

Scattered Souls: An unflinching and realistic account of traumatized and shell shocked lives of Kashmiri People

Title of the Book: *Scattered Souls*

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The short story writers of Kashmir in English like, Akhter Mohiuddin, Amin Kamil, Hari Krishan Kaul etc have candidly voiced the agony of Kashmiris in their writings and this has given birth a cannon called 'conflict literature'. Shahnaz Bashir is a well acclaimed literary icon of Kashmir who has contributed to the conflict literature. He won the international fame with his debut novel *Half Mother* (2015) which won the Muse India Young Writer Award 2015. His *Scattered Souls* (2016) is a collection of thirteen stories depicting the shell shocked lives of the people of Kashmir especially in 1990s when the militant insurgency was in full swing in Kashmir. The book is a series of interconnected stories and can be read as a novel per se. They refer to the time when Kashmir was sandwiched between the militant insurgency and the atrocities of the Indian Army. People were in the quagmire of death and hopelessness. People cherished rebellion for freedom but every attempt for the same was thwarted by the Indian Army. Shahnaz Bashir makes us visualise those scenes throughout the narrative.

The novel opens with the chapter "Transistor" in which a petty misconception which claims the life of a villager, Mohammad Yousuf Dar. He becomes the talk of the village as people suspect him a spy. He was provided with a transistor by his Delhi based brother who was a mainstream politician. He would be seen with the transistor by the people in general and the insurgents in particular and they took him for an informer with a wireless set. One night, he was put to perpetual silence by the three unidentified men. "...with daring heart and shivering body...he went over to open the door...And before he could ask them who they were and what they wanted, they cocked their guns."(P-13).

“The Gravestone” is about a skilful carpenter Mohammad Sultan who was the staunch supporter of the freedom struggle and lost his only son after the later joined a group of militants. Sultan remains in enigma whether to accept the ex-gratia for his dead son from the Govt. or not. Misfortunes overtook him and he turns penurious which propel him to apply for compensation. Now he wanted to wipe out the word “Shaheed” from the tomb stone of his dead son which he thought was the only stumbling block. Then one day he did the counter-conscience act. “...he hold the blunt chisel with his trembling left hand against the word Shaheed...the pointed end of the chisel slips, misses the mark and scrapes off the name Mushtaq instead.” (-P 25)

“The Ex-militant” is an interview which delineates about the social ostracism, injustice and brutality faced by a surrendered militant, Ghulam Mohiuddeen. Once, he along with Fayaz Shah and Irshad Beigh were caught by the army, blindfolded and tucked in a windowless room. He narrates his experiences both at Papa 2 and KotBhalwal which were heart wrenching and nightmarish. There was no let up to the torture they received: “They would just roll a cement roller on your legs, let suspended burning tyres drip on your bare back, pour buckets of dirty water over you and rattle you with electricity until you’d puke out some broken pieces of vague information.” (P-38). Fayaz Shah’s joining the mainstream politics, after he was released from jail, underscores and subverts the very cause for which he joined the insurgents. The story also explores the other dimensions of the conflict. The influential and well to do people manage to move to safer zones to safeguard the future of their wards. The poor and their wards had nowhere to go and hence they suffer.

The “Psychosis” is about the Post Traumatic Psychological Disorder (PTSD) of Sakeena whose husband—Gulam Mohiuddeen, an ex-militant, disappears mysteriously. She is told by the police to give one lac rupees to get her husband’s information. She is even asked by the police forces to offer herself in bed if she wants to know about her husband. It is about how the disappearance of the sole breadwinner can wreak havoc with the life of a woman. She is eventually gang raped by the Indian troops which deteriorates her mental balance: “The men threw her down to the ground and held her legs and arms. One of them stripped her off her shalwar and stuffed it into her mouth. Insha —her daughter shrieked, calling out the neighbours for help.” (P-62) She is then admitted in the psychiatric disease hospital where she notices the pathetic and deplorable condition of the other patients affected by the conflict : “She has to...queue up behind a morose old woman —whose son, Sakeena learnt, has been killed in front of her eyes...another old man had stopped feeling his legs after Army taker ran over his only son.” (P-53) In such a mayhem, one can see the only ray of hope in the form of Dr.Imtiyaz, the consultant at psychiatric hospital who adopts Sakeena’s ten year old daughter, Insha whose experiences are mentioned in the chapter “Theft”. Insha starts working as salesgirl in a shop to earn her living. At a time when she was about to carve out a niche for herself in the inhuman society, she is charged of theft and the police is called into action. It tells us about the humiliation and helplessness faced by the children of the ex-militants.

“A Photo with Barack Obama” is about how the developed nations like America maintain the criminal silence over the long pending Kashmir issue. It is also about the younger generation who are very much curious and ardent about the Kashmir being discussed and talked about. Bilal “Buil” was the son of Sakeena born of gang rape by the troops and was called by the epithets like “haramuk”(the illegitimate) by the people. An outcast and an estranged fellow, Buil compensates the inferiority complex by becoming the leading stone pelted in Batamalloo which landed him in the police custody. Later in the Chapter, Buil comes across a poster of Barack Obama and takes him for a saviour of the people of Kashmir. He is so obsessed with Obama’s visit that he pins all his hopes on him, “who could say something about the resolution of the Kashmir issue”. (P-77) To his utter dismay, Obama mentioned in his speech everything including Indian leadership, economy, heritage, civilization in the Indian parliament except Kashmir.

“Oil and Roses” is about Gul Bhagwan, a gardener. Gul has been a cautious gardener tending the flowers in Mughal gardens throughout his life but his own life is without a flower. He is childless and brings up his foster son Showkat who gets a govt. job to the utter satisfaction of his ‘parents’. But here happiness is the occasional episode in the general drama of pain. He gets killed when the army fires indiscriminately after a tyre bursts. Gul’s hopes are shattered. Moreover, deep in heart he detests the American tourists visiting the gardens who marvel only at the beauty of the flowers but are indifferent towards the Kashmir issue. According to him Kashmir sans oil resources and America assists only those nations which have ample oil resources. That is why when one of the Americans offers him money for the roses, Gul says, “No. Not money All I want is a bit of attention, sir.” (P-105 “Country-Capital” is the satirical portrayal of the sheer ignorance and carelessness of rural children in remembering the correct capitals of the countries . They are so over influenced by the war torn and nuclear countries that they construe that the only countries worth remembering are America, Pakistan and India. It is also a scathing attack on the double standards of the villagers especially the Sarpanchs who relish the facilities provided by the Army like Operation Sadhbhavna, free medical eye camps, discounts on the army canteen products etc. For his political career the village Sarpanch would go to any extent. He would even cajole the army Captain only to win the forthcoming panchayat election.

“Shabaan Kaak’s Death” is about the death of the oldest person from Hawal, who had been a witness to the political upheavals Kashmir underwent since India got freedom. He wonders about the future of Kashmir which was awfully stuck in a deadlock. Also, the story describes how his grandsons strained every nerve to get their grandfather buried amidst the strict curfew throughout Kashmir. He had dreamt that his funeral procession would be accompanied by ten thousand people but ironically only twenty two people attended his funeral. The story also brings to the lime light that even in case of death of a person one has to abide by the draconian laws and severe curfews imposed by the authorities. “The House” is about a house called Mir Manzil in Bulbul Bagh where Farooq Ahmad Mir lived with his wife Zareena. The house is portrayed so magnificent and monumental that the neighbours

would envy at it. Contrary to the inhospitality and superiority complex of Farooq, Zareena is portrayed as sociable and of modest disposition. Their children followed their father's footsteps by playing indoors and nurturing their genetic superiority complex. Soon the house loses its glory with the death of Zareena after the army fire indiscriminately in the compound of the house. This catastrophe brought a positive change in Farooq who seems to be a changed character towards the end of the chapter. To end his loneliness Farooq offered the rooms of the house to his relatives who were in desperate need of shelter which gave him a sense of belonging. He would now indulge in the matters of the masque management committee and realised that it is only by helping others and praying we get the peace of mind. The worldly possessions and grandiloquent villas serve no purpose at all.

"Some small things I couldn't tell you" is in the form of a letter written by an ailing father (who suffers from cancer) to his son advising him to relish the every moment of his life. In the letter he also confesses him why he broke the toys gifted to the boy by his maternal DSP uncle. This was a strategy to protect the boy from "the shadows of evil love". The father also advised his son to look after the ornamental garden he had set up on the one side of the stream in spite of the dispute. The piece of advice is worth mentioning: "Just because one doesn't live to see settlements and solutions doesn't mean that you should quit striving for better things on your side. The day we conquer our ego is the day we win ourselves and that is when we win the world" (p-148) "The Silent Bullet" is poignant story of a teacher cum philosopher- Mohammad Ameen. The story dwells on the idea that in all-time-conflict zones, the innocent people become the most vulnerable. It has been one year since a silent bullet pierced his spine. It was in 2012 when the army in Natipora picked up two young boys followed by the street protests when a bullet sank into the spine of the teacher. Since then he is bed ridden and occasionally dreaming about the heaven and contrasting between heaven and hell.

In the last story "The Woman Who Became Her Own Husband", a neighbourhood shopkeeper narrates the poignant story of Ayesha, a home maker and her husband Tariq Zargar putting up at Khan Sojourn, Rajbagh. Ayesha's mind refuses to accept that her husband is no more and imitates his style incessantly. Tariq was a bank manager and loved Ayesha with heart and soul. Their exemplary love was envied by the neighbours and could no longer be hidden from the evil eye. Tariq gets killed because the bunker outside his office was attacked and he was the only person who couldn't save his life. This was a severe shock for Ayesha who loses the balance of her mind. She could be seen often wearing her husband's suit and imitating his style of leaving for office. The whole account is so overarching and gut wrenching that it would move anyone to tears.

The book unveils the realistic picture of Kashmiri People. The reader is the onlooker of the scenes and stories in the book. The reader like the neighbourhood shopkeeper, empathises with the fate of Ayesha whose fate is the fate of all those women whose husbands fall prey to either the militant insurgency or to the wrath of govt. forces. Shahnaz Bashir is the mouthpiece of a typical Kashmiri who gives vent to histumultuous emotions. His characters

are from every walk of life, a school boy, a home maker, a teacher, a doctor, an innocent orchard owner, a former militant etc. They face the consequences of the Kashmir conflict. His characters tell us about the common human agony with hope, rejection, disappointment, challenges and success. He tells us that all the sections of the society were affected by the militant insurgency and military occupation. He uses a sharp and elegant style of storytelling. He also makes a determined effort to present the inhumanity of the oppressors, the helplessness of the victims and the signs of humanity in some characters like Dr. Imtiyaz. In an interview, Shehnaz Bashir says that his aim was to reach out to the larger audience: “ I have written two novels in English to reach out to people. I can communicate better in my own language but writing in a foreign language is an attempt to make myself heard.”Each story in the book is so gripping and engrossing that the reader feels that the author has taken the feelings from the his heart.