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Shahnaz Bashir's 'The Half Mother': A Tale of Loss, Resilience, and Pursuit of Justice

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Abstract: 'The Half Mother' the evocative novel penned by Shahnaz Bashir, weaves a haunting narrative that delves into the profound themes of loss, resilience, and the relentless pursuit of justice. The present paper offers a glimpse into the emotional complexities of the novel, focusing on the central character, Haleema, and her poignant journey through the conflict-ridden region of Kashmir. Conceptualizing 'The Half Mother' as a powerful exploration of the human spirit, this study examines the impact of loss and trauma on Haleema's psyche. The disappearance of her son becomes the catalyst for her transformation, as she grapples with grief and embarks on a tireless search for answers, setting the stage for a quest for justice and closure. Through Haleema's character, the novel becomes a testament to resilience in the face of adversity. Her unwavering determination and strength serve as beacons of hope amidst the darkness of conflict, illuminating the indomitable spirit of individuals amidst chaos and despair. The pursuit of justice emerges as a central thread in the novel. Haleema's quest for truth and accountability not only revolves around her personal tragedy but also reflects the larger injustices prevailing in the war-torn society. Through Haleema's journey, readers are compelled to reflect on the importance of seeking justice in a world marred by violence and uncertainty. The paper aims to highlight how 'The Half Mother' transcends the confines of a personal narrative, shedding light on the collective trauma experienced by a community struggling to cope with the consequences of conflict. The novel becomes a poignant exploration of the lasting scars left by violence, prompting questions about accountability and healing in the pursuit of justice.

Keywords: Enforced disappearance, violence, trauma, resilience, and insurgency.



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Introduction

Kashmir, a region marred by political disputes and conflicts since the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, has endured immense violence, resulting in unimaginable hardships for its people. The period of insurgency and counterinsurgency during the 1980s and 1990s brought forth the worst violations of human rights, turning Kashmir into a living hell. However, amidst the chaos and suffering, Kashmiri writers have risen as powerful voices of resistance, using their literature as an effective tool to depict the harsh realities and articulate the struggle for justice and peace. Kashmiri writers, through their profound works encompassing poetry, novels, short stories, memoirs, and journalistic writings, have become a formidable force in shedding light on the lived experiences of the people. Their writings provide profound insights into the trauma, resilience, and defiance of the Kashmiri community during conflicts. Through their stories, they offer readers a window into the multifaceted dimensions of the Kashmiri struggle, seeking to communicate the human cost of political upheavals and the relentless pursuit of justice.

In recent years, numerous compelling voices have emerged from Kashmir, capturing readers' attention worldwide. Writers such as Siddhartha Gigoo, with his novel 'The Garden of Solitude' delve into the complexities of identity and belonging in a land torn by turmoil. Mirza Waheed, through works like 'The Collaborator' and 'The Book of Gold Leaves' offers poignant narratives that resonate with the themes of love, loss, and sacrifice against the backdrop of conflict. Basharat Peer's memoir, 'The Curfewed Night' stands as a deeply personal account of growing up amidst military occupation, underscoring the impact of violence on individual lives and the collective psyche of the Kashmiri people. Shahnaz Bashir, in his works 'The Half Mother' and 'The Scattered Souls' explores the profound themes of loss, resilience, and pursuit of justice through intimate portrayals of the characters' struggles.

The literary expressions of Kashmiri writers are not only works of art but also profound acts of resistance. They serve as a means to preserve the collective memory and voice the aspirations of a people longing for peace and healing. Through their powerful storytelling and evocative prose, these writers humanize the conflict, moving readers to empathize with the pain and resilience of those living in the valley. Kashmiri literature has emerged as a potent medium of resistance, weaving together the narratives of a people



enduring unimaginable hardships capturing the attention of readers worldwide, providing profound insights into the complex realities of the Kashmiri struggle. Their literary contributions stand as testament to the enduring power of storytelling and the significance of amplifying voices from conflict-affected regions, fostering understanding, empathy, and hope for a peaceful future.

Shahnaz Bashir: An Emerging Voice of Kashmir Advocating Peace and Justice through Fictional Narratives

Shahnaz Bashir, a talented Kashmiri writer, has emerged as a significant literary voice, using his powerful storytelling to advocate for peace, justice, and reconciliation in the strife-torn region of Kashmir. His critically acclaimed debut novel 'The Half Mother' was published in 2014 and won Muse India Young Writer Award 2015. The story is woven around the central character Haleema who is a mouthpiece of unending miseries and torture suffered by the people of Kashmir. The title of the book is highly symbolic. It refers to the Kashmiri mothers whose sons disappeared during the insurgency in 1980s & 90s. The term "Half" is taken by Bashir from the term "half widow" which is used for the wives of those men who are disappeared or arrested by the insurgents and defense authorities and there is no record of their whereabouts. The title half-mother is used as a metaphor by Bashir to show the plight of Kashmiri mothers;

So, for all such uncertain cases for women whose husbands have disappeared, we will prefix their status with 'Half', Advocate Farooq explained. Half. The word ringed in Haleema's head. A cold pinch. 'And what about mothers, Farooq sahib?' Haleema asked. 'Are they half-mothers by rule?'... He didn't know how to respond to Haleema. He couldn't be certain what status of victimhood should be attested to her. 'So am I a half-mother?' Haleema repeated (Bashir 142-143).

Through his works, Bashir masterfully blends fiction with stark realism, presenting the harsh realities of life in Kashmir while offering readers a deeply empathetic glimpse into the lived experiences of its people. Bashir's writings serve as a call for peace and justice, echoing the aspirations of countless Kashmiris longing for an end to violence and conflict. He shines a light on the human cost of political turmoil,



delving into the depths of personal suffering, resilience, and the quest for closure in the face of unimaginable challenges.

His novel 'The Half Mother' holds a mirror to the painful experiences of Kashmiri families torn apart by disappearances and violence during the insurgency. By meticulously fictionalizing these heart-wrenching events, Bashir urges readers to confront the horrors of the past while igniting a collective call for accountability and justice. Bashir states in an interview,

I have dedicated this book to all mothers and sons of Kashmir because not only those mothers or wives or sisters or daughters who have lost their sons, husbands, brothers and fathers have been victimized, but I think almost all Kashmiri mothers and sons are indirectly victims of this unfortunate phenomenon of enforced disappearance. Because all mothers in Kashmir fear, they are very worried about the safety of their sons. Making it home in the evening in Kashmir would be a miracle (Zargar).

Through his realistic portrayal of the Kashmiri struggle, Bashir presents the complexities of the conflict in a deeply human and relatable way. He weaves together the lives of ordinary individuals, their hopes, fears, and dreams, creating multidimensional characters that resonate with readers on a profound level. In doing so, Bashir brings authenticity to his fiction, grounding his narratives in truth and making them more accessible to a global audience. He states, "fiction is nothing but extension of the reality. It is the expansion of the truth. It is the truth told more beautifully, creatively, freely, more understandably and patiently" (Zargar).

Bashir's writing is an exercise in empathy, compelling readers to see the world through the eyes of those who have endured suffering and loss. His characters grapple with the moral dilemmas of a war-torn society, and their emotional journey reflects the profound impact of conflict on the human psyche. By presenting reality in a fictionalized manner, Bashir bridges the gap between lived experiences and imagination, fostering understanding and solidarity. In the spirit of reconciliation, Bashir's stories also explore the potential for healing and coming to terms with the past. Bashir's emergence as a prominent voice from Kashmir signifies the power of literature to advocate for peace, justice, and reconciliation.



Through his fictionalized portrayal of harsh realities, he urges readers to engage with the human cost of conflict and envision a future of healing and understanding.

The protagonist of the novel, Haleema, represents all the suffering mothers of Kashmir whose sons disappeared since the conflict started in Kashmir. The central character is used as a mouthpiece by Bashir to expose the reality of fear, pain, violence and humiliation that people had to suffer during the period focusing on mothers of disappeared people. Bashir states in an interview,

The Half Mother is the reality of Kashmir. It's is a realistic novel. While there might be use of fiction in expressing the story, the subject is very much real, something I have closely witnessed. It is the story of a woman who represents thousands of such women in Kashmir who are lonely and suffering in waiting for their loved ones to return (Dispatch).

Bashir's writing serves as a poignant call for peace, and his exploration of Kashmir's complex tapestry through storytelling makes his work a crucial contribution to the ongoing dialogue for a peaceful resolution in the region.

Exploring Trauma, Loss, and Resilience through Haleema's Journey

Haleema, the central character is a complex and deeply conflicted individual whose psychological journey is marked by trauma, loss, and resilience. The journey of Haleema is profoundly marked by maternal love, creating a gripping and emotionally charged narrative that delves into the complexities of human emotions in the face of unimaginable challenges. It shows her pain and trauma, arising from the disappearance of her son in the conflict-ridden region of Kashmir. Losing a child can be so devastating that it feels like a part of the parents' own lives has been taken away. In Haleema's case, the loss of her son, Imran, has a profound impact on her well-being. Her physical health deteriorates, and her mental state worsens over time. She begins to experience auditory hallucinations and develops a belief that inanimate objects communicate with her (Balwan 4992). She seems to relate everything in the universe to her son's absence. With the burden of separation of her son she slips into an illusion and mutters;



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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 (Bashir 5).

Haleema's life plunges into a state of profound grief, anxiety, and despair. It not only represents the suffering of mothers but also the sufferings and misfortunes of the society as a whole; the ugly side of the social and political conflict in which many people were killed and many went missing.

The tragedy of Haleema's life underscores the fact that women serve as soft targets in turmoil-ridden regions, and that any form of violence, assault, or agitation on them works as a system of a political cover-up. As outlined by the lives of Haleema and other women in 'The Half Mother', women are often subjected to the disappearance or killing of their male-folk, resulting in an immense trauma manifested in different spheres of their lives (Jeelani).

The novel portrays the deep emotional wounds inflicted upon her as she grapples with the loss of her father who is killed by army and later her only son who is also whisked up by army under a mistaken suspicion being someone else with the same name; "after her father's murder, fate again plays its dirty role. One fateful night Imran gets arrested by Major Kushwaha during a raid at night and is pushed into oblivion never to return back. He is picked up by army on the pretext that he shares the name with other known militant from his locality Imran Bhat" (Bashir 55).

The trauma she experiences is all-encompassing, impacting her mental and emotional well-being. It manifests as grief, anxiety, and a haunting sense of helplessness. The novel brings forth the rawness of her pain, presenting readers with a visceral understanding of the devastating effects of conflict on an individual's life. "Through one mother, a voice is given to millions of suffering mothers who cannot speak



and fight for themselves. The mothers' silent suffering not only accentuates the anarchy in which they live, but most importantly, it is appropriated to break the silences" (Balwan 4991).

Amidst the pain and trauma, Haleema's maternal love remains an enduring force throughout the novel. Her love for her son becomes a powerful driving factor in her relentless pursuit of truth and justice. It exemplifies the depth and resilience of maternal love, transcending all obstacles and propelling her forward, even in the darkest of moments.

Haleema had never travelled out of Natipora, but for her son, she explores distant areas to almost become a beggar. She does all this despite depleting health and living conditions. She has been suffering from bronchitis for a long time, yet she remains oblivious to her precarious condition. She does not give up even if her body does not sport her. Readers admire Haleema's female courage as she empowers herself within her perilous life's incomplete journey (Balwan 4993).

Her love for her child becomes a source of strength and purpose, compelling her to endure the most difficult circumstances in the quest for answers. As Javeed Ahmad Raina observes in his research, "The Half Mother showcases the actual plight and suffering of Haleema who lost all her dear ones, to the war which benefits none, while being the mute spectator and witness to the events. She, therefore, suffers from both physical tortures as well as mental or psychological agonies which trace and track her always until finally trap her before dying a painful death" (2).

Haleema's journey also portrays her emotional resilience in the face of adversity. Despite the overwhelming pain and trauma, she displays remarkable strength and courage. Her determination to find her missing son showcases her unwavering spirit and her refusal to be silenced by the harsh realities of the conflict. Even in the absence of her son, Haleema's love and connection with him endure, resonating through her relentless search and unwavering hope. The portrayal of this bond underscores the profound impact of maternal love, transcending time and distance, and becoming a central theme that resonates throughout the narrative.



Quest for Justice, Truth and Accountability

The pursuit of justice becomes a driving force in the novel. As Haleema searches for her disappeared son, her journey also becomes a quest for truth and accountability. The novel explores the complexities of seeking justice in a society marked by violence and impunity. Haleema's pursuit reflects the broader pursuit for justice felt by countless families in Kashmir who have suffered loss and human rights violations during the conflict. The character of Haleema is loosely based on the real founder of 'Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons' (APDP), Parveena Ahangar. Her fourteen year old son was picked up by the armed forces along with other boys and never came back. APDP was the result of her struggle to seek justice for her son and hundreds of other Kashmiri people. Bashir mentions in an interview about his meeting with Parveena Ahangar and how he decided to write about the disappearance;

I met Parveena Ahangar. I interviewed her thoroughly but then I decided that it was something very very serious, the issue of disappearances. I thought that every loss in Kashmir was getting lost in the general database of facts and statistics. The loss was, and still is, becoming dangerously normal, that as if people will not die, the way they die here, it will be abnormal. That if you write the stories of the disappeared as small newspaper reports maybe a hundred times over but it would look like a normal daily report, and then it all enters into our psyches. (Zargar)

Haleema's fight has a great semblance to reality, "They wanted to call it the "Association of Relatives of Disappeared Persons" is that ok? Haleema read, fumbling with the English words she had repeatedly revised to enunciate them properly" (Bashir 141). The novel's depiction of Haleema's determination to find answers and confront the injustices of the past serves as a powerful call for accountability and healing. Through Haleema Bashir also gives voice to the oppressed people who are silenced by the dominant hegemonic state discourse on Kashmir. It also questions the misuse of power by armed forces. It challenges and debunks the impunity given to armed forces. The failure of justice system and the special powers of armed forces can be seen in the response of a police officer when Haleema tries to file a complaint for her missing son;



We cannot lodge an FIR against the army... Our job is now confined to identifying, carrying and delivering dead bodies to their families. This is the job of the police now... Sister, in your case, the only way is to approach the army itself. They take everyone they pick to their local camps. (Bashir, 63)

In search of truth Haleema goes beyond her own limits, “She does not leave any stone unturned to search for her missing son. She does not feel traumatised though her faith in Law and justice is shattered. Her indefatigable spirit and rebellious nature of tracking her son make her a strong woman... into a worrier.. from being simple homely woman to a woman with an iron-rich in search of any piece of information about her missing son” (Bashir 169). Haleema’s journey highlights the issue of complete silence of government and media over the Kashmir issues and especially on the disappeared people. By giving us the account of Haleema’s victimization, Shahnaz Bashir has actually highlighted it as the reality of Kashmir. The end of Haleema’s story is heart breaking,

she goes pillar to post and visits police station to police station, jail to jail, approached to politicians, and even sold all her property, but every effort went fruitless. She becomes a psychiatric patient and... dies with the unfulfilled desire and cries on her death bed only three words ‘*Imran Saeba? Aakha* (Imran. Have you come?’ which symbolises the motherly love of those mother’s whose ones are disappeared and are showing their photos but don’t know whether they are alive or dead. (Itoo 1046)

The novel offers a glimpse of the lives of Kashmiri people trapped in sociopolitical conflict. Bashir has given voice to the jurisdictional crisis of Kashmir. He has beautifully presented the plight of all the people who lost their loved ones and their endless craving for their return. It ridicules the failure of the justice system that is impotent to provide justice to thousands of disappeared cases like Imran. It also questions the accountability of justice system, people in power and nation as a whole.

The author has dealt with several aspects of life in Kashmir including the policies of the government, the army’s inhumane rule, the torture, the helplessness of people, and the media that is dominated by the State. This is a story that Kashmiris know. Every



corner of the Valley has a story. Bashir has tried to show how it feels for a mother to lose her only son, something she never imagined would happen in her own lifetime (Shah).

The novel is fictional representation of thousands of true stories of ailing mothers who suffered, fought, struggled but did not give up.

Conclusion

Through its exploration of loss, resilience, and the pursuit of justice, 'The Half Mother' presents a raw and emotional portrayal of the human experience amidst conflict. Shahnaz Bashir's powerful storytelling immerses readers into the psychological and emotional turmoil of Haleema's journey, allowing them to empathize with the profound pain and determination of those affected by conflict-related tragedies. The novel's thematic depth resonates with readers on a universal level, drawing attention to the human cost of violence and the enduring power of hope and resilience in the quest for justice and healing.

Ultimately, the novel stands as a haunting and traumatic tale of a mother's endless wait for justice which gives voice to not only the victims of Kashmir conflict but all the victims of conflict zones across the globe. The novel's emotional depth and its portrayal of the human capacity to endure in the face of unimaginable challenges resonate with readers, inviting them to reflect on the enduring power of hope and the pursuit of justice in times of profound darkness. It humanizes the pain and sufferings of the people who are still waiting for their loved ones. Lastly, it also shows the transformative power of storytelling to create a dialogue and healing and foster empathy for the victims.

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