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The Cost of Living in a Conflict Zone: A Study of Shahnaz Bashir's *Scattered Souls*

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Abstract

Art and conflict share filial affinity with each other. Art has been used as a perennial tool to fight the oppression and to give voice to the voiceless. Where ever the menace of occupation digs its roots, art comes as a handy tool of resistance to fight back against the oppressor. Art, in conflict zones, shoulders the burden of a *witness* to highlight the innumerable crimes committed against humanity.

For long, Kashmir has borne the trauma of conflict. This has not only caused the human rights violation but has amounted to almost a psychological rape of the local people who live in a constant state of siege and anxiety. The pain and misery of living in a conflict zone is reflected in the literature produced by the natives. Aga Shahid Ali has been followed by writers like Mirza Wahid, Basharat Peer, Rahul Pandita, Siddhartha Gigoo, and Shahnaz Bashir. The aim of this paper is to study Shahnaz Bashir's *Scattered Souls* (2016) as a text which tries to reflect the day to day miserable life of a common Kashmiri who lives in a constant state of pain and anxiety.

Key Words- *Oppression, Voiceless, Witness, Occupation, Siege.*

The coming of Shahnaz Bashir marks a new intervention in the narratives from and about Kashmir. With his debut novel *The Half Mother* (2014) his reputation was established. *The Half Mother* reflects the pain of a Kashmiri mother Haleema who struggles to live a

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dignified life in a society which has reduced her to a 'Half Mother.' Haleema's son Imran has disappeared mysteriously which has turned her into a living corpse. She often cries within herself, "Where have you disappeared? Where do I look for you now?" (The Half Mother, pp, 4) As a result, she has been forced to live a life of constant psychological torture and suffering. She belongs to Kashmir—a place where in the words of Aga Shahid Ali, "the reports are true, and without song: mass rapes in the villages, towns left in cinders, neighbourhoods torched... The rubble of downtown Srinagar stares at me from The Times... Srinagar hunches like a wild cat; Lonely sentries, far from their homes in the plains, *licensed to kill* . . . while the Jhelum flows under them, sometimes with a dismembered body. . . . The candles go out as travellers, unable to light the . . . Void. Srinagar was under curfew . . . The identity pass may or may not have helped in the crackdown. Son after son—never to return from the night of torture—was taken away." (Ali 1997) In her Introduction to "*Kashmir: Roots of Conflict, Paths to Peace*" (2008) Sumantra Bose says that, "From 1989 to 2002, between 40,000 (official Indian estimates) and 80,000 (claimed by the Hurriyat Conference, a coalition of pro-independence and pro-Pakistan groups) civilians, guerrilla fighters, and Indian security personnel died in violence that gradually spread beyond the Kashmir Valley to affect most of Jammu, IJK's other populous region. According to Indian counterinsurgency sources, in this period, more than 4,600 security personnel were killed, along with about 13,500 civilians (the vast majority Muslims) and 15,937 "militants" (the term for guerrilla fighters) including approximately 3,000 from outside IJK, "mostly Pakistanis and some Afghans." Also in this period, 55,538 incidents of violence were recorded and Indian forces engaged in counterinsurgency operations captured around 40,000 firearms, 150,000 explosive devices, and over 6 million rounds of assorted ammunition." One can have a clear understanding of the life in Kashmir by having a look at this statistics. If this reportage gives us the numbers of people that became the victim of conflict, writers like Shahnaz Bashir give us the impact of this 'sound and fury' of violence on the day today life of people in Kashmir.

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Scattered Souls (2016), a collection of short stories by Shahnaz Bashir, broadens the horizon of perspectives about the life in Kashmir. What lends power to this collection of short stories is its more 'objective' and 'realistic' portrayal of day to day life in Kashmir. As an insider, Shahnaz Bashir avoids excessive sentimentality and unveils the various shades of Kashmir conflict and its horrors. This 'objective' portrayal lends credibility to his book as brutally honest and explicitly authentic. Jhanavi Acharkar commenting on the book writes, "This powerful collection of stories focuses on life, loss and death in the Valley...The book explores the effects of the prolonged violence and unrest on the human mind...with its focus on personal tragedy in times of political conflict, Bashir's writing bears shades of Manto." Similarly, Supriya Sharma in Hindustan Times writes, "Shahnaz Bashir's second book that comprises vignettes from Kashmir, however, succeeds in drawing attention to the human cost of the conflict, and to how draconian laws and excessive militarisation of the state have ravaged the lives of ordinary Kashmiris." Dr Ihsan Malik, Assistant Professor Central University of Kashmir, writes that Bashir's book is "a candid account of the bitter realities of the Kashmir conflict where even a petty misunderstanding is enough to claim a person's life." The thirteen stories in the book are at once unique because they unravel different shades of Kashmir conflict, at the same time; they are inter-connected because collectively they form a single unit, a whole. They are connected by recurring motifs and characters that appear and re-appear in different forms. The book is a sort of portrait gallery in which one can witness the characters with their unique stories. They unfold the untold stories from their homeland which have been silenced by the oppressive state and nationalist narratives. The story entitled, "*The Transistor*" highlights the precarious nature of life in a conflict zone where even rumours and mere misunderstanding can prove to be lethal to human life. The story deconstructs the, often assumed, binary narrative of nation/state versus its people and highlights how even people turn against their own people on mere suspicion. Mohd Yousf Dar, an ardent supporter of people's movement, is shredded to pieces on being suspected as a spy of government forces. The government forces are also shown as greedy, callous and

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committing heinous crimes against the locals. The story portrays them as eternally the 'Others'. As the narration of story goes we are told that, "the troops had been stealing apples and firewood, and now they were encroaching upon the land. They had breached the fence one side..." (Scattered Souls, p.11) "*The Gravestone*" depicts the plight of the people who belong to the humble background in a society where 'the cost of living' is too much. Mohd Sultan, a carpenter by profession and a devout supporter of freedom struggle, is invaded by the pricks of his conscience when he tries to apply for monetary compensation to the same government which has killed his son. The narrator comments, "Finally, he threw off the guise of commitment to the cause of freedom, ignored his guilt and applied for compensation... Now the only hurdle that came between Mohd Sultan and his compensation, was the word *Shaheed*, conspicuously engraved on his son's gravestone. If discovered, the word could ruin his chances of compensation." (Scattered Souls, pp.24, 25) The social and economic pressures ultimately force him to sell his own conscience, as he tries to erase the tag of Shaheed from the tombstone of his son. Shahnaz Bashir very deftly and consciously highlights the fact that it is the common man/woman who at the end of the day has to bear the brunt of living in a conflict zone. "*The Ex-militant*", a story full of irony portrays the stigma of being an ex-militant and the impossibility of a return to normal life for a poor man once branded as a 'militant'. Ghulam Mohi-ud-Din, an ex-militant, narrates his heart wrenching story to a journalist Izhar who is doing a story on ex-militants. He narrates how he is haunted by not only the government forces but also by the local people who sever every connection with him. He narrates to Izhar how he faces, "Stigma. Every month I have to show up in the Raj Bagh station. Earlier it was every week. It is impossible to get registered for certain important things now. Passport and all other big registrations could only be had in dreams. Even TV cable operators are inquisitive about me." (Scattered Souls, p.30) He goes on to narrate how during 90's with Fayaz Shah, one of his friends from an elite class, he joined the local insurgents chanting the slogans of freedom struggle. Later on they were taken to the infamous Papa 2 interrogation centre and thence to Kot Bilawal prison. His friend Mr Fayaz

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is set free from the prison due to his political approach and he moves to Bangalore for studies. The story takes an unexpected turn when we are told that Mr Fayaz without completing his engineering degree joined the main stream politics. When Ghulam approaches the Trust which can help his daughter Insha to continue her education, he shockingly comes to know that Mr Fayaz, once his comrade and a rich ex-militant, is the chief trustee who can offer him monetary help. The story is an indirect attack on chameleon like state politicians and the way they run the government to push underdogs further in the abyss of poverty. “*Psychosis*” is a different dimension of the preceding story. It depicts how Sakeena, the wife of ex-militant Ghulam Mohi-ud-Din, after the detention of her husband, is gang-raped by the ‘security forces.’ We are told that on a certain night they (security forces), “threw her down to the ground and held her legs and arms. One of them stripped her of her shalwaar and stuffed it into her mouth...the men did not let Sakeena go for an hour...” (Scattered Souls, p.62, 63) As a result of this violation, a son Bilal is born to her the consequences of which wreak havoc in both of their lives. Sakina lands into the shaky land of depression and she has to consult the psychiatrist Dr Imtiyaz to resume her normal life. She faces stigma as well as the social ostracism of the society which casts its eye brows on her. She has been reduced to a half-widow. She searches every nook and corner, visits police stations but does not find any clue about her disappeared husband. The callousness of the security forces is shown when at a Sonawari camp, “the guards demand that she sleep with them”, in lieu of being provided with any clue about her husband. This story is a direct attack on all the state and national meta-narratives that see ‘security forces’ as safeguarding the rights of the local people. The story shows how in reality the ‘security forces’ of the state make life insecure by their very presence. They detain people on mere suspicion, torture them and commit barbarous acts like rape. “*Theft*” portrays how a young girl Insha from a socially humble class is met with social distrust and insecurity when she tries to assert her own independence. She works as a sales girl in a cosmetic shop and has to face the wrath of her employer who commands her to work as per his whims. The story reaches its climax when she is accused of theft about which she is

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herself clueless. There are also hints about her body being used and abused for the gratification of the callous employer. She is thrice marginalised, first as a daughter of a rape victim and an ex-militant, second, as a woman and finally as a member of humble class of the society. What lends power to this powerful story is its style which is explicitly post-modern. There seems to be no real beginning and the dialogues seem a series of ramblings. The story drifts from one idea to another and then comes back to the initial point. One has to be very alert to understand who is narrating the events. Sometimes the voice of the narrator and the dialogue of the character seem one. Shahnaz Bashir does not remain confined to his particular location. "A Photo with Barack Obama" is Bashir's dig at the indifference of international political superpowers like America which don't hold on to the moral responsibility of resolving a lifelong conflict. Buel, a stone pelter, expects American President Obama, who is on his visit to India, to resolve the conflict of Kashmir because, "He is black. He understands the pain of being deprived." Buel is shattered when he learns that in his speech "the president of the United States mentioned everything... Kashmir was not mentioned at all." Buel disappointed finally faces the wrath of state forces as he is ruthlessly tortured. The fate of Buel reminds one of countless boys turned stone pelters who are hunted down and neutralised as 'terrorists' by the 'security forces.' One can't do but recall here Aga Shahid Ali's poem:

"Rizwan, it's you, Rizwan, it's you," I cry out
as he steps closer, the sleeves of his phiren torn
"Each night put Kashmir in your dreams," he says,
then touches me, his hands crusted with snow,
whispers, "I have been cold for a long, long time"
"Don't tell my father I have died," he says,
and I follow him through blood on the road
and hundreds of pairs of shoes the mourners
left behind, as they ran from the funeral
victims of the firing. From windows we hear

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grieving mothers, and snow begins to fall
on us, like ash. Black on edges of flames,
it cannot extinguish the neighbourhoods,
the homes set ablaze by midnight soldiers.
Kashmir is burning.” (Ali. 1997)

Shahnaz Bashir in his story, “*Oil and Roses*” portrays Gul Bhagvaan struggling with loneliness and fighting to create meaning in his life. Gul, a childless gardener, has lost his foster son Showkat in a firing accident and he tries to compensate this by symbolically creating a hybrid flower species. He offers ‘flowers’ to the coming American tourists which later on leads them to infer the irony of living in Kashmir because they realise that “perhaps there are more complicated things in the world than oil and roses.” “*Country Capital*” is at once a dig at the school system where children are even not aware about country’s capital and at the same time it highlights the double attitude of some local people who make money out of blood in Kashmir by acting as collaborators for their petty means. The story also depicts how actually soldiers transport the costly resources of Kashmir like deodar trees to their homes under the façade of programmes like Operation Sadhbhavna. As Captain Manohar orders his people to “Put all the cedar into the Volvo, the same one we are using to take the kids... Its belly is enough to carry more than a hundred pieces. And put the kid’s luggage and other things over them.” (Scattered Souls, p.113)

Dr Ihsan Malik writes about another short story titled, “*Shabaan Kaakh’s Death*” that it ‘reiterates the reality that in a conflict zone even the burial of the dead can pose insurmountable problems to family and friends of the deceased. Owing to a strict curfew in the valley following a teenager’s death, Shabaan Kaakh the centenarian is not able to get the kind burial he had always dreamt of. Contrary to his dream of leaving for the heavenly abode a sunny Friday with thousands attending his funeral, he dies on a bleak and gloomy Thursday with only a couple of rows of people comprising his family and the immediate neighbours offering the janaza in a narrow lane. After a lot of difficulty the family manages to give him a

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burial.’ The curfewed city surrounded by soldiers does not even allow the Ivan Illych like Shabaan’s *authentic life* to end naturally. *The House* is a classic example of the fall of hubris and the conflict’s potential to cause family dysfunction and the disintegration of even the well-knit structure of a family.

“Some Small things I could not tell you” is a heart wrenching letter of a cancer ridden father to his son about the do’s and don’ts of life. A concerned father writes, “Son, many of us are consumed by our egos. The day we conquer our egos is the day we win ourselves and that is when we win the world. But we should take care not to compromise on our sense of justice. Being humble doesn’t mean you have to *please all*.” Though appearing moral in tone, the story moves beyond the everyday life morality to a metaphysical one. It also highlights the plight of Cancer patients and the apathetic attitude of Oncologists towards their patients as he writes, “My oncologist is scarier than cancer. He shocks me more than news of death. The way he shakes his head from side to side and sucks his lips when he looks at my reports- it kills me a thousand times. I want to tell him to counsel me even though I know how ineffective any counselling is for a patient like me... I want to die in peace. (Scattered Souls, p.143)

The Silent Bullet highlights the duality of life- illusion versus reality. Mohd Ameen, a lover of philosophy and wisdom is capable of brooding over the ultimate questions of human existence like “What is the purpose of the mind in heaven? Is it needed here? If yes, then why has it not been limited to only appreciate the perfection and absoluteness? What the hell is heaven actually?” (Scattered Souls, p.160) Apparently lost in his dream of heaven where he sees everything perfect and happy go lucky, he wakes to find his own miserable life and is reminded of how he was once hit by a bullet and how it has crippled his life.

The last story, “The woman who became her own husband” is a tragic story of a lovely couple Ayesha and Tariq Zargar. They are known in the whole neighbourhood as a perfect couple when all of a sudden Tariq is killed in a firing accident. Ayesha, devastated by the shock tries to mimic his husband’s way of life. The narrator comments, “The next day...

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she stood on the verandah, leaning on the railing over the grille the way Tariq did, smoking a cigarette exactly in his style.’ (Scattered Souls, p.181) She suffers from post-traumatic disorder as she fails to act and live the normal life she once lived.

What is more striking about this collection is that Shahnaz Bashir is able to maintain a certain distance as an insider and this gives him an opportunity to observe and report avoiding sentimentality. Although stories presented seem individual and unique, they are connected to each other and dramatize the various shades of conflict that surpass the ordinary and biased depiction of Kashmir by media.

Conclusion

The narrative that emerges from this book challenges all the nationalist and state narratives about Kashmir that tend to mask the bitter reality on the streets. As Bhat Safeer rightly points, “Of late, Kashmiris have started writing about themselves, telling their stories to the world through fiction and non-fiction. This is quite significant as it has introduced a local narrative into the discourse, reflecting the way Kashmiris themselves perceive their problem.” Bashir’s collection succeeds in creating a local narrative that at once challenges and at the same time goes beyond the state sponsored and nationalist narratives to highlight the various shades of life under the shadow of conflict in Kashmir.

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