

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. IV & Issue I (April- 2019)

Chasing the Shadows: A study of *The Half Mother*

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DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2019.4.1.09

Abstract

The three decade old armed conflict in Kashmir has claimed thousands of lives, left hundreds homeless and rendered numerous youth missing. The vacillation of the Kashmir issue has raised a furore and frenzy among the people and it has been registered and documented in various literary and non-literary genres. The narratives about the state of conflict and its impact on the populace are tendentious, written from extrinsic and probative positions that fall in the ambit of mainstream narratives. Lately, the indigenous writers from Kashmir have registered the grim accounts of the impact of insurgency and militancy in the state and the unabated military action. The native writers have a firsthand account of the events of the turmoil. One such writer Shahnaz Bashir's *The Half Mother* is a doleful story of Haleema, the protagonist who is an epitome of valiance and courage. It is a woeful tale of a grief stricken mother who loses her only son to the enforced disappearance at the hands of the armed forces. In this paper, I aim to highlight the importance of the native Kashmiri writers in bringing out the honest and truthful accounts of the impact of militancy on the contemporary Kashmiri literature.

Keywords- Conflict, Insurgency, Militancy, Mother, Armed Forces

Introduction

The relentless Kashmir Conflict has taken a heavy toll on the lives of Kashmiris for more than three decades now. The war of conflict has assumed a horrendous shape. As it continues to be appalling for the residents of Kashmir, the magnitude of violence is unprecedented. The disputed history and political upheaval has been voiced in plenty of works which mostly have either a mainstream connotation or they're written by the non-Kashmiri writers and, therefore, many such literary or non-literary works do not comply with the fundamental aspects and impact of armed struggle and the ground situation in Kashmir. Thereby distorting and misrepresenting the actual narratives of the conflict. In the recent times, the political pandemonium and the state excesses of the armed forces on the people of Kashmir ranging from custodial killings, arrests, fake encounters, rapes, enforced disappearances etc. have been broached up by the aboriginal and budding writers of the valley. The verity of such

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incidents have prompted the native writers like Mirza Waheed, Basharat Peer, Shafi Ahmad, Shanhaz Bashir and others to expound the realities in form of literature. Shahnaz Bashir's debut novel *The Half Mother* is a reliable and well-founded narrative that offers an honest and authoritative account of the conflict by an individual who has witnessed the brutality and tyranny of the conflict.

Ever since the militancy and armed rebellion against the Indian state emerged in the valley, thousands of youth have disappeared after being taken into custody by the armed forces on one pretext or the other. In an article titled *The Spectacle of a Good Half-Widow: Women in Search of their Disappeared Men in the Kashmir Valley* Ather Zia remarks "After militancy for self-determination and Independence started in 1989 in the Kashmir Valley, more than eight thousand Kashmiri men have been subjected to enforced disappearance by the Indian Army." Reviewing *The Half Mother*, Mudassir Bhat points "The narrative offers an authoritative account by the insider of a brutalized wilderness at the hands of Indian army. It embarks upon to wake up the dozing giant of Indian sovereignty lulled by decades of official liberal sing song. It is deeply provocative and an excellent addition to the burgeoning genre of Kashmiri fiction in English". It embarks upon the literary conscience of the mainstream narratives.

Divided into three books the novel tells a funereal tale of Haleema and the unfathomable disappearance of her only son Imran. Unlike other writers who have written about Kashmir remotely sitting in the comfort of their cozy houses, Shahnaz Bashir has closely witnessed the ongoing conflict and the relentless brutalities and tyranny of the armed forces. Haleema is a representation of all the mothers whose sons went missing mysteriously in the custody of the armed forces ever since the armed struggle began in Kashmir. Edward Said propounds that the role of an intellectual is to "...challenge and defeat both an imposed silence and the normalized quiet of unseen power, wherever and whenever possible ... visibly represents a standpoint of some kind and articulates the same without barriers. He is neither a pacifier nor a consensus- builder but someone who is staked on a critical sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas or ready-made clichés or smooth, ever-so accommodating confirmation of what powerful have to say and do." (pp. 31). Shahnaz Bashir takes up this role responsibly and with grace. Commenting on his book Shahnaz Bashir remarks that "In strife-torn Kashmir, I have always been tormented by the feeling of indefinite and eternal uncertainty. *The Half Mother* is an outcome of those feeling" (Greater Kashmir)

The Half Mother is a chronicle of affliction and torment in the frame of resistance literature. The book opens with a couplet from Allama Iqbal which reads:

Darya, Kohsar, Chaand, Taaray

Kya Jaanay Firaq-o-Naasaboori

Rivers, hills, the moon and stars

What would they know of separation's indelible scars

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Judaai(Separation), Baal-e-Jibreel

In his paper titled, Chronicle of Pain: The Half Mother through Resistance Discourse, Jan Mohamad Pandit remarks “The novel opens with a reverie that brings out antithetical elements of suffering-hopes, miseries-patience, and uncertainties-quests into her mind in a way that the nostalgic impulses align with the present consciousness in a surreptitious manner only to aggravate her melancholic tendencies”. The very first chapter of the novel sets the mood for pain, agony and suffering as the protagonist Haleema embarks on the never-ending search for her lone son, Imran. Haleema’s gaze hung dreamily. She murmured absentmindedly, just as she would have rehearsed the wedding madrigals for Imran (The Half Mother, 5).

The colour of everything is sorrow,

The colour of the moon is sorrow,

The colour of the streets is sorrow, and

The colour of memories is sorrow.

The colour of my heart, in its own heart, is sorrow.

The colour of my breath is sorrow

The colour of sorrow is sorrow.(The Half Mother,5)

The setting of the novel is Natipora in Srinagar in the early 1990s. Haleema, the only child of her parents has witnessed tragedy after tragedy. Her mother, Boba, died when Haleema was only a young little girl. Unable to bear the financial expenses, Ab Jaan, Haleema’s father had to withdraw her from school. On her last day at school Haleema’s class teacher had scribbled on her glossy Mashq

HamaariPyariHaleema, Hum DuaKartein Hain Ki TuhariZindagiBahutKhoobsurat
Ho.

(Our beloved Haleema, we wish you a very beautiful life)

As her life goes by, these lines prove to be ironic because Haleema’s life becomes miserable. Haleema devoted herself to the household chores Ab Jaan married her off to a “medical assistant from a Srinagar nursing home, who began having an affair with a nurse at the hospital...” (13). Haleema ended the marriage in just three months. Few months later, Haleema gave birth to a baby boy, Imran, on the last day of July(Bashir,15)

The 1990s were very turbulent times in the history of Kashmir. The long tussle between the political rivals had finally culminated into war. Young boys had begun sneaking into Pakistan to fetch arms and rebel against the government.(Bashir,23) These were the times when the army bunkers mushroomed in Srinagar and the rest of the valley. One chilly morning, Imran went out to help Ab Jaan clear the snow off the walkway. Just outside the gate they saw troops erecting a bunker. Ab Jaan thundered at them “The bunker will be a nuisance - you will always be intruding into our homes. Our women cannot come out of their houses. Please take the bunker little away from here.” (26). In response the trooper pushed him with the butt of his rifle and he fell to the ground. At this, Imran became furious and

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threatened the trooper out of rage and anger. That night the Joo family sat quiet. It was their first encounter with the armed forces. The conflict and insurgency had aggravated and had led to a routine of curfews, torture, disappearances, encounters, killings, and rapes. Growing up in the tumultuous times, Imran was a conscious and a talented boy. He was a noble soul and would help his mother in the household chores. As Haleema fell sick, Imran began to look after her and maturely assumed all the responsibilities of the household while balancing his education. Imran had a quest for knowledge and he was a curious boy and would often question his teachers and challenge their teaching methods. Once Imran asked his teacher ‘Why we were never taught the history of Kashmir?’ (34), even when we are taught Mesopotamia and Indus valley. MrsTeja tweaked his ear suggesting him to remain quiet and thus discouraging him to know his own history. On hearing this Ab Jaan tells him “Until we stop oppressing ourselves others will never stop oppressing us. Remember this. Mark my words...Everything has a history. And we have a firm history of own history. Except the fact that it has never seen the light of day” (34), he further adds, “We have to indulge in alternate education...Read besides your school curriculum. I have an old copy of Kashmakash (35). Kashmir history is wrought up with the conflict in the most intricate and intriguing way only to left ‘tinctures of decay’ in the present. Through the mouthpiece of Ab Jaan, Shahnaz Bashir tries to highlight the intellectual bias of the outsiders and the indigenous rapacious state functionaries-incessant endeavors on their part to erase memories, distort facts, monopolize narratives, substitution of historical facts by the myths/ hypes strategically that lay bare the harsh realities of the Kashmir conflict.

As the insurgency in the valley intensified, the government resigned, paving way for the governor’s rule. Tear, blood, death and war followed, as did curfews, crackdowns, raids, encounters, killings, bunkers, an exodus of people, burning markets, schools and buildings. (32) The violent acts of the human rights violation at the hands of the security forces were inflicted upon the people. Imran Bhat and and Shaheen Bhat, the two sons of Shafiq, the neighbour of Haleema, are the first ones from Natipora to join the militancy and cross the border in Pakistan. One fie evening, a contingent of troops escorted a Pandit in Natipora who was there to collect whatever was left. Suddenly there was an attack, the gun fire started. This was the first attack in Natipora. After this attack, the troops retaliated in frenzy by beating people, setting the shops and houses ablaze and hurling abuses and invectives wildly and loudly.

Agha Shahid Ali writes,
“...Black on edges of flames,
It cannot extinguish the neighborhood
The homes set ablaze by midnight soldiers.
Kashmir is burning...” (The Veiled Suite, 179)

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The next morning, the army led by Major Aman Lal Kushwaha barged into the Joo house and asked them where they had hidden the militants. Ab Jaan was beaten when he bravely argued with the major. “You beat everyone. There are civilians in the locality, yet you burn down our shops, you snatch away our living and now you are torturing us. Don’t you have any shame?” (48) The major held Abjaan by his collar and dragged him. Haleema cried for help “Kuni Kahn Chhuna? Anybody? Help! Please don’t kill him! Please!” (49) Three bullets were pumped into Abjaan, one in the heart, one in the neck and one in the stomach. (49) Blood started oozing out of Ab Jaan’s throat and Haleema slapped her face and screamed and cried while Imran was in a state of shock. Shahnaz Bashir has diligently depicted the horrific killing of Ab Jaan and it is a representation of the military excesses on the people of Kashmir ever since the armed struggle for *Azadi* began in Kashmir.

Late one night Imran and Haleema were woken by a flurry of noise. The troops were looking for Imran. Major Aman Lal Kushwaha rapped at the door followed by other troops and picked up Imran mistaking him for Imran Bhat. Imran was frightened and Haleema begged for his innocence. “you killed my father! Leave me someone to live with! How could you be so cruel?” (56) Haleema reiterated effusively with tears in her eyes but the major turned his back at her with a callous indifference. Haleema knelt in front of the army vehicle breathing hard, begging, crying collapsed on the dirt road barefooted, bareheaded. It was the longest night of Haleema’s life.

The Book 2 of novel further tells us a gory tale of a mother who lost her son to the enforced disappearance. The mysterious disappearance of Imran into the oblivion turns Haleema schizophrenic and her quest to track her son remains the sole reason for her to live. The next morning Haleema along with Imam goes to the Sadder Police Station to register an FIR against army. However the constable informs her that “It has been long time since we filed an FIR. A long, long time. Actually, we cannot lodge an FIR against the army.” He adds “Our job is now confined to identifying, carrying, delivering dead bodies to the families. That is the job of the police now.” (63) This shows the official apathy and misgovernance in the conflict zone. Natasha Kaul remarks “The women of Kashmir are in the tens of thousands of widows and half-widows; wives of killed and disappeared men; as well as mothers and grandmothers of missing children. Vulnerable, often impoverished, the sorrows, struggles and humiliation of these women of Kashmir are a catalogue of charges against the occupation of Kashmir.” (Of Occupation and Resistance: Writings from Kashmir, 253).

Haleema, accompanied by the Imam and others reaches the local camp. “We are looking for a young boy. Your captain picked him up last night from Natipora, the Imam told the guard at the camp. (66) However it went futile. Haleema visited another army camp Malaysia but returned empty handed. She sold her jewelry, her cattle and even the expensive silverware. The Joo house wore an empty look now. (68) Sometimes Haleema would talk to the things

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that belonged to Imran, his clothes, his books etc. She cried in silence and sometimes wailed loudly. She would sometimes sing melancholically:

“Kyazitscaa’iroodhammaah-inamkehilaaltai?

Dohgoumpyaaraan, chhinatsalaan mala al tai?”

“O crescent moon, why do you hide from me?

Sulking as you are, why have you kept me?” (70)

In her pursuit of finding her son, Haleema went to places of all sorts, she went to a TV station and Radio station where she was denied help. Although the media should have helped her but such is the state of things in the conflict ridden valley that even the media feels helpless when it comes to reporting against the atrocities committed by the security forces. In an interview Arundhati Roy stated that Indian media “failed to highlight the plight of the ordinary Kashmir’s who were being tormented and brutalized by security forces every day in the name of freedom and peace.” The media has become instrumental tool in the hands of the government, for it not only valorizes the brutality in the name of ‘national integrity’ but in a scheming way efface and erase the bruteness of brutality, seriousness of the serious issue, naturalize the unnatural, rationalize the irrational so that everything look justifiable and of commonplace to the common people. (reference) She went to the Press Enclave in Srinagar where she went straight to BBC’s Srinagar bureau. There she met a young journalist Izhar who promised her a short story in the BBC. He took her across the Wadi Ki Awaaz newspaper office where they told her that they would print her story on the front page of their next day’s edition. Izhar told her to approach the court.

The state excesses become predominant when Haleema visits the army hospital where she sees the young boys who are tortured in the torture centers set up across the state. There she sees some “limbless, fingerless, nail less, hairless, toothless, eyeless, earless, detainees – a variety of wriggling, howling, yowling amputated souls” (80). The barber Abdus Salam tells her an excruciating tale of the situation inside the BadamiBagh Cantonment. He gives her a hope that her son is alive and he had seen him once in the BadamiBagh Cantonment. Yet she is helpless and is not allowed to go inside the torture centers to look for her son. At the mortuary she meets Khazir Post Mortem who has conducted over ten thousand post-mortems. He tells her the tales of heinous and gruesome torture that the boys have to go through at the hands of army and other security forces. “I was asked to undress, be naked. The first time I resisted, I was beaten, undressed forcibly and tied to a chair. Then they tied copper wire to my arms and gave me electric shocks... I fainted a few times. They brought me back to my senses and inserted a copper wire into my penis” (146).

Haleema went to the court and there she met a multitude of people who, like Haleema have lost their sons, husbands, fathers etc in the similar raids by the army and their nears and dears too haven’t returned home. Along with these people Haleema forms an association, the Association of Relatives of the Disappeared Person (ARDP). Haleema becomes the head of

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the association. At her Zia remarks “After militancy for self-determination and Independence started in 1989 in the Kashmir Valley, more than eight thousand Kashmiri men have been subjected to enforced disappearance by the Indian Army. In 1994 the Association of Parents of the Disappeared Persons (APDP), a female-dominated movement, began to search for these disappeared men.”

The title of the novel is highly reflective of the pain and agony that the parents and relatives of the disappeared people go through. At the court the lawyer while making the list of the members of the association, taking the legalities into consideration, he writes Half Widow for the women who have lost their husbands. At this Haleema asks the lawyer what would her status be called, would she also be called a Half Mother? (142) At the court Haleema learns that the Army Major Aman Lal Kushwaha was killed in an encounter some years ago. On hearing this Haleema loses the only hope of finding her son. She met the CM and also knocked the doors of NGOs and the State Human Rights Commission SHRC, but nothing constructive came out of it. She was told that she can get some monetary help only which she gracefully denies. She returned empty handed from everywhere. The battered hope inside her was still alive. (155)

“...The night is tired now,
The old moon, hanging in the dark sky,
is tired too, T
he roads are tired,
Your footprints are tired,
The candle, the windows, the doors are tired –
I am still waiting, Come now...” (156)

Both, her conscious and unconscious are evaded by the memories of Imran. She became indifferent to this world. Battered and baffled, she attains a stature of a poetess who sings the songs of longing and separation. (reference) Her last words before death are-

“Imran Saeba? Aakha?”
“Imran, Have you come?” (178)

Conclusion

The life and struggle of Haleema proved that “the greatest of suffering brings greatest of hopes, the greatest of miseries greatest patience, and the greatest uncertainties lead to the greatest quests” (69). Shahnaz Bashir’s *The Half Mother* challenges the notion that the ‘Kashmiris are expressionless’ and this gives an expression to all those mothers who have lost their loved ones to the killings and enforced disappearances. Salaman Rushdie necessitates for the writer, “...a genuine need for political fiction, for books that draw new and better maps of reality, and make new languages with which we can understand the world.” Thus this novel is an insider’s account of the turmoil in Kashmir and gives a clear picture of the on ground situation and helps understand the chronicle of excruciating pain that

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the Kashmiris go through while the state excesses continue to hamper the routine lives of the people of the valley. The native writers from Kashmir have witnessed the impact of turmoil and they're writing to diffuse the state of the affairs in the valley to the world outside.

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