

Effect of Conflict Upon Women: A Study of Shahnaz Bashir's Fiction

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Abstract

History is witness to the fact that an armed conflict has a very devastating impact upon individuals. People in a conflict zone suffer both physically as well as mentally. The ongoing catastrophic conflict in Kashmir has touched the lives of all the people in some way or the other and has wreaked a great havoc in the lives of Kashmiri people in general and Kashmiri women in particular. Kashmiri women have always been the main victims to Army's oppression and atrocities in the form of rape, abduction, disappearances, murders, widowhood, and what not. They are made to suffer and endure the pain and anguish of the kidnapping, disappearing, and killing of their beloved ones- husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons by Indian security forces. Shahnaz Bashir has endeavored to portray the pain and suffering of the Kashmiri women. This article will make an attempt to show how these women suffer the pain and agony gifted to them by the armed conflict.

Key words: Disappearance, Conflict, Oppression, Trauma, Kashmiri, Rape, Suffering, Pain

Introduction

The implacable and unrelenting conflict in Kashmir dates back to the year 1989 and has badly left very harsh scars upon the people of entire valley. Gone are the days when writers used to write about the beauty and charm of this heaven on earth. Kashmiri writers writing in English no longer write about the soothing beauty of the valley, the beautiful mountains, charming streams, graceful gardens, sparkling flowers, and fascinating meadows. The armed conflict has wreaked such havoc in the lives of Kashmiris that these writers cannot wear the cosmetic faces of evading the ground reality, thus fairly write about the bitter experiences encountered by the Kashmiris on daily basis. Writers like Mirza Waheed, Basharat Peer, Shahnaz Bashir, and many others expound the grim reality in their fiction, which has helped to put Kashmiri literature on international track. Shahnaz Bashir has two books to his credit- *The Half Mother*, a novel and *Scattered Souls*, a short story collection. This paper will attempt to argue how the armed conflict has resulted in making the lives of Kashmiri women miserable. The paper will narrate the life and suffering of Haleema, the central figure in *The Half Mother* and her unending struggle in the first part and tragedy of some other women characters in *Scattered Souls* in the second.

The Half Mother is the debut novel of Shahnaz Bashir and is one of the important Kashmiri narratives in English, portraying the agony and traumatic condition of a young mother, Haleema, whose father is ruthlessly killed by the Indian Army and son abducted by the troopers only to disappear into the void world of ‘disappeared’ and ‘missing’ people. Bashir tells the heartbreaking story of Haleema, her battle for life, the mysterious disappearance of her son, Imran, which leads to a dark and gloomy story of her unending quest to find her son, only to end in her own end at the end. The novelist portrays the sad plight of the Kashmiri women through the character of Haleema and one of the thousands of torn and unfortunate mothers, whose children have disappeared in the dense fog of disappeared and missing people, where there is no trace of their location till date. These mothers are referred to as ‘Half Mothers’ because there is no idea whether their children are alive or dead or whether they will return back or not. Haleema tragically asks Advocate Farooq when he introduces the word ‘half’: “‘And what about mothers, Farooq sahib? Haleema asked. ‘Are they half mothers by rule?’” She goes on to say, “‘So am I a half mother?’” (*Half Mother*143)

Haleema has suffered indiscriminately. She tragically performs different roles- the role of an orphan, a divorced woman, and most pathetically, the role of a half mother. She finds no time to mourn the death of her father as her son is taken by the troopers very soon after her father’s killing. She lost her mother at the age of eight and was forced to leave her studies. Her being the only child of her father resulted in her husband’s living in her home rather than his after marriage. Her marriage with the medical assistant culminated only after three months because his affair with a nurse at the nursing home. After the insurgency started in 1989, uncertainty, gloominess, darkness, and confusion prevailed everywhere. Her Ab Jaan was killed by Major Kushwaha. Soon after Imran was taken by the troopers for never to return back. Days passed by and Haleema could find no trace of Imran. She finds herself in trauma. In the grief of her son, she murmurs:

*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. (Half Mother 5)*

Another lady, Rukhsana, Shafiqa’s daughter also suffers and was beaten by the troopers. “Then Shafiqa’s daughter Rukhsana became the first woman from the neighbourhood to be beaten, in her own compound. Her parents were tied with ropes and made to see their daughter being stripped by a trooper.” (*Half Mother* 32)

On the death of Ab Jaan, Haleema was overwhelmed with grief and she cried: “*Kuni kahn chhu na? Anybody? Help! Please don’t kill him! Please!*” (*Half Mother* 49) The spectators at the scene are not allowed to come nearer to the spot. Mustering some courage, a woman there came through the columns of troops and cried: “Let me give some water to him. He is dying. What kind of people are you? Don’t you have any pity?” (*Half Mother* 49) This shows the extreme callousness of the Indian troopers. Haleema was not able to believe her father’s killing. She screamed: “Please don’t cry. My Ab Jaan is alive. Isn’t he? Isn’t he? *He is alive*. Why are you all crying?” (*Half Mother* 50) She in deep sorrow laments and cries further: “I don’t believe this, my father isn’t dead! Isn’t this a lie, my father? Your death has battered me, my father!” (*Half Mother* 52) However, this was not the end. Tragedy after tragedy befalls upon Haleema. The kidnapping of her son by Major Kushwaha breaks her in every way. Dr Ihsan Malik in this regard writes:

Imran’s arrest makes the beginning of the most agonizing phase of Haleema’s life, the repercussions of which take a heavy toll on her physical and psychological health. She now embarks on a long, interminable, and demoralizing journey. A journey of the unavailing endeavours of trying to find out the whereabouts of her only son. She moves from one army camp to another looking for her only son but no officer or cop at any of the camps claims to have seen him, she runs to the official electronic media to request them to bring her plight to the notice of the authorities only to come across a few abrasive men whose harsh words push her further down the vortex of despair (qtd. in Dar 47).

She breaks down fully at her son’s abduction and she requests the major: ‘I beg you, *balaai lagai*, he is innocent!’ (*Half Mother* 56) The major seems to have least affected by her pleas, thus revealing his cruelty and callousness. She proceeds on to request more: ‘Please, brother, I have no one except him. Leave him for God’s sake!’ (*Half Mother* 57) Haleema is subjected to believe the undeniable and unavoidable truth of her son’s disappearance. She screams and all the neighbours come to soothe her tormented heart.

“In a few minutes the whole neighbourhood was shaken awake. Shafiq pulled a stupefied Haleema into her lap. ‘*Gaed ha kaertham, patro!* I am a perforated soul, my son’, Haleema muttered in a singsong voice. Two frozen trails of tears glistened on her cheeks.” (*Half Mothers* 57)

In her subsequent journey, she makes all the possible efforts and leaves no stone unturned to trace her son. She like all other victims keeps on waiting and waiting. Shahnaz in this regard writes: “Yet, a daughter still waits for her father to wed her off. A wife searches for her husband. And a mother still pines for her son and waits for him to be a pallbearer when she dies” (*Half Mother* 177). The author wants to emphasize how Kashmiri daughters, wives, and mothers continue to suffer due to the relentless conflict.

Haleema sells her cow and jewellery to get some money to locate her son. Her separation with her son breaks her completely and she in trauma begins to talk to her clothes and the walls. She goes everywhere, searching every camp, prison and interrogation centre only to come back dejected and hopeless. She visits the radio station, T.V station, newspaper offices, but finds nobody to listen to her wails. The only person sympathizing with and hearing her pleas is Izhar, the journalist who helps her in giving various clues about her missing son, hence helps her in sustaining a hope against hopelessness. Haleema keeps on searching and waiting for her son till the very end. Her physical and mental health collapses and she dies in a state of insanity. The last words she could breathe were addressed to her son: “*Imran Saeba? Aakha? Imran. Have you come? (Half Mother 179)* and thus ends the story of an unfortunate mother who suffers for none of her faults.

Scattered Souls, published in 2016 is a short story collection consisting of 13 short stories depicting the misery and pain of Kashmiri people. The collection portrays some women characters and their endless sufferings. The conflict has left women physically and psychologically distressed. Violence on Kashmiri women takes different forms: they are bruised, maimed, beaten, tortured, mutilated, molested, and raped. The story “Psychosis” depicts the psychological and traumatic condition of Sakeena, whose husband has disappeared. She is told to offer an amount of one-lac rupees and herself too in bed by the police personnel if she wants to have any clues about her husband. As the story proceeds, she is gang raped by the army men resulting in her mental disorder and admission in the Psychiatric Diseases’ hospital. On being asked by Dr Imtiyaz about her mental stability, Sakeena replies: “The nightmares have become infrequent. Now I don’t see my body rolling down the riverbank. Nor does my bloody shalwaar appear. But the smell of sperm barely leaves me. Even pleasantly scented things smell dirty to me” (*Scattered Souls 55*). Sakeena was gang raped in front of her daughter, Insha. The author describes the scene:

“The men 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. Insha shrieked, calling out to the neighbours for help. One trooper lifted Insha by the neck of her shirt and took her away” (*Scattered Souls 62*).

She begins to hate her own son, Bilal, born of rape by the Indian troopers. She went to every Army Camp, jail, and interrogation centre to search for her husband, Ghulam Mohiuddeen. The story “Theft” chronicles the story of Insha, Sakeena’s daughter, who is humiliated and forced to take up many filthy jobs and accused of stealing, thus portraying the effects of insurgency upon the female children of those ever involved in militancy. She is insulted badly: “Now you wish you died the day you were born. Or the day you were thrown out of school. Or the day your father vanished. Or the day your mother was raped. Or the day your house was dismantled on the riverside” (*Scattered Souls 71*).

The tragedy of Ayesha in “The Woman Who Became Her Own Husband” is very depressing and saddening. She and Tariq were a loving couple. Her ecstatic married life ended with the killing of her husband in the army firing at Residency Road Srinagar after an army camp was attacked by militants. Ayesha loses her mental balance and suffers from psychological disorder, copies her husband’s activities after his death and becomes her own husband. The author describes the heartbreaking condition of Ayesha and Tariq’s mother through the words of the shopkeeper in the story:

And it was then I spotted Ayesha. Surprisingly, she looked normal. I couldn’t believe my eyes. The neighbourhood women, my wife, Ayesha’s sister and her sisters-in-law were begging her to cry, but she didn’t react. Finally, I found Tariq’s mother; she was bareheaded, with not a trace of tear in her eyes, but only wailing. And her wailing sounded more like grumbling. There was a fresh wound on her forehead, a slanting slash surrounded by a crust of gore” (*Scattered Souls* 179).

She was brought back from Mattan to Srinagar to see if the flat and its memories would provide a relief to her traumatic condition and bring her back to her stability. Her psychological deterioration is further depicted in the shopkeeper’s words: “Another day, I found her dressed in Tariq’s navy-blue suit, smoking a cigarette just like him, wearing his pair of brogues, carrying his leather briefcase, limping down the lane for ‘office’” (*Scattered Souls* 182).

Scattered Souls sketches the real picture of torture inflicted upon Kashmiris in general and Kashmiri women in particular. Dr Ihsan Malik writes about the book:

Like in his last book, *The Half Mother*, Shahnaz has made artful use of the tragic happenings of last two and half decades, which now form a part of the Kashmiri collective conscience, to carve out another engrossing work. Shahnaz has once again allowed reality to rub shoulders with fiction allowing his artistic prowess to facilitate a coalescence of the two into an organic and connected whole (Ihsan 2016).

Conclusion

The author has fictionalized the bitter realities of disappearances, innocent killings, rapes, abduction, violence, oppression, and victimization of women by the conflict in Kashmir. The author has made a valuable attempt to portray the harsh conditions women are subjected to face due to the ongoing conflict. His fiction clearly delineates the oppression upon Kashmiri women by military atrocities. The author through different women characters has clearly tried to universalize the pain and sufferings of Kashmiri women. His works are a vivid portrayal of pain, anguish, torment, and agony Kashmiri women endure in the face of turmoil.

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