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Title of the Book: *The Half Mother*

Author: Shahnaz Bashir

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A Tribute to the Missing

Gone are the days when the people of the valley were labeled as, what Shoshana Felman calls, “the expressionless” i.e. those whom violence has deprived of expression, and those who have been historically reduced to silence. Voices are being raised; narratives of mourning and brutalization of Kashmir are being written and thereby the so called Indian sovereignty and colonial rule over Kashmir is being questioned.

The Half Mother marks the daring debut of Shahnaz Bashir, another rising star in the literary firmament of Kashmir. The narrative offers an authoritative account by the insider of a brutalized wilderness at the hands of Indian army. It embarks upon to wake up the dozing giant of Indian sovereignty lulled by decades of official liberal sing song. It is deeply provocative and an excellent addition to the burgeoning genre of Kashmiri fiction in English.

Divided into three books, the novel tells the gloomy tale of Haleema and the mysterious disappearance of her son Imran. The setting is Natipora, an area located at the outskirts of Srinagar city, some three kilometers away towards the south. The time is turbulent 90's and the valley is roaring with the cries of war. Natipora like the rest of valley has begun to claim its first victims of the war. As Bashir remarks: “The war has begun...young boys had begun sneaking into Pakistan to fetch arms and rebel against the government” (23). Shaheen Bhat and Imran Bhat became the first two boys from Natipora to cross the border to Pakistan. The insurgency in the valley intensifies followed by curfews, crackdowns, raids, encounters, killings, bunkers, an exodus of people, burning markets, schools and buildings. People began dreaming of utopian independent Kashmir, shouting slogans of *azaadi* in an endless stream of processions.

In such a tumultuous, blustering atmosphere Haleema's son is growing up. He is a boy of unusual hobbies, extremely gifted and talented. He excels in every field and skyrockets every household chore. Like other boys of the valley he also views militants as majestic and is equally enthralled and fascinated by the journey towards *sarhad paar*, but because of his responsibilities and liabilities towards his mother, he keeps himself at bay from the kalashnikovization. But fate plays its dirty role. One fateful night Imran is picked up for no reason by Major Kushwaha and is pushed into oblivion never to return back. He is

picked up in place of his namesake surrogate Imran Bhat, who had crossed the LOC and was active as the area commander of Natipora for JKLF.

The mysterious disappearance of Imran leads to an ingenious and wonderfully dark story of a mother's quest to track down her only reason left in the world to live for. Her search not only unearths the dark secrets of the most brutalized state in the world, but also as she searches varied tracks, she discovers that she isn't the only one who is suffering the agony of missing dear ones. She comes to know that majority of them believe that their missing loved ones have been killed in custody and cremated in mass graves. Many of them have given up hope and have tried to move on. There are others like herself who are obsessively fighting for justice, hoping that their dear ones will return someday. The sudden disappearance of Imran and of thousands of other civilians of Kashmir exemplifies the extrajudicial killings in Kashmir that Indian army has always presented as part of a legitimate struggle to protect the security of the Indian nation state from "non-native enemies of the nation". By contesting the circumstances of such disappearances the novel challenges the myth of "enemy encounters" which are often invoked to justify India's security policies in Kashmir.

The mystery regarding the sudden disappearances of Imran is never revealed, the truth is never disclosed, and the curtain is never lifted. Haleema decides to track down her son at any cost. She sells her cattle, her jewelry, her orchard and even her expensive copper utensils to raise some money she might need to free her son. She searches in army camps, torture centers, police stations, jails, wetlands and approaches social leaders, journalists, bureaucrats, NGOs and courts only to find no trace of Imran. Clue after clue is being traded but the truth remains lost in the shadow of war.

The truth is just hinted at in the eponymous chapter entitled "The Half Mother" that Imran might have been used by Major Kushwaha to fetch him a promotion or a medal. After all "a man means a medal" says Major Kushwaha. The title of the novel is a mockery at the system that is unable to deliver justice to the thousands of cases like Imran. It is a sly dig at the draconian laws like APSPA and PSA that legalize and legitimize extrajudicial killings through fake encounters in the valley.

Haleema reaches at the brink of madness, talking to walls and things belonging to Imran, crying and wailing all the time. Tears started streaming down my cheeks while reading Haleema's heart rending cry, *Lag'ya Balayi* after listening from Rehbar that her son is alive behind the bars. This ignites a ray of hope and it is this hope that keeps her going. But this hope kills her everyday and resurrects her every morning only to kill her again. Finally unable to bear the agony of separation she collapses and dies without seeing the return of her *Jigar ka Tukda*.

The life and struggle of Haleema proved that "the greatest of suffering brings greatest of hopes, the greatest of miseries greatest patience, and the greatest uncertainties lead to the greatest quests" (69). Her soul is perforated by tragedy after tragedy. She is deprived of her protectors one by one. At the age of eight her mother passes away, then after enjoying a very

short bliss of her marriage her husband deserts her; then her father is killed by Indian troops; and finally she is knocked down by the calamitous event of the disappearance of her only son. Her whole life appears to be clouded by a mysterious unseen gloom, full of miseries, adversities and afflictions only. The image of the peeling paint is a recurring motif in the novel that hints again and again at the dark end her life was moving towards. One can say that her life is not only a tragedy but an ongoing tragedy which offers almost no catharsis anywhere. As such it is a portrayal of a very grim tragic situation.

The accomplishment and success of this book is that while stirring the most dormant emotions, it also chronicles and documents the long and shameful abuse of human rights in Kashmir. It forms a kind of counter discourse of resistance against the official hegemonic discourses of Indian sovereignty. Shahnaz Bashir has successfully given voice to the issue of extrajudicial killings and fake encounters by the Indian army in Kashmir. The subject taken by the author is different but the agony and pain is same.

While the ending of the book does not offer any clear cut resolution, yet it is equivocalness which teases one to ponder over this perspective from the margins. In the highlighted 'uncertainty' in the conclusion one finds more room for ambiguity, for a nuanced reaction. It seems it is deliberate on the part of the writer so that the reader feels empathetic and puts himself into the shoes of those oppressed by the state sponsored killings. The reading stirs emotions which are too real. Agony experienced is exquisite indeed. The language is lavishly elegant and delicately beautiful. The way the author has entwined beauty and pain in this book never allows the reader to feel at ease. At the same time it makes the reader participate equally in the personal loss of Haleema as well as in the unimaginable violence and ugliness of the war in Kashmir.

In nutshell it is a highly recommendable and must read. The book is so interesting and engrossing that one remains glued to it till the end. It is really a laborious and commendable job done by the author in paying tribute to those who have lost their loved ones in this burning cauldron of territorial war.