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KASHMIR CONFLICT, A SAGA OF VIOLENCE AND AGONY IN *THE HALF MOTHER*

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ABSTRACT

For about the last three decades Kashmir has been one of the most volatile regions of the South Asia. Particularly, after the early 1990's, its people are entangled in a conflict that is reflective of immense oppression, suppression and profound tragedies. The conflict is the direct result of non-resolution of the Kashmir problem for about seventy years now. With the outbreak of armed struggle for freedom and self-determination during 90's, Kashmir has always been in the lime light and yet till date the conflict remains to be un-resolved. The present paper focuses on one of its native writer, Shahnaz Bashir who exposes the Indian colonizing power in Kashmir.

Key Words: Kashmir Conflict, Freedom Struggle, Enforced- disappearances, *The Half Mother*

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DISCUSSION

Since 1989, the conflict has not only taken a heavy toll on the people of Kashmir but the magnitude of the catastrophe which it brought is countless. Noted writer, Sumantra Bose writes about the Kashmir of 1990's, "Since late 1989, it is Kashmiris who have done [much of] the fighting" — and most of the dying (Bose 3).

Much has been written about Kashmir by outsiders who were neither the participants nor a witness to this conflict and struggle. However, now our clouds have enough silver lining with the emerging of many native indigenous voices who try to reveal and reflect the actual life under the conflict in Kashmir. These authentic voices have taken upon themselves to counter the otherwise biased and uninformed narratives and evolve a distinct discourse called Resistance Literature. Postcolonial critic Barbara Harlow asserts in this regard:

Resistance narratives embedded ... in the historical and material conditions of their production and [contain] the allegiances and active participation of their authors often on the front lines, in the political events of their countries, testify to the nature of the struggle for liberation as it is enacted behind the dissembling statistics of media coverage and official government reports ... The narrative is not only a document, it is also an indictment. (Harlow 98)

Shahnaz Bashir, in his maiden novel *The Half Mother* (2014) fictionalizes the bruised memories of the era heralding the turmoil of 1989-90s. *The Half Mother* is a story about a mother, Haleema, who's only son Imran, her sole reason to live for is arrested by the Indian army and then goes disappearing. The novel aims to

address the issue of enforced disappearances in Kashmir, which has been one of the worst and unfortunate outcomes since the violent conflict erupted from the late 1980's.

The novel is set in the Natipora area of Srinagar district and the time is turbulent 90's. After a gun battle in the neighbourhood of Natipora, the army is sent to the region to establish and exercise its wrath and might against the locals. Shahnaz Bashir uses the character of Major Aman Kushwaha to represent this military sovereignty. Troops are sent and stationed in the valley. The author writes, "The war has begun ... no one had ever seen bunkers inside the valley" (Bashir 23-24). Meanwhile, the insurgency intensifies, protests became frequent, demand for *Azaadi* (freedom) reverberates everywhere. A large number of youth particularly Muslim youth cross the border to get arms training. This is followed by curfews, crackdowns, killings, enforces disappearances, torture, raids, exodus. The response of the Indian government to the Kashmiris struggle for freedom is miserably harsh. Shahnaz Bashir writes about this period:

The year 1990. 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. Shafiq's sons, Shaheen Bhat [a bright student of science and math] and Imran Bhat [an unbeatable footballer] were the first two boys from Natipora to cross the border to Pakistan. Then Shabeer Ahmad, the blacksmith's son, was the first in Natipora to fall to army bullets. Twenty-three rounds were pumped into his chest when he refused to throw a Pakistani flag off a telegraph pole. Then Shafiq's daughter Rukhsana became the first woman from the neighbourhood to be beaten, in her compound. Her parents were tied with ropes and made to see their daughter being stripped by a trooper. And then Farmer Ramzaan Dar's ripe paddy was set on fire when he refused to hand over his son Riyaz to the army. Hundreds of thousands began to march on every street and road in an endless stream of processions. Men, women, children, old, young – all. Their green headbands, the banners they brandished, the flags they waved, the placards they held, the slogans they shouted and painted on the walls repeated the same word over and over again: *Azaadi*. (Bashir 32)

The events changes the tranquillity of the Natipora thus signifying the change that Kashmir prior idealized as a paradise to now as a daily arena of bloodshed. Soon Haleema's father namely Ghulam Rasool Joo whom she lovingly calls Ab Jaan, is brutally killed by Major Kushwaha when he was trying to defend against the autocratic and dictatorial rule of the Indian army:

'What is this? You beat everyone. There are civilians in this locality yet you burn down our shops, you snatch away our living and now you are torturing us. Don't you have shame?' AbJaan argued bravely, yet trembling. (Bashir 48)

After the cold blood murder of Ghulam Rasool Joo, the Major further threatens the people, "No one will come here. Whoever does shall meet the same fate" (Bashir 49). Shahnaz Bashir aims to show how the lawful violence is carried in Kashmir.

While still mourning her father's killing, one fateful night Haleema's son, Imran is taken by the army without any charges against him. He was taken in place of his namesake Imran Bhat (Bashir 138). Thus, began her struggle of hope and despair. Haleema tells Izhar (BBC news reporter):

Dear, something more tragic has happened since Ab Jaan's death, and it has not given me even the time to mourn him properly. Something more painful (Bashir 75).

Once again Shahnaz Bashir highlights the issue of arbitrary arrests which have been in vogue since the eruption of turmoil. Imran like many other Kashmiri youth became a victim of the 'enforced disappearance' at the hands of the Indian army. And Haleema, herself represents all those robbed mothers of the conflict. While her search for Imran is going on she discovers that there are many more mothers and families who are equally suffering the agony of missing their dear ones. Like Haleema, many of them are still fighting in the hope that their dear ones will return someday but many have given up hope. Since 1989, there are a large number of enforced disappearances in Kashmir which has led to what is called as 'half widows' and 'half mothers' in

Kashmir. The fate of these disappeared ones' has remained a mystery. The fact is testified by the formation of Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) in Kashmir.

After Imran is whisked away, Haleema relentlessly decides to track down him. From the local army camps, police stations, jails, hospitals, to the infamous torture centre of Kashmir - Papa 2, Haleema visits every place hoping to find Imran. But all in vain! The author writes:

Her search for Imran had become her habit, a habit she couldn't do without. Jails and courts became routine affairs, like going to school. Six days a week she locked the wooden gate at dawn and went to the court. ... She now knew almost ever lawyer, judge, judicial clerk, police officer and journalist in Kashmir (Bashir 127).

She even ties a votive thread at a shrine and making a wish "the knot will be untied when I will have found him, perhaps" (Bashir 80). Amid all this a ray of hope is always ignited in her heart. She finds hope in Imam's words who tells her, "The greatest of sufferings bring the greatest of hopes, the greatest of miseries greatest patience, and the greatest of uncertainties lead to the greatest quests" (Bashir 69).

Each new day is a struggle and longing for Haleema. She sells whatever she has be it jewellery, orchard, copper utensils, cattle everything. Physically and mentally drained, she helplessly murmurs while thinking of her son:

Where have you disappeared? Where do I look for you now? ... Where have you been? I have been looking for you everywhere. ... 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 4-5).

As readers our emotions are stirred while feeling Haleema's predicament. Being frustrated she now begins talking to herself or sometimes with Imran's shadow, his clothes and other belongings. Shahnaz Bashir writes:

She began talking to herself or to the walls. Sometimes, she would talk to the things that belonged to Imran, crying and wailing alternatively. She would open the dented heirloom trunk and take out his notebooks. She would slowly run her fingers over his scribbles and feel the letters ... Again and again. ... Then, melancholy she would croon a song: *Kyazi tscaa'l roodham maah-i-nam kehilaal tai? Doh goun pyaraan, china tsalaan malaal tai?* (69).

At the end, of the novel Haleema dies with the hope of her son's return. She dies uttering: "*Imran saeba? Aakha? Imran. Have you come?*" (Bashir 178). Haleema exemplifies all those tragic mothers of Kashmir who have undergone various shades of oppression. At large, Haleema represents the people of Kashmir living under the Indian hegemony particularly under its military oppression. *The Half Mother* gives a voice to all of this. The novel is a definitely a tribute to those who are lost and those who have lost their loved ones in the turmoil. It is a novel that portrays Kashmiris unrelenting struggle to achieve their most wanted – Freedom.

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