

Shahnaz Bashir's *The Half Mother*: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract:

Shahnaz Bashir's *The Half Mother* depicts the hardships of Haleema, a Kashmiri woman who lost her father and son to the political unrest in the valley. Her innocent son, Imran was taken into custody, and her father was shot dead by the army. The disappearance of Imran is a significant blow to Haleema's hopes for a better future. The narration traces her journey in search of her missing son from one prison to another and from one place to another. Lives of many people from Kashmir get mirrored in her story. Later, in the novel, we see the families of people who went missing after they were taken up into custody by the army, uniting and trying to make their voices heard. As novel proceeds, we witness the transformation of Haleema from a helpless victim to an active decision-maker. This paper is an attempt to show how Haleema's suffering becomes an embodiment of the suffering of the people of Kashmir living under the unbearable shadows of oppression.

Keywords: Struggle, custody, political, unrest, army, oppression.

Introduction:

The writer of the novel *The Half Mother* is Shahnaz Bashir. For this novel, he was awarded with the Muse India Young Writer award in 2015. Some of the other notable works by him are *A Clutch of Indian Masterpieces: Extraordinary Short Stories from the 19th Century to the Present* (2014), *Of Occupation and Resistance- Writings from Kashmir* (2013), *Scattered Souls* (2016) etc. He was born and brought up in Kashmir. He studied journalism from University of Kashmir and won the gold medal for the same. In 2007 he was awarded with the Shamim Ahmad Shamim Memorial Kashmir Times Award. At present he teaches 'Narrative journalism and conflict reporting' at the Central University of Kashmir. Regarding this novel Bashir said, "In this strife-torn valley, I have always been tormented by feelings of indefinite and eternal uncertainty. *The Half Mother* is outcome of those feelings" (quoted from Goodreads.com). Mirza Waheed, also a renowned writer from Kashmir and author of *The Collaborator* wrote in his review of this novel, "With delicately drawn characters, Shahnaz Bashir tells the heartbreaking story of one woman's battle for life, dignity, and justice" (ibid).

Textual Analysis:

The novel is set in the area of Natipora, Srinagar, and depicts the struggles of Haleema, a Kashmiri woman who lost her father and son to the political unrest in the valley. Her innocent

son, Imran was taken into custody and her father shot dead by the army. Haleema's trials are already hinted in the description about hens in the beginning of novel, "The mother hens looked angry and chuffed from motherhood. They raised their quills and pecked at the hands that touched their children. But they were helpless against the eagles that dived and stole their chicks" (17). This pain and suffering of not finding a voice and an outlet turned into the feeling of self-hatred, "She woke up hating herself, remembering the pleasure of the dreamless sleep she had before dinner. She hated having to believe she existed, to feel she was conscious. She hated the smell that sleep brought. She wished she were dead" (1). This novel follows Haleema and people with similar story as her in their struggle to find their muffled voice. Also as novel proceeds we witness transformation of Haleema from a helpless victim to an active decision maker. In political terms, when a husband goes missing, half is used as prefix with wife's name in the missing report. The title *The Half Mother* refers to Haleema and when she calls herself half-mother in the novel then it is her taking a political identity.

The narration traces her journey in search for her missing son from one prison to another and from one place to another. Lives of many people from Kashmir get mirrored in her story. Later, in the novel we see families of people who went missing after they were taken up into custody by the army, uniting and trying to make their voices heard.

In the opening of the novel we see Haleema repeating words of hope given by Imam to her-self and tries to find God in the sky but only finds emptiness and reminder of her loss. Even while doing her daily chores her eyes rests on the door anticipating the return of her son, "Then once again, she was back on the ledge, now studying the frayed edges of her dupatta that badly needed washing. Her eyes did not leave her wooden gate" (4). The futility of this hope is expressed near the end of the novel. Izhar, a helpful BBC reporter fixes a meeting of Haleema with the newly appointed chief minister of Kashmir. Haleema meets him as representative of the association of Family Members of Missing People and pleads him to get them justice and be reunited with their lost ones. To this he responds that it could have been that their relatives might have crossed the border. Haleema says that if this were to be a case then they would not be making rounds of court and jail to find their loved ones. Even if their loved ones were killed right in front of them by the army then after mourning they might have lived a life of no hope or expectation. But the fact their family members are missing, it has brought longings with it which is "An eternal torture. It has not abated for a second. It kills us every day and resurrects us every morning to kill us again" (151). To their suffering the chief minister insensitively remarked that his wife and son lives in America and his daughters are married here and there, therefore his life is same as theirs.

In her loneliness Haleema was haunted by memories. Narration of the novel from here proceeds to follow her memory. Father of Haleema, Ghulam Rasool Joo juggled through various odd jobs such as cart-puller, gardener, caretaker, construction worker, sales man, candy maker, tailor and cook before settling to become a shop owner. In the area of Natipora he was called by the name AbJaan by everyone. He was the first to bring a 'Hercules bicycle' there. It had a headlight and a bucket in the front. AbJaan would take Haleema on rides on the same bicycle while telling her the stories from *Gulrez* and *Gulistaan-Bostana*, which are Kashmiri folktales on the way.

When Haleema was eight years old her mother died of tuberculosis. In beginning, Haleema continued to go to school but when household chores began to fall apart then Haleema gave up her education in order to look after the house. The house chores completed by her were:

“Haleema devoted herself fully to household chores then: she milked the cows, winnowed the rice, washed, cleaned, mopped, swept the leaf-strewn compound with besom and pounded on red chillies in a large stone mortar with a wooden pestle taller than her. Slowly, the chores became a habit; the habit seeped into her and then became a part of her being.” (10)

Here we can see that roles for girls and Women are prioritized to be maintenance of household. Shafiq, a woman who lived in the neighbor helped Haleema in learning these tasks.

Natipora’s location has been specified to be “three kilometres away from Lal Chowk, the centre of Srinagar, to the south. The locality grew sparser and finally transformed into vegetable farms, paddy fields, bush lands, poplar grooves, and plum orchards” (11). Haleema with her father lived at the periphery of Natipora in a three-storey house. There were different kinds of trees such as “Russian poplars”, “horse-chestnut” and “acacia trees” around the house (11). There was also a cowshed and chicken coop near house. The custom was that if the only child of the parents was a girl then the husband of that girl would stay with the girl’s family after marriage. Haleema was married to a medical assistant working in a nursing home in Srinagar. When she found out he was having an affair with a nurse working there, she divorced him after three months of the marriage. This reveals Haleema had some agency of her own. It is she who made the decision to divorce her husband. After one month of her divorce when she began to have bouts of vomiting she went on her to a maternity hospital, Lal Ded Hospital, without telling her father. She gave birth to a boy at her home. Instantly she found in him her bundle of joy, “Ignoring the stark similarities between him and his father, Haleema passionately and desperately lied to herself. She dismissed the similitude and likened the boy to herself, declaring that he was part of her being” (16). Despite Haleema’s affection for the new born child, it was AbJann who gave the name to the young boy and it was Imran. After AbJann death and Imran’s abduction, Haleema becomes a very active agent. While her earlier forms of protest against army were sobbing and pleading, near the end it becomes more active. These will be discussed later in the paper.

AbJann made a seat for Imran on his bicycle and brought him various toys and doll. It is interesting to note that AbJann brought him a doll. Imran loved his studies. After completing a class he would be excited for new books of next session. The little boy against address would write that he is the “citizen of the whole world” (19). In the place of name he would write “Not important” (19). As a part of school uniform the students were made to wear a colored badge reading ‘I love Kashmir’. Outside the school there was a small shop of Aziz where Aziz sold various kinds of cheap candies. Students would crowd this shop before the school began and after it closed for the day.

The novel records the turbulence which started from 1987 in Kashmir and how it impacted various lives of people living in Kashmir. In 1987, Muslim United Front (MUF), a political party of Kashmir planned to contest the democratic elections of 1987. Leaders of various socio-

political and religious organizations were its members. Some of the notable members were Syed Salahuddin and Syed Ali Shah Geelani. Many of the members were imprisoned by Indian government and speculations were high that elections were rigged. This escalated the tension in Kashmir. The novel shows how so many lives got disrupted and interrupted. In the dark nights AbJaan would read stories from Imran's English reader in the light of kerosene lantern. While AbJaan would be reading stories to Imran, Haleema would be spinning wool on a wheel near the clay oven. Here we can notice the gender discrimination where the position of women is confined to the kitchen.

On January night that year AbJaan returned home holding an Urdu newspaper under his arms. He was in sour mood and sat silently with solemn expression. He declares that "The war has begun" and newspaper described a gun incident in Srinagar where "two masked men had shot a police constable at point-blank range and run away on their scooter. 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" (23). AbJaan then finds an old transistor and fixed its wave scale on Urdu BBC channel. The news was confirmed there too. A possible malfunction of the machine is interrupted as deliberate interruption by the Government by AbJaan. Here the writer draws our attention to the fact that people of Kashmir had started to become suspicious of government more and more, "AbJaan told Haleema that the frequency interruptions were an attempt by the government to censor the BBC" (23).

Soon the presence of army in Kashmir increased and they began to make bunkers around the place, "One day while on his way to school, Imran saw several men in khaki fatigues at the local Sufi shrine shoveling sand into white nylon bags; some of them were stacking the stuffed bags one over the other" (24). The narrative here marks the change in the atmosphere of Natipora. Bunkers and gun wielding army men were a new sight to the people living there. The scene takes a communal turn when 'OM' sign is painted on the entrance of bunker by army officials.

The following night AbJaan kept on smoking and Imran was afraid to ask him to read the stories. Thus we see disruption in the routine of people. Winters advanced and slight snowfall turned into heavy blizzard. Imran wondered as to why the army men had come here to suffer in cold, "*Why have these men come to die in the cold?*" (24). One day after heavy snowfall, AbJaan was clearing the area in front of his house when two troopers came to him demanding shovel from him, "One of them, a rifle slinging from his shoulder and a crooked forefinger on the trigger, told AbJaan brusquely, 'Give us your shovel'" (26). Imran was also there to help AbJaan remove the snow. AbJaan threw the shovel in their direction and they walked away taking it. They were building bunker right in front of their home. Observing this AbJaan was filled with both anger and fear. He asked them to build bunker somewhere else as women of his house would be unable to move around freely outside of their home in outsider's presence. In response the trooper pushed him away with the butt of his rifle and he fell on the ground. Enraged Imran hit the trooper on his legs and asked for the shovel back. By then the people too had gathered around and Haleema too came out. People protested and Haleema cried for Imran. On Imam's persuasion, army men agreed to not make bunker in the neighborhood. Thereafter:

“Imran stood frozen, dazed, gazing with rage at everything around him. Everything—the gate; the path, now cleared of the snow; the shovel, now returned by the trooper; his mittens; AbJaan’s *karakuli*; the poplars; the falling snow—seemed to applaud him for what he had done.” (27)

Inside the home no one spoke anything, “as if in mourning. No one spoke for hours, not knowing what to talk about” (27). AbJaan was smoking nonstop, Imran while sitting in the corner recalled the incident over and over again, “The memory of AbJaan lying in the snow with his *karakuli* tilted over his eyes brought tears to his eyes. Everything in his room looked distorted, yet clearer through the tears” (27).

As a teenager Imran grew into a tall and handsome man, “In a strange way he seemed more of a husband than son to Haleema” and while speaking to him “She would feel as if she spoke to someone older than her. Someone firmer, stronger than her. He seemed like her protector now” (28).

On Sunday Imran would help his mother in her wool work and other home chores. Haleema would save money for Imran’s education. Haleema was once a local healer in her neighborhood but then her own health began to fall and she complained of breathlessness which later escalated to feelings of suffocation. Doctor diagnosed it as Bronchitis, “When Imran and AbJaan helped a staggering Haleema out of the doctor’s clinic, she slouched and rasped hard, huffing, gasping and panting rhythmically. Her cough was relentless and she tottered to sit down after every ten paces” (30). At symbolic level, the local healer, Haleema, herself turning ill hints at ongoing depletion and degradation of local community and culture.

From here Imran took upon himself to perform most of the household duties. Before going to the school he would first serve *nuun chai* with bread crumbs in it to Haleema and after coming from school he would wash Haleema’s handkerchief dirtied with phlegm. He would clean the entire home and cook meals. AbJaan too began to help by taking care of cattle.

In 1990, the situation took turn for worse:

“As the insurgency in the valley intensified, the government resigned, paving the way for governor’s rule. Tears, blood, death and war followed, as did curfews, crackdowns, raids, encounters, killings, bunkers, an exodus of people, burning markets, schools and buildings.” (32)

Young talented boys turned radicals and went to Pakistan. Among first of them was Shaheen Bhat who was also known as ‘Natipora’s Einstein’ because of his excellent skills in science and math. The other was Imran Bhat who was an incredible football player. Many youths died of bullet wounds. The first is said to be Shabeer Ahmad who was gunned down with twenty-three rounds of bullets in his chest for waving Pakistani flag. Many girls and women were sexually assaulted. Author mentions Rukhsana to be the first one as she was beaten and stripped naked in her own compound in front of her own parents. Farmer’s paddy were burnt when they did not reveal the whereabouts of their ‘radical’ sons.

This violence gave rise to processions on road where many women, men, children, old and young people marched raising the slogan of ‘*Azaadi*’ (freedom).

The novel also grapples with the question of history. Imran is unable to understand why history of Kashmir, a place where they were born and are living is not taught and instead histories of far remote and bygone places are taught such as ‘Mesopotamia’, ‘Indus Valley’ and ‘Harappa’ in their school. On receiving punishment by teacher for raising this question, Imran thought that Kashmir must not had a history and that’s why teacher got angry. AbJaan responded to this incident by saying that, “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. Our own history. Except the fact that it has never seen the light of day” (34). According to AbJaan it is important to one’s history in order to know and learn about oneself.

Some of the young Kashmiri militant youths had organized a party, Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) around this time. Army was in constant watch of the members of this party to arrest them. Attacks on army troopers were supposedly carried out by the members of this party.

Processions against the army had a pull to it which was not always logical and reasonable. Sometimes without understanding it people especially children would be attracted towards it. Writer reveals that these processions can falsely mobilize people who does not have clear picture through the description of an incident where Imran was attracted towards the procession and drawn towards participating in it, “Everybody around him repeated the slogan the procession was shouting. The words began to form on his lips too: *Azaadi!*” (38). He began to imitate the leaders by raising fists in the air and repeating their slogans for *Azaadi*.

Because of crowded and frequent processions curfew was imposed. Orders were given that if anyone was seen outside during the duration of curfew then that person must be shot on sight. Duration of curfew was not specified and for that reason everyone was in panic specifically because of limited food supply.

This began to have an impact on children. They would now draw guns instead of usual flowers and trees. During the curfews, education got disrupted. The game of hide and seek took a new form of ‘Militant-Military’. Children formed themselves into these two groups and would attack each other with wooden guns and then would hide from each other, “Imran always chose to become a ‘militant’, and with his wooden gun he would suddenly ambush a ‘patrolling party’ and then run away to hide in an empty house which belonged to a Kashmiri Pandit and would wait to be spotted and killed or be picked up by the ‘military’” (41). Innocent games of children turned into imaginative bloody play.

The other curfew lasted for two hundred and seventy days. One evening when Imran was playing cricket with his friend, Tickoo, a Kashmiri Pandit who owned the home next to Imran’s came to collect his leftovers with army standing as guard. Suddenly fire broke from an alley and rounds were fired on the both sides. Children ran into different directions. The image of “[a] broken plastic chair that doubled as the wicket remained in the crossfire, in the middle of the deserted road” (43) juxtaposed with image of gun shots being fired and blood stains on road reveals the

tragic nature of this violence. It also reveals the disruption of safe place in which children grew up in Kashmir in the past.

One of the gun shot hit the truck driver on his neck and the truck rammed into a wall crushing a trooper. Once the attackers left, troopers dragged Tickoo out of the truck and beat him relentlessly. Further they set fire to all his things. People in the neighboring houses ran away from their houses to escape the fury of troopers and those who could not escape were beaten, "The angry troops began to indiscriminately beat those trapped inside their homes. They sprinkled gunpowder over the shops and houses on either side of the road and set them on fire" (44). The army wanted to know the identity of attackers and people did not know who attacked the troopers.

When they came searching at the front of the home of AbJaan, Haleema hid herself under thick mattress. AbJaan had put a lock on the front gate earlier on and had entered the home from the back door. Both were trying to be completely still and were worried about whereabouts of Imran. While Haleema bit on the end of her scarf to muffle her coughing, AbJaan, "He picked up his Quran from the niche and hugged it tightly. Tears streamed down his wrinkled cheeks and disappeared into his grizzled, short beard" (45). When the troopers banged on the door, AbJaan lost control over his bladder and fainted. This reveals the fear with which people are forced to live. On retaining consciousness AbJaan looked for any sign of injury on his body. Finding himself to be unhurt he went to the window to check on troopers. By then they had left. He went downstairs looking for Haleema. Finding her buried under blankets and short of breathe he gave her three pumps of inhaler and said, "Don't worry Haleemai, they are gone. Breathe...long...longer...Good!" (46). The stifled breathing of Haleema symbolically reveals the loss of freedom and feeling of powerlessness felt by people in Kashmir as they turned into subjects of occupying power. After few hours after dawn, Imran too returned. AbJaan found out that his shop had been burnt.

The next morning patrolling party with a Major came to do another enquiry. People were again beaten and troubled. When they came in front of AbJaan house, they called male members to come out. When AbJaan came out the major asked him where he had hid the shooters. Major called him and all Kashmiris 'sisterfuckers' and accused him of hiding the shooters in his orchard. After hitting AbJaan he turned to Imran and slapped him. Imran had come out too with Haleema to protect AbJaan. When AbJaan argued with troopers that they were harassing civilians then he is threatened with a threat to shut up otherwise he would be killed. Faced with this threat he does not to comply to their demands and calls this kind of life unbearable to live, he is taken on the road outside his home and shot down, "Haleema frenetically slapped her face and her chest and pulled her hair. Blood began to gurgle out of AbJaan's throat. She fainted" (49).

Crowd tried to intervene but the Major pointed gun at them and stopped them from coming any close. All the women in the neighborhood started to wail and beat their chest. An old woman took Imran and Haleema to her own lawn and their young boys consoled Imran and women tended to Haleema. Major Kushwahawas is interested in setting an example. He neither allowed people to give some water to the dying AbJaan and neither let them drape his body. He denied all

their requests while saying, “No, let everyone see this! See what happens when you rebel against us” (50). Haleema was in the state of shock. She asked women around her to not cry and could not believe that AbJaan was dead “The skin beneath her throat was red from chest-thumping. Her cheeks had the imprints of her own slaps. Her hair fell loose over her face. She laughed, and then abruptly ran towards a wall barefoot to bang her head” (50).

One day troopers came again looking for Imran. He was confused and scared as to why army was looking for him. So was Haleema. When they caught hold of Imran, he screamed for his mother to save him. Haleema while crying pleaded to them to let Imran go as he was her only child, “Haleema tightly clasped Imran’s hand and grappled with it; she was dragged with him as they wrested him away. Her shawl fell off. Her plastic sandals slipped out” (56). Haleema tried chasing the Gypsy in which Imran was being taken but “Haleema collapsed on the dirt road, wailing, barefooted, bare-headed” (57). Shafiqa came outside of her home and propped up Haleema in her lap. Some other women picked up her shawl and slippers. Imam decided to wait for Imran’s return till dawn. All night Haleema was haunted by countless fears, “Haleema imagined the troops kicking Imran with their hard, white jackboots. She imagined him crying for her help—calling her name. Asking for water. “*Water! I couldn’t even get him a tumbler of water! But how could I?*” (58). Two women stayed with her all night. Here we can see community intervening to help the victims but as novels proceeds such interventions keeps on decreasing because on intervention they came at receiving end of trooper’s violence.

After countless requests and visits to SSP, she was allowed to go to army hospital and identify her son from those admitted there. She saw various amputated young boys being treated there, “She surveyed the boys whose kidney had failed. They had been trampled over by cement rollers” (80). All had undergone the torture of interrogation. They were handcuffed to their hospital bed. But she did not find Imran there.

Haleema was unable to sleep all night. At early dawn after morning namaz, alone she went to the house of Imam. He observed that, “Haleema looked weary and tired. Her hair was loose, her dupatta was wound carelessly around her head, and her eyes were swollen and moist” (61). In her haphazard condition she had worn her *pheran* inside out. Her right foot was injured and was bleeding. Imam decided to go to police station along with Haleema and Shafiqa. They found a police constable there. The police could not file FIR against the army. He suggested them to approach the army itself. In the way they saw a young boy reading result of class tenth from a gazette. Haleema walked up to him and asked for her son’s result. After knowing that her son had been picked up by the army, everyone grew sympathetic. The young boy found his result by looking in names section which took him greater efforts. He told Haleema that Imran had passed with the distinction and also refused to take any money for telling the result. We can see here society’s role in healing process.

On reaching the camp, a soldier secretly told Imam that Imran had been taken to another camp. Haleema decided to sit on dharna in order to protest against the army. She sat on the middle of road near shrine. Many young men and people too joined her. The traffic stopped and a battalion of army came to disperse the crowd with guns and sticks. For many days Haleema

with many people sat in the middle of road and every day they were beaten and forced to leave. When Muhammad Shafi, neighbor of Imam went to meet his detained son at camp named 'Malaysia' he found a young boy who befitted the description of Imran. On reaching that camp the major there squarely refused the fact that anyone had been picked up by the army from Natipora and even said that he knew no one named Major Aman Kushwaha. While leaving the camp a trooper seemed to be trying to tell her something but soon another trooper came and the communication fell off. They waited for the first trooper to come outside and tell them something but no one came out. From then Haleema began to sit outside that camp to catch the glimpse of the trooper who tried to help her and she stopped only when she got to know that the whole battalion has been shifted from there. From here it is clear that writer is not trying to present all troopers with one broad stroke but is opening a space where some troopers are sympathetic to people in Kashmir and are caught in power system. Thus there are other victims too, the army troopers who don't support the violence against people in Kashmir but are forced to comply.

Haleema sold all the precious belongings in her home. People would occasionally come to console her but soon she would be left alone. In that condition she would talk to walls or belongings of Imran and wail, "She would slowly run her fingers over his [Imran] scribbles and feel the letters, smelling the pages while riffling through them. Again and again. She had carefully ironed and folded his school uniform..." (69). This image reveals the human condition of mothers and family members of those who went missing in army custody. In order to take her voice to the masses she decided to go to the radio station. The employee there took her to the news producer. The producer told her that the broadcast could not carry narratives such as that of her. He encourages her to go to the newspaper people or TV station. Haleema decided to go to the TV station as it was nearby. There she found a woman who gave direction to the office of news producer but also told her frankly that meeting with him would go futile as producer was hesitant to take up stories as her's.

From there she decided to go to the office of Urdu and English newspapers which were at Press Enclave. She decided to go to BBC's Srinagar office as this was the only name which she knew. Recently a bomb had been sent to its office in a parcel. It claimed life of one reporter. Izhar was in charge of matters there. He had covered the story of AbJaan's murder. He was now willing to take on the story of Imran. Izhar also arranged for Haleema's story to be printed on the front page of a local daily. He also suggested her to go to court and offered the help of a friend of him who was an advocate. All free of any charges. Haleema did not sleep all night and waited eagerly for dawn and newspaper seller. She asked for the local daily and found news on Imran on the small section of the front page. She read that article till she found a sense of satisfaction and then placed it carefully in her trunk. This was her first successful attempt in making her voice heard. Thereafter she decided to visit Rafi Bhat, who was a politician. He would listen sympathetically to people like Haleema whose family members had been abducted by army and this way would increase his vote bank. But he was not sincerely involved in pain of all those who visited him seeking help. This is presented through the picture of his well furnished home which is juxtaposed to the disarrayed picture of Kashmir which lay outside the boundary of his home.

There were two interrogation centres, Papa 1 and Papa 2. These names were derived from the wireless language code. On advice of SHO she went to Papa 2 looking for her son. On the eve of Eid some young boys were being released. Imran was not among them but one boy who had been released told her that he had met a boy named Imran in cantonment and that it was impossible for any visitor to enter it. He suggests her to meet Abdus Salaam who was a barber and who went in to shave the head of detainees. He had a shop near cantonment and could be found there. She did not find him there and went to his address. She took an auto to his home and during the started telling her whole story, "In a way, it was now a strange, a different kind of psychological torture to be compelled to tell her story to anyone from the beginning, in proper order, without missing a single detail, till the end" (94). She was conscious that she had begun to miss out some details and thus felt compelled to her story whenever she could so that her story did not get lost and forgotten.

Barber told her that her son was physically alright but was very scared. He was shifted to another place. The next group of detainees which came were deeply injured during interrogation. Some were denied water for a very long time. Some had their skin peeled off from their face. Some other's injuries had become infected and they were not treated. Barber's son-in-law was killed in a fake encounter. Gun and grenade were put into his possession and in media it was hailed as a success for army. When Haleema went to meet Rehbar Khan in hospital, the same boy who told her about barber, she asked nurse for where torture victims were admitted. To this nurse replied, "They are everywhere in the hospital. There are two hundred and forty admissions as of now" (100). In the emergency ward two patients shared a single bed. One of the admitted patient was forced to pee on a heater. Because of that blood had started to come in his urine. His right kidney had failed too. Other wounds were infected. He was put on medications as doctors had other more serious cases to handle.

One day Izhar, the BBC journalist came and told Haleema that one of his police acquaintance had told him that a young boy named Imran was held in Central Jail of Srinagar or Tihar Jail. On not finding Imran there Haleema along with Shafiq and Shafiq's husband, Rafiq went to Delhi. There they faced lot of prejudice. First they were denied rooms at hotels. Then when they tried to make a call through PCR, they were asked to submit a copy of their identity, permanent address and the address of place they were staying at Delhi. They were treated as outsiders in their own country. Nationalism is criticized through the image of a beggar child leaning against windows of car trying to sell tricolor. These images questions raises the question how one can celebrate a nation where a mother has to wander looking for her abducted son by the state and where some children have to beg instead of gaining knowledge at school.

With changing seasons the toll of Kashmiri people who died kept increasing and public institutions like schools kept coming down. With all this army camps and bunkers kept proliferating. Haleema kept her search for her only son on and visited courts and jails all days. One day Izhar called her to tell her about State Human Rights Commission (SHRC) and asked her to register her case there. On visiting that place she found that there were three rooms. The first one which she knocked was empty, in the second room there was a man sleeping inside and the third room had a board on outside on which it was written 'Chairman'. Upon entering that

room she found a man sitting there and she told her whole story to him. He frankly told her, “Our commission is a toothless tiger. At the end of the day we will only be able to register your case and claim for compensation. Not more. Nothing more than that. Don’t expect justice from us” (132).

In order to register her case she needed clearance from the mortuary of the police control room to register her case. She needed to do so to prove that her son was missing and not dead. The next evening she went to PCR mortuary to get the certificate which stated that no dead person who had been post-mortem there resembled Imran. Often Haleema would reach her home in night after searching for Imran all day but since no elder man was there at home, she was not held in a position to give account of her whereabouts. Khizir a person who worked there told her that he had not seen the young boy in picture but also told her that bodies on which he performed post-mortem had their faces disfigured or were absent altogether. He told her that after 1989 morgue had been crowded with bodies and only after this year this job had begun to take serious toll on him, “A man thanked me once for sewing his bullet-torn face back on his head” and the other time “Then there was a young boy- in whose stomach I found coals and strips of cloth. His gut smelled of kerosene. When I probed his nails I found something sticking to them. The forensic report later said they were traces of his own skin” (135).

On hearing Imran’s name, Khizir told Haleema that a Gujjar had found a dead body and on it was written ‘I am Imran’. That dead body was to come to him for post mortem the next day. Haleema was filled with fear. The next day on looking at dead body she fainted but that was not Imran. On her journey to find Imran, she was led to so many young boys who were abducted and prisoned forcefully. Some she found were dead and some were close to death. She found that there is no single Imran but many Imrans. Near the end of her journey she was fighting for the release of all Imrans and not just her own Imran. Haleema had decided to file a case against army and the advocate friend of Izhar, Farooq Ahmad agreed to help her. In a court case, Shakeel, a militant had told that he and Imran Bhat had attacked army troops who accompanied Kashmiri Pandit. When their hideout place was raided he was captured but Imran Bhat managed to escape. In prison he was constantly tortured and decided to identify Imran Joo as Imran Bhat in order to escape the torture.

On her visits to court she would find parents like her whose children had been abducted by the army, “As time passed, Haleema jelled with this little society of relatives of disappeared persons. They would all sit together, eat or stroll in the park outside the courtroom and discuss their future actions. Haleema heard all their stories and told them her own” (139). Seeing the need for them to unite and fight together she told the families that they must file a case as an association. On suggestion of Bar members, they decide to call it ‘Association of Relatives of the Disappeared Persons’. Family members decided to choose Haleema as president of the association. While writing the name of members of this association, Farooq said that since they don’t know the status of missing people, whether they are dead or alive therefore for women whose husband is missing he would write half, “We are talking legal language here, and the status matters. So, for all such uncertain cases for women whose husbands have disappeared, we will prefix their status with ‘Half’...” (142). Haleema wondered the same holds for her too as a mother.

The last section of the novel is titled as 'Random Notes by Izhar'. From here the story is told as first person narration by Izhar. Izhar mentions his growing concern over failing health of Haleema and later reports about her death. In this section he contemplates on the role of journalists. How difficult it was for him to witness all the violence against people of Kashmir and not interfere in as he realizes that he could be killed just as a stray cat or dog can be killed. The novel begins with complete involvement of community in one another's pain but in the ending note it ends with complete non-intervention. At one hand Haleema began her journey at very personal level and ended at a very broad community level and at other hand all the journalists and reporters are stuck at the level of intervention.

Conclusion:

In this novel we find the theme of fear, pain, suffering, violence, solidarity, justice, freedom, communal healing etc. People in Kashmir are being disallowed to think any thoughts of political determination. This very fact attacks the democratic status of our nation. Narratives coming from Kashmir have almost identical stories and this is not an indicator of stunted imaginative growth but reveals the elements of Post-traumatic demoralization syndrome across whole community. Our job as true civilians of democratic nation is to not turn away from such stories. The paper can be concluded with these words of Izhar spoken in discontentment with a supposedly secular nation who has chosen to turn blind to suffering of so many people: "It fills me with rage every day. I feel like making portraits of a seven-year-old battered by the police and hanging them on the walls of the politicians and their galleries. I want to encircle New Delhi with Badami Bagh Cantonment. I want to collect tears of the half mothers and sprinkle on the faces of Indian journalists. I want to rinse the brains of blinkered Indian elites with the blood of seventy thousand Kashmiris. I want to gift lice-infested blankets from prison cells to youth in KFCs, McDonalds, Baristas and Café Coffee Days. I want to put up pictures of a flimsy old father tumbling over the stretcher-laden corpse of his dead young son (in a police chase) around two words—Hey Ram—on Raj Ghat." (178)

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