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Reimagining Identity in a Homeland: Youth Agency and Hybrid Belonging in Kashmir

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Abstract

The youth of Kashmir, situated at the intersection of protracted conflict and political upheaval, are actively reimagining their identity in ways that challenge traditional narratives and redefine the region's socio-political landscape. This paper explores how Kashmiri youth navigate the complexities of identity formation amidst the dual pressures of political pressure and cultural tradition. Drawing on qualitative interviews, participant observation, and digital ethnography, the study highlights the emergence of a hybrid identity that blends local cultural heritage with global influences. It examines the role of education, employment challenges and political differences in shaping youth subjectivities, while also shedding light on their innovative forms of counter-narratives and expression through art and literature. The paper argues that Kashmiri youth are not merely passive recipients of inherited identities but are active agents in constructing dynamic, multifaceted identities that reflect both their struggles and hopes for the future. By situating their experiences within broader theoretical frameworks of belonging and globalization, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how conflict-affected youth negotiate identity in socio-political spaces. Ultimately, it underscores the transformative potential of youth agency in redefining what it means to be Kashmiri in the 21st century.

Keywords: Kashmir, Identity, Belonging, Youth, Article 370, Hybridity

Introduction

The abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution in August 2019 marked a profound rupture in the political, legal, and psychological landscape of Jammu and Kashmir. Once celebrated as a symbol of the state's semi-autonomous status, the provision had long been central to Kashmir's distinct identity within the Indian federal framework. Its revocation by the Indian Parliament was not merely a constitutional manoeuvre but a decisive political act that sought to assimilate Kashmir more firmly into the Indian nation-state. For many Kashmiris, however, ranging from Ex-CMs to common citizens, this move was taken as political dispossession. The consequences of this transformation have reverberated deeply within the Kashmiri body politic, especially among the youth, who constitute the largest demographic group in the region and are at the forefront of both everyday survival and political imagination.

Youth in Kashmir inhabit a paradoxical position. On the one hand, they are heavily, stigmatized, and policed in socio-political spaces, often framed through dominant security discourses as either potential radicals or passive victims of violence. On the other hand, they are the most vibrant agents of cultural and political redefinition in the Valley. In the aftermath of Article 370's abrogation, Kashmiri youth face profound socio-economic uncertainties, with unemployment rates among the highest in India. Yet despite these structural constraints, young people are not simply passive subjects. Rather, they are actively engaged in reimagining their identities, producing counter-narratives, and asserting modes of belonging that resist reduction to either victimhood or radicalization.

This study investigates how Kashmiri youth construct and negotiates identity in a homeland marked by violence and the double pull of tradition and globalization. It asks: How are Kashmiri youth reconstructing identity and belonging in the wake of political

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disenchantment and socio-economic marginalization? The paper argues that Kashmiri youth are actively developing hybrid identities, complex assemblages that weave together local cultural heritage, Islamic spirituality, Sufi traditions, modern global aesthetics, and everyday practices of survival. In doing so, they challenge dominant narratives of Kashmiri identity as either purely traditional or as subsumed by sub-nationalist tropes.

Situating youth as a political category

Understanding the role of Kashmiri youth requires situating them as a distinct political category. Demographically, nearly 70% of Jammu and Kashmir's population is under the age of 35, positioning youth not merely as "future citizens" but as central actors in the present political and cultural moment. This demographic reality is further sharpened by the conflict: youth are disproportionately affected by policy responses, unemployment, and social stigmatization. The category of "youth" in Kashmir is thus not neutral but politically charged, simultaneously romanticized in state development discourses as "builders of the future" and demonized in security narratives as "stone-pelters" or "radicalized elements." Such binaries obscure the everyday complexities of young lives and foreclose an understanding of how agency, creativity, and belonging operate in conflict zones.

The concept of youth agency is particularly critical in Kashmir. Agency here is not about absolute freedom or unconstrained choice but about the capacity to navigate structural constraints, to create spaces of expression, and to articulate belonging in conditions of uncertainties. Borrowing from James C. Scott's (1990) notion of "everyday resistance," Kashmiri youth exercise agency in small yet profound ways: through music, art, humour, coded speech, digital creativity, and the cultivation of trans-local connections. Such acts, while not always overtly political, carry within them a politics of survival, defiance, and re-signification.

Identity, belonging, and hybridity

Identity in Kashmir has historically been mediated by competing projects of nationalism, religion, and regionalism. The idea of Kashmiriyat, a composite cultural identity emphasizing syncretism and tolerance, has often been invoked to frame Kashmiri distinctiveness. However, decades of violence, displacement, and political disenchantment have fractured this narrative, making identity an arena of contestation rather than cohesion. In the post-Article 370 era, belonging has become an even more fraught terrain, where expressions of loyalty, dissent, and survival are carefully monitored, performed, and negotiated. The youth response to this predicament has been to embrace hybridity as a mode of identity formation. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's (1994) theorization of hybridity, Kashmiri youth occupy an "in-between" cultural space, neither fully traditional nor wholly assimilated into globalized modernity. This hybridity manifests in rap songs that intersperse Kashmiri and English lyrics, in digital art that fuses Quranic verses with graffiti aesthetics, in poetry that draws simultaneously on Persian mysticism and contemporary political angst. These hybrid forms not only express the fragmented realities of Kashmiri youth but also resist binary classifications that reduce them to either "authentic" locals or "Westernized" outsiders.

Research rationale and contribution

Despite the centrality of youth in Kashmiri politics, much of the scholarship continues to portray them in reductive terms: either as vulnerable victims of violence and trauma or as radicalized subjects drawn into militancy. While these framings capture important dimensions of the youth experience, they obscure the everyday creativity, negotiation, and agency through which young people reimagine belonging. This paper intervenes in that gap by foregrounding Kashmiri youth as dynamic agents engaged in constructing hybrid identities under conditions of social, political and economic precarity.

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it expands the literature on identity formation in conflict zones by highlighting hybridity as a central strategy of survival and expression among Kashmiri youth. Second, it provides an empirically grounded analysis of how global cultural flows intersect with local traditions in shaping belonging in Kashmir. Third, it underscores the transformative potential of youth agency in redefining what it means to be Kashmiri in the 21st century, a definition no longer confined to state-imposed categories or historical imaginaries but actively re-scripted by young people themselves.

Thesis statement

This paper argues that Kashmiri youth, far from being passive subjects of conflict, are active agents in reimagining identity and belonging. Through hybrid cultural expressions, digital counter-narratives, and the pursuit of alternative futures, they negotiate the dual pressures of policy response and cultural tradition. In doing so, they produce new imaginaries of what it means to belong in a contested homeland.

Review of Literature

The study of youth identity in conflict zones has emerged as a critical field within sociology, anthropology, and political science. It speaks to broader questions of how belonging, subjectivity, and political agency are shaped by protracted violence and contested sovereignties. This section reviews three interrelated strands of scholarship:

- (1) theories of identity and youth in conflict zones;
- (2) Kashmir-specific literature on identity politics;
- (3) globalization, hybridity, and belonging.

Together, these strands highlight both the global relevance of youth identity formation under conflict and the specificities of the Kashmiri experience.

1. Identity and youth in areas of conflict

Identity construction has long been a central concern in social theory. Erik Erikson (1968) foregrounded identity as a developmental task, shaped by crises and negotiations during youth. Later, Anthony Giddens (1991) emphasized reflexivity in modern identity formation, suggesting that individuals construct coherent self-narratives amidst disjunctive modern experiences. Stuart Hall (1996), however, challenged the notion of a fixed or unified identity, proposing instead that identities are always in flux, constituted within discourse, and shaped by power relations. When applied to conflict zones, these theoretical insights acquire particular resonance. Youth in sites of protracted violence often negotiate fragmented and contradictory identities. In Palestine, for instance, scholars have shown how young people's sense of self is shaped simultaneously by nationalist struggle, everyday survival, and globalized

cultural flows (Peteet, 2005). In Northern Ireland, Smyth and Scott (2000) highlighted how sectarian conflict produced rigid identity categories, yet youth often navigated these boundaries through everyday practices of crossing and blending. In Sri Lanka, Thiranaagama (2011) demonstrated how Tamil youth identities were profoundly reshaped by displacement, war trauma, and diasporic imaginaries. These comparative cases underscore two points: first, that youth in conflict zones are not merely passive victims but active negotiators of belonging; and second, that their identities are formed in dialogue with both local histories of violence and transnational cultural circuits. Kashmiri youth similarly inhabit this dual terrain, simultaneously rooted in local traditions of Kashmiriyat and Islam while engaging global repertoires of resistance, from hip-hop to digital activism.

2. Kashmir studies and politics of identity

Scholarship on Kashmir has historically focused on nationalism, resistance, and policy response. Early works such as those of Prem Nath Bazaz (1954) and Sumantra Bose (2003; 2021) traced the emergence of Kashmiri political identity within the broader context of India–Pakistan rivalry. Chitralekha Zutshi (2003, 2014) highlighted the cultural and historical construction of Kashmiri identity, situating it in the long arc of colonialism, regional autonomy, and Islamic reform.

A central concept in Kashmiri identity discourse is Kashmiriyat, often understood as a plural, syncretic ethos rooted in Sufi traditions. Scholars like T. N. Madan (2008) emphasized its cultural resilience, while others critiqued its romanticization, noting that decades of conflict and displacement, especially of Kashmiri Pandits in the 1990s, fractured its appeal (Rai, 2004). More recent work suggests that Kashmiriyat continues to exist but has been reconfigured under securitization (Kaul, 2018).

Another key strand of Kashmiri studies centers on resistance and policy response to it. Junaid (2013) explored how Kashmiri youth deploy the practice of stone pelting as a form of performative resistance, simultaneously symbolic and material. Haley Duschinski (2009) analysed the legal and military frameworks, such as the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), that institutionalize a state of exception in Kashmir. Angana Chatterji (2012) highlighted, militarized governance, and the production of grief as integral to Kashmiri subjectivity. These works underline the extent to which state surveillance and violence structure everyday life, particularly for young men.

Yet, despite the wealth of scholarship on policy response and resistance, fewer studies have examined the creative, hybrid, and globalized forms of identity that Kashmiri youth are producing. Much of the literature frames them as either victims of trauma or participants in militancy, thereby overlooking the everyday negotiations of belonging through art, education, humour, and digital expression. This paper seeks to fill that gap by foregrounding hybrid belonging as a central strategy of youth agency in contemporary Kashmir.

3. Globalization, hybridity, and belonging

To understand Kashmiri youth identity today, it is crucial to engage theories of globalization and hybridity. Arjun Appadurai's (1996) concept of "global cultural flows" emphasizes the movement of people, media, and ideas across borders, producing new cultural imaginaries.

Kashmiri youth, connected through the internet and diasporic networks, inhabit these flows, accessing global repertoires of music, fashion, and political discourse even amidst recurrent internet shutdowns.

Homi Bhabha's (1994) theorization of hybridity provides another key lens. For Bhabha, hybridity is not simply the mixing of cultures but a creative "third space" where new identities emerge, destabilizing fixed binaries of colonizer/colonized or tradition/modernity. Kashmiri youth exemplify this hybridity: their rap songs blend Kashmiri and English lyrics, their art juxtaposes Sufi imagery with contemporary political symbols, and their social media practices mix local grievances with global memes. This hybridity is not apolitical but carries a subversive potential, resisting both state-imposed nationalisms and rigid cultural essentialisms.

The concept of belonging further illuminates the Kashmiri case. Nira Yuval-Davis (2011) argues that belonging is multi-layered, encompassing emotional attachments, social positioning, and political recognition. Marco Antonsich (2010) distinguishes between "place-belongingness" (a personal sense of being at home) and "politics of belonging" (the contested inclusion/exclusion within a political community). Kashmiri youth embody these tensions acutely: while emotionally rooted in their homeland, they often feel excluded from the political community of India. Their creative expressions, from graffiti to digital zones, can thus be read as attempts to reassert belonging on their own terms.

At the same time, globalization is a double-edged sword. While it provides Kashmiri youth with new repertoires of visibility, it also fuels desires for migration and alienation. The dream of studying or working in Delhi, Dubai, or London coexists with a deep attachment to the Valley, producing contradictory affective geographies of belonging. This ambivalence echoes what Ghassan Hage (2010) terms the "politics of elsewhere," where belonging is simultaneously tied to home and projected onto imagined futures beyond its borders.

4. Identified gap

While existing scholarship provides rich insights into Kashmiri identity, the everyday negotiations of youth identity through hybrid forms remain underexplored. Comparative studies from other conflict zones suggest the importance of examining how young people creatively reimagine belonging beyond victimhood. By drawing on theories of hybridity, globalization, and belonging, this paper positions Kashmiri youth as dynamic agents whose identities are constituted in the interplay between tradition and global cultural flows.

Methodology

Research design

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive framework, appropriate for examining the lived experiences and identity negotiations of Kashmiri youth. Qualitative inquiry, in contrast to quantitative methods that emphasize generalizability, facilitates the depth and nuance essential for comprehending identity as a fluid, contested, and performative phenomenon. Identity in conflict zones transcends individual characteristics, representing a relational and historically ingrained construct. Consequently, interpretive methodologies facilitate the

exploration of meaning-making practices, narratives, and symbolic expressions that shape youth subjectivity in Kashmir.

The study is predicated on the epistemological assertion that knowledge in conflict zones is contextual and incomplete (Haraway, 1988) ^[14]. Instead of aiming for "objective" detachment, this study emphasizes the dialogical interaction between the researcher and participants, acknowledging that narratives of identity are collaboratively constructed within the research context. The methodological commitment is not to ascertain a singular "truth" of Kashmiri youth identity, but to investigate the diverse and occasionally conflicting expressions of belonging, resistance, and aspiration among young individuals.

Fieldwork and Sample

The research utilizes 30 semi-structured interviews with Kashmiri youth aged 18 to 30, encompassing both late adolescents and young adults. The sample is intentional, meant to include people from different genders, regions (urban/rural), and socio-economic backgrounds. The goal was to include university students, unemployed graduates, artists, writers, and young professionals to show the different paths that Kashmiri youth have taken in life.

Fieldwork took place from 2021 to 2023, a time when political repression continued after Article 370 was repealed, the COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing, and the internet was shut down on a regular basis. These crises that were happening at the same time affected both the field and the way the data was collected. Interviews were conducted in person when feasible; however, they frequently utilized encrypted digital platforms (e.g. WhatsApp & Zoom) due to mobility restrictions and surveillance apprehensions. This dual modality of fieldwork integrating in-person engagement with digital ethnography not only addressed practical limitations but also reflected the hybrid environments in which Kashmiri youth express their identity.

Data gathering tools

The main method was semi-structured interviews, which let people talk about topics like cultural identity, political belonging, goals, and creative practices in a way that was both guided and free-flowing. Depending on what the participant wanted, the interviews were done in English, Urdu, or Kashmiri. This multilingual strategy allowed participants to articulate themselves in languages that reflected their lived experiences, simultaneously uncovering the hybrid linguistic codes through which identity is expressed (e.g., alternating between Kashmiri and English within a single sentence).

Along with interviews, the study used participant observation and digital ethnography. The research was conducted in youth cultural venues, including cafés, art collectives, literary readings, and casual assemblies. Digital ethnography encompassed the examination of social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter/X), online zines, rap lyrics, and visual art disseminated by Kashmiri youth. Due to the widespread censorship and surveillance of the internet, many young people use coded language, humor, and allegory to express themselves online. These actions were seen as important places to make an identity and fight back.

Analyzing data

Thematic analysis was used to look at the data, using Braun and Clarke's (2006) ^[7] six-step framework. We coded the interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and digital artifacts inductively, which meant that themes came out of the data instead of being imposed on it. Through iterative coding, four primary themes emerged:

- 1) Hybrid belonging and cultural reimagination,
- 2) Political disillusionment and counter-narratives
- 3) Education, employment, and the aspiration for elsewhere, and
- 4) Surveillance, resistance, and digital expression

Thematic analysis was augmented by critical discourse analysis, especially of online content, to investigate the utilization of language, symbolism, and metaphors in identity construction. This dual analytic strategy, both thematic and discursive, guaranteed focus on both substantial narratives and the linguistic-symbolic practices that articulate them.

Ethical considerations

Because of the higher risks of surveillance and retaliation in Kashmir, ethics were very important. Participants were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality, utilizing pseudonyms consistently. Participants gave their informed consent both verbally and in writing, making sure they knew what the research was for, what risks it might pose, and that they could leave at any time. Being sensitive to trauma was very important. Interviews often brought up painful memories of violence, repression, or feeling alone, so it was important to be careful about how fast conversations went and to let participants set their own limits.

Data security was just as important. All digital files were kept on encrypted devices, and transcripts and recordings were made anonymous right away after they were collected. No personal information, like which political party someone belongs to, was kept in a way that could be traced back to them. Consistent with feminist and decolonial methodologies, the study aimed not only to gather data but also to establish a dialogical space where participants' voices were esteemed and acknowledged.

Limitations

The study recognizes various limitations. First, the small sample size prevents generalization to all Kashmiri youth; rather, the findings represent broader trends. Second, militarization, curfews, and internet shutdowns made it hard to get to places, which affected the kinds of fieldwork that could be done. Third, some participants were hesitant to talk about political issues in depth because they didn't trust each other, which led to silences that are important for analysis. Finally, digital ethnography was constrained by content deletion, as users frequently remove posts due to fear of repercussions, complicating the creation of a comprehensive archive of online expression.

Even with these limitations, the methodology gives a detailed, multi-layered picture of how young people in Kashmir express their identities. It combines interviews, observation, and digital ethnography to show both the real-life experiences and the mediated ways of belonging that shape youth agency in modern Kashmir.

Findings and thematic analysis

The empirical data collected from interviews, participant observation, and digital ethnography was subjected to thematic analysis, resulting in four principal themes. These

themes encapsulate the complex methods by which Kashmiri youth navigate their identity amidst political repression, cultural heritage, and global interconnectedness.

Theme 1: Cultural reimagination and hybrid belonging

A striking feature of youth identity in Kashmir is the embrace of hybrid belonging, a blending of religious, cultural, and global influences that resists narrow definitions of what it means to be Kashmiri. While rooted in Islamic identity and Kashmiriyat, many youth also incorporate elements of global culture, creating forms of self-expression that are at once local and cosmopolitan.

One university student described this hybridity through music:

“When I rap, I mix Kashmiri with English. It’s not about choosing one over the other — it’s about showing that we can be both, Kashmiri and global.”

Rap and hip-hop have become important vehicles of cultural reimagination, drawing inspiration from global resistance movements while localizing them with Kashmiri language, metaphors, and imagery. Songs interweave references to Quranic verses, Persian poetry, and Sufi mysticism with the stylistic beats of Western hip-hop, producing a cultural form that is distinctly Kashmiri yet transnational in resonance.

Visual arts reveal similar hybridity. Young artists incorporate traditional Kashmiri motifs such as chinar leaves and calligraphy with digital techniques and graffiti aesthetics. Online zines and Instagram accounts often juxtapose Sufi imagery with contemporary political satire, demonstrating how cultural hybridity is mobilized as a form of critique and expression.

This hybrid belonging can be understood as an “in-between” space in Bhabha’s (1994) sense: neither fully anchored in tradition nor wholly assimilated into global modernity. It reflects an active reworking of identity under pressure, allowing youth to affirm their Kashmiri roots while resisting essentialist definitions imposed by both the state and cultural gatekeepers.

Theme 2: Political disillusionment and counter narratives

Another dominant theme was political disillusionment. Across interviews, young people expressed a deep alienation and disconnection from mainstream political processes in India, especially in the wake of Article 370’s abrogation and media labelling of youth as ‘anti-national’. Elections were described as show with little credibility, and promises of development were seen as hollow in the face of security and unemployment.

A 24-year-old explained:

“They are not for me or you; they are for Delhi to show the supreme court that everything is fine here.”

Yet this disillusionment does not translate into apathy. Instead, youth create counter-narratives through cultural and digital forms. Poetry slams, spoken word performances, graffiti, and memes serve as mediums of political commentary, often coded to avoid state censorship. For instance, graffiti in downtown Srinagar juxtaposed the phrase “We Exist” with the image of a chinar tree, asserting presence against erasure. Online memes satirize political leaders and policies, using humour to cope with policy responses while subtly undermining state narratives.

Counter-narratives to media/social-media labelling also circulate in literature. Young writers produce short stories

and essays that weave allegories of exile, belonging, and memory, challenging state-imposed discourses of integration. These creative practices embody James C. Scott’s (1990) notion of “hidden transcripts”, everyday forms of opposition that allow subordinated groups to articulate dissent under high security.

Thus, political disillusionment among Kashmiri youth is not synonymous with disengagement. Rather, it has given rise to alternative political imaginaries, where art and digital expression become vehicles of resistance and the reassertion of agency.

Theme 3: School, work, and the dream of elsewhere

The aspirations of Kashmiri youth are shaped profoundly by the region’s chronic economic precarity. With unemployment rates among the highest in India, many young people view education and employment as pathways to mobility, both within and beyond Kashmir. However, their narratives reveal a tension between the longing for home and the dream of elsewhere.

Many participants spoke of aspirations to migrate, to Delhi, Bangalore, Dubai, or even further West. These aspirations were driven not only by economic necessity but also by a desire for recognition and dignity denied at home. One unemployed engineer noted:

“Here, even if you have a degree, you are seen only as a Kashmiri, a suspect. Outside, at least you can try to be judged for your skills.”

At the same time, this desire to leave was often accompanied by ambivalence and guilt. Several youth emphasized their emotional attachment to Kashmir, the pull of family and community, and the longing for the Valley’s landscape. The contradiction of wanting to leave yet feeling bound to return was a recurrent theme.

Education was seen as both an opportunity and a site of disenchantment. Repeated internet shutdowns disrupted online learning, leaving students feeling disadvantaged compared to peers in other parts of India. Female students highlighted additional constraints, including gendered surveillance and limited professional opportunities. Yet despite these challenges, many youth described education as a way of keeping hope alive, an act of defiance against the conditions that seek to limit their futures.

This theme illustrates what Ghassan Hage (2010) terms the “politics of elsewhere” the projection of belonging into imagined futures beyond the homeland. For Kashmiri youth, education and employment represent not only material survival but also symbolic quests for dignity, recognition, and freedom from stigmatization.

Synthesis of findings

Taken together, these themes reveal that Kashmiri youth are neither disengaged victims nor radicalized monoliths, as often portrayed in dominant discourses. Instead, they are creative agents navigating multiple pressures: tradition and modernity, response and resilience, home and elsewhere. Hybrid belonging allows them to draw strength from cultural heritage while engaging global repertoires of resistance. Political disillusionment fuels counter-narratives that challenge hegemonic discourses. Aspirations for education and migration embody both the pain of exclusion and the hope of transformation. And everyday negotiations with the state reveal the ingenuity of resistance in the most constrained circumstances.

These findings underscore the central argument of this study: that Kashmiri youth are actively reimagining identity in ways that complicate simplistic binaries and open up new imaginaries of belonging in a contested homeland.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the ways in which Kashmiri youth navigate a deeply constrained socio-political environment while simultaneously constructing new imaginaries of belonging. Far from being passive recipients of conflict, they emerge as agents of cultural reimagination and political creativity. This discussion situates these findings within the broader theoretical frameworks of identity, hybridity, belonging, and resistance.

Young people as political agents

The daily actions of Kashmiri youth support James C. Scott's (1990) ^[20] idea of "*everyday resistance*". When militarization makes it hard for people to openly protest, resistance often takes the form of small, symbolic acts like coded poetry, memes, graffiti, and mixed cultural works. These practices may not always resemble organized political activity, yet they embody a politics of presence, asserting dignity and agency in conditions of repression. By creating counter-narratives, Kashmiri youth broaden the scope of the political, demonstrating that politics transcends formal institutions and is expressed through art, humor, and quotidian acts of defiance.

Hybridity as a form of identity politics

Homi Bhabha's (1994) ^[4] notion of hybridity is essential for comprehending the identity of Kashmiri youth. The hybrid cultural forms seen, like mixing Sufi themes with rap or traditional calligraphy with digital styles, show not assimilation but subversion. Hybridity serves as a tactic to undermine binary classifications: Kashmiri youth reject being labeled as either "radicalized" or "authentic traditionalists." Rather, they occupy a creative "*third space*", generating identities that are fluid, multifaceted, and resistant to state categorization. This goes against the tendency of both state discourses and nationalist imaginations to make everyone the same.

Contested belonging

The results also show how complicated it is to belong. Yuval-Davis (2011) ^[23] underscores that belonging encompasses both emotional connections and political acknowledgment. Kashmiri youth have strong emotional ties to their homeland, but their political exclusion from the Indian nation-state makes their sense of belonging unstable. Antonsich's (2010) ^[2] differentiation between "place-belongingness" and the "politics of belonging" elucidates this tension: although youth perceive Kashmir as their home, their affiliation with the larger political community is either denied or contingent. Consequently, their creative practices can be interpreted as endeavors to reclaim belonging on their own terms, resisting the erasures enforced by nationalism.

The dual nature of globalization

Appadurai's (1996) ^[1] theory of global cultural flows is very relevant to the case of Kashmir. Exposure to global repertoires equips youth with novel vocabularies for expression and resistance, ranging from hip-hop to digital

memes. However, globalization also leads to alienation, which makes people want to move and creates conflicts between wanting to go home and wanting to go somewhere else. This ambivalence embodies Ghassan Hage's (2010) ^[12] concept of the "politics of elsewhere," wherein belonging is concurrently associated with the homeland and envisioned futures beyond it.

Reframing the youth of Kashmir

Overall, the findings challenge prevailing narratives that depict Kashmiri youth solely as security threats or trauma victims. Instead, they emerge as dynamic agents of identity construction, adept at reimagining belonging through innovative approaches. This study situates Kashmiri youth within a broader global discourse on youth agency in conflict zones by emphasizing hybridity, everyday resistance, and contested belonging, while also addressing the particularities of the Valley's political context.

Conclusion

This research investigates the ways in which Kashmiri youth are reconstructing their identities and sense of belonging within a contentious homeland influenced by repression, ambiguity, and global cultural exchanges. Utilizing interviews, participant observation, and digital ethnography, the analysis emphasizes the agency of young Kashmiris who, despite structural limitations, create hybrid forms of belonging that defy simplification into victimhood or radicalization.

The results revealed four principal themes. First, young people mix Islamic, Sufi, Kashmiri, and global influences in their art, music, and writing to create something new. These practices create cultural forms that are rooted in the local context while also having a global reach. Second, widespread political disillusionment does not result in disengagement; rather, it fosters counter-narratives articulated through poetry, graffiti, memes, and spoken word, contesting prevailing state discourses. Third, young people's hopes for school and work show that they feel both at home and away from home. They see their futures outside of the Valley, but they still feel connected to it.

In theory, the results support Scott's (1990) ^[20] concept of everyday resistance, Bhabha's (1994) ^[4] idea of hybridity, and Yuval-Davis' (2011) ^[23] and Antonsich's (2010) ^[2] ideas about belonging. They collectively underscore the manner in which Kashmiri youth navigate the dual challenges of repression and globalization, converting cultural hybridity and digital creativity into mechanisms of survival and dissent.

The research also adds to larger discussions about young people living in war zones. It contests the dichotomous portrayals of Kashmiri youth as either "radicalized" or "apolitical," instead illustrating that they are active political agents involved in reinterpreting the essence of being Kashmiri in the twenty-first century. Their artistic practices demonstrate that belonging is perpetually redefined, even within contexts of mandated nationalism and militarized governance.

In the end, Kashmiri youth are not just reacting to conflict; they are also actively changing how people see themselves and how they think about politics. Their mixed ways of belonging show that there is still a chance for the future, even though repression has made it hard to see. In these futures, cultural creativity and everyday resistance keep

dignity, presence, and hope alive. More research should keep looking into how these kinds of youth imaginations change as political situations change. This will help us understand how agency can change things in contested homelands.

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