its clarity stood up to patriarchy and how change was the need of the times. A well-known student activist of the leading party who studied in my neighbouring school and was my senior of mine, sent a message to me saying "this is not a part of your culture, do not upload such display pictures." My Christian name and the maangtika apparently did not go hand in hand. My culture despite being an Indian was not enough because my name was not a Hindu name and because I was not a Hindu. Because of this incident I educated myself on the politics of India and how each party had a different ball game. Each party followed a different agenda for personal gain not for the collective growth of India as a nation.

On 4th of April, 2019 there was protest march in Delhi titled as *Women for Change*, I decided to be a part of it. This march was right before the Lok Sabha 2019 elections and there was a lot of heat. The slogans echoed all over, women danced in solidarity, sang with waving flags, roared like lions with different banners that all shouted in unison that India would not die on our watch. I decided to upload the videos and photos of the march on Facebook – my motive

being to spread awareness and how important peaceful dissent was. On this public platform I got hate from people I did not know, a post that celebrated womanhood received so much hatred that I was angered. This anger soon turned into sadness when a comment on the post said, “You’re a *explicit* minority, you have no right to speak.” A complete stranger decided that just because I do not fall under the norms of the majority and I do not agree with the politics of hate, my identity was of no significance and my citizenship was null.

After this incident there was no turning back. I decided my medium of dissent would be my words. I do take part in protests but my word is my *art of dissent*. Personal leads a way to politics.

My paper focuses on the works of Gurmehar Kaur, *Small Acts of Freedom* and *The Young and the Restless: Youth and Politics in India*. In her first book Kaur talks about three generations of women who have in their own way lived for freedom – freedom from patriarchy, freedom of choice and freedom to grow on one’s own terms. The three ladies have very different stories that are panned down in the novel in a non – linear form of manner. The second book concentrates on 8 youth leaders and their aspirations for the country and their personal experiences and how it led them into politics.

Gurmehar Kaur came into the limelight with a harsh jolt. Her personal led her into the world of student activism. She in her introduction to her book *Small Acts of Freedom* talks of mundane, unimportant things and says, “It’s because I want you to know that I was living an ordinary life, a teenager’s life” (Kaur, 10). Kaur came into the limelight after the violence in Ramjas College, Delhi, in 2017 over a seminar, Culture of Protest – A seminar exploring representation of Dissent. Violence broke out in college because the keynote speakers for the day were Umar Khalid and Shehla Rashid and they did not support the views of the ABVP members on campus. Kaur on that day could not be a part of the protest so in her show of

solidarity she uploaded a photo on Facebook holding a placard that said: ‘I am a student from Delhi University. I am not afraid of ABVP. I am not alone. Every student of India is with me. #StudentsAgainstABVP.’

After this post the whole focus of the conversation was Gurmehar Kaur. She recalls this experience stating, “I became coloured by the narratives people imposed on me: I was the girl with the placard, but I was also the anti-national, the martyr’s daughter, the student” (Kaur, 13). She received such backlash because after the picture with the placard went viral on social media, dirt was dug up on her. A year before this as a part of a peace campaign, Kaur appeared in video that speaks about the martyrdom of her father during the Kargil war, in the video she can be seen holding a placard which read, ‘Pakistan did not kill my father, war killed him.’ This led to her receiving so much hatred and abuse from people she did not know. She received hate from people of power and fame. She even received death and rape threats. Kaur in her book recalls how this period of time for her as a 20-year-old person was that of distress and helplessness. But the whole process helped her “emerge from all of that more determined than even before to never be silenced” (Kaur, 25).

Kaur is not strong just on her account of grief, her “Strength is inherited” (Kaur, 25). Kaur’s grandmother Amarjeet who before the partition hailed from Pakistan had to move to India during the partition. The partition was a trauma in itself. Yes the country was “to be free but this future freedom had a price- one that they would have to pay for leaving behind every trace of their past and moving forward with no legacy” (Kaur, 8) Amarjeet became a widow at a young age and had to take care of two daughters and the same was the case with Kaur’s mother, Rajvinder. These ladies despite being widowed at a young age with two very young daughters managed to pull through. They fought for their own freedom, freedom to make choices that

they thought were right for their daughters. They fought and lived bravely so as to provide freedom for their daughters. The collective hurt and strength was what Kaur inherited.

Looking at Kaur's life in *Small Acts of Freedom* we see her through the lens of her utmost reality. During the course of the book we see how a child learns how to deal with the loss of her father. As a child Kaur could not "understand the chaos" (Kaur, 1) that was her father's funeral. She lived with the loss of her father; she lived a life so much more different than kids of her age. She says "my life was foreign to me, yet it was my own" (Kaur, 48). No one really understood her trauma, it was her own for the world to see. We see incapability of baby Kaur to understand the intensity of death and loss

Not only is this one aspect, Kaur also had to unlearn so many things. Her father died on the 6th of August, 1999 in the Kargil war. He died while our nation was in war with Pakistan. The Bhaiyya that worked in her house tells the little 2-year-old Kaur about her father that, 'He fought with the bad Pakistani people and died to save the country'. This remains with Kaur, who for a long time in her childhood spewed hatred against Muslims because she thought they were Pakistanis. She mentions in her book about how she learnt how to forgive, while her Instagram post of 22nd April 2018 is of a young baby Kaur in her mother's arm and the caption reads, "My mama and me. Fighting the world, holding our own, protection each other and constantly finding it within us the ability to love and forgive despite the bitterness that is life."

As a child Kaur thought "when someone dies you have to become sad at the mention of their name" but through the passage of time we see how Kaur learnt how to honour the memory of her father and live in celebration of his memory. She says, "My only dream is to be like my father, to be the same person that he was and to emulate his personality" (Kaur, 108) and accepts that the memories of her father will always be "ageless, immortal" (Kaur, 180).

You are not a diamond, you are not the most precious stone in the world, and I don't want you to believe that you are. You are a slab of iron ore. You will go through the furnace and you will come out strong, like iron. Life will throw rocks at you and beat you with hammers but you will take those beatings in your stride and come out like a sword, a weapon. Make your weaknesses your strength. Cry it out today, but tomorrow be prepared to go through the motions all over again. This is life for you. You win, you lose, but you do not give up. (Kaur,139).

Rajvinder speaks these wise words to a 15 year old Kaur who was distressed over losing a tennis match. If we see these words in the context of Kaur's life it is evident how these words were still relatable to her when she was being bullied by the world for something that she stood for.

Gurmehar's life is that of struggle, but the outcome is that of a winner. Her personal led her to the political, an art of politics. She used her voice to rage chaos on the wrong, she stood up against cyber bullying. She nurtured her personal to bear fruit so as to share the fruits with others. The art of organizing your personal grief to a stage of shared activism is art, art of protest in support of dissent. A mode of dissent that speaks out bold, loud and follows love.

Gurmehar was then termed 'anti-national' by majority of the nation. She was deemed as one because her art of dissent did not follow the same ideology as that of the majority. Now in a constitutional country such as ours, we have the right to speech. Does our constitution come into play situationally? Our constitution does not function on power of any ruling government but the ruling government works on constitutional basis.

Kaur in her second book, *The Young and the Restless: Youth and Politics in India*, takes into account 8 young leaders. The book is divided in two parts: "The Chosen Ones" and "The Hopefuls". Shehla Rashid falls under the category of "The Hopefuls". Kaur has been deeply

inspired by Rashid, she states, “The way she spoke, her passion, her enthusiasm, her confidence and her unshakeable morale—she was everything I aspired to be.” (Kaur, 77).

Rashid’s story is different from that of Kaur, but it is nonetheless inspiring. Kashmir is a state of affairs India and Pakistan cannot come to an agreement on. No one could have imagined that a girl from Kashmir could be vocal and courageous enough to take on the most powerful men of the country.

But her identity is as much a hassle for her as it is her tool. She is a feminist born into a Muslim family and has been as critical about the portrayal of women in Islam as she has been of the treatment of Hindu women in a patriarchal Brahmanical Hindu society. Her sharp take on Triple Talaq has not gained her major fans within her community but that’s not the only trouble she has been facing. No one votes in Kashmir as they have no faith in the Indian democratic process. The people of Kashmir saw Shehla as the moderate link between Delhi and Kashmir, but rumours of her joining a certain political party to contest the 2019 elections have earned her criticism for crossing over to the ‘other side’.” (Kaur, 81-82).

To keep such a balance is nothing short of a tough challenge. Change starts singularly but has to be developed in a plural setting. Rashid being born in a conflict zone gave her no way out of politics. She was in the middle of it.

In this chapter Rashid recalls how the children could never really play freely because they were afraid of being at the wrong place at the wrong time. “Even as she recited these stories to me, there wasn’t anger that was reflected but a deep sadness. A longing for a childhood she never had, a wish for a better future.” (Kaur, 84). Rashid recalls while speaking to Kaur how they did not know that the state of their affairs was not normal. They had no source of information. The people of Kashmir lived amongst the unrest thinking it was the norm on how a state is supposed

to function. “Back then there was nothing to tell Shehla the conflict was not a normal state of being.” (Kaur, 84).

The first time Shehla and her generation had an awareness of the conflict was in 2010, after five long months of protests post an incident where the Indian Army claimed to have killed three ‘Pakistani infiltrators’, but it was later revealed to be a case of a fake encounter in which a soldier of the territorial army, a counter-insurgent and a former special police officer had lured three young men from Nadihal village in Baramulla district and killed them at Sona Pindi. During the five months of protests, a young boy was killed on his way to tuition.” (Kaur, 84).

Her initial form of protest was her expression of anger against the injustice and brutality and nothing else. Rashid started her blog in 2007. It was such a crucial step for the people of Kashmir and her generation because they had to rely on no one to express their thoughts and the realities of the state that were hidden behind censorship. “On social media, Kashmiri voices were raw, unfiltered and from the heart. There was hope that there could be a resistance.” (Kaur, 86).

Rashid then goes on to explain how things started getting worse for Kashmir when the BJP government came into power. She recalls how the radicals who wanted azadi needed it more now and the moderates who sat peacefully and wished for the war to end were treated like traitors by their own people.

Rashid joined JNU only after completing her engineering from Srinagar and on completion of a short journalism course. Her journey into politics was not a direct one but one that nurtured itself systematically through the expression of her thoughts. Rashid’s challenge isn’t expressing herself since she has never shied away from speaking the truth. Her challenge remains her

being expected wholeheartedly by her people back in the valley. There is a constant struggle within the student activist and the hopeful candidate inside of her.

Rashid learned how to channel her anger into form of written expression while she assesses how the youth in Kashmir have no form of expression and no system to turn to. Hence, they take violent forms. Rashid started to pen her voice openly because she did not want anyone else to interpret what the valley wanted or what they were going through. She did not want a second hand version of the truth. She wanted to bring out the truth as it was. Rashid in JNU joined the All India Students' Association. She believes it is important to be a part of an organized effort. It gives you a platform to voice your concerns openly. She then goes on to explain how a person alone can become overwhelmed with the list of things to do and the issues that are to be taken care of. But in a joint effort each person has their own space and they work hard in a collective effort to bring about change.

Rashid emphasises that the intelligent and good people who are to become politicians end up becoming academicians, while people who deserve not sit in power, rule in power and destroy the nation with the same power. This is why she believes she deserves a place that has responsibility to bring about change.

Kaur's description of Rashid when she met her for the first time is that of a "graceful storm". (Kaur, 81). Rashid's struggle is portrayed as nothing less than a storm and the path that she has taken to be where she is today and what she aspires to be is nothing short of a woman of grace and righteousness.

Conclusion

To make a breakthrough takes some pressure or push that is out of one's comfort zone. In the above research paper we have seen the personal events in the lives of the two student activists

that pushed them into the front lines of politics. People join politics because they want change, power, fame, money or whatever they deem important to them. It is this personal want and desire that leads one to politics. Both Kaur and Rashid discuss how they know their lives are at stake but it comes with the choices they have made. Their personal may have been their own, but they organized their expression into a form of written dissent for all to be a part of, that is protest. The art of protest is not to make noise, it is to make a difference.

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