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## **Conflict Literature from Kashmir: A Study of *Curfewed Night* and *The Half Mother***

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### **Abstract:**

In 1989, war or conflict began in Kashmir. Kashmir commenced to lose its leaders, men, women, fathers, sons, houses, roads, bridges, peace and idyllic pulchritude. Once a paradise on the Earth, and a place of wonder for *Aungrez* (Kashmiri word for British), it now started to collapse as Indian forces emerged on its soil. Their occupation of it and the resistance of Kashmiri people in general and her youth in particular against them opened a new chapter in the history of Kashmir. Curfews, crackdowns, raids, firing, blasts, interrogation camps, bunkers, frisking etc. became the common characters of this book. For Kashmiri youth, crossings the Line of Control for arms training became an expedition. Loudspeakers announcing crackdown, midnight kidnappings of fathers and sons, protests, firing on protesters and their killing started a new era: the era of uprising against Indian rule. To placard and showcase its sorrows, pains, and sufferings globally, Kashmir had no true and genuine spokesmen except Agha Shahid Ali. But now the good news is that it started to produce its literary representatives to represent its cry and protest against injustice. They have opted to write its poignant tales to the world. The present paper attempts to scrutinize *Curfewed Night*, and *The Half Mother* as conflict literature produced from Kashmir.

**Keywords: Insurgency, occupation, curfew, crackdown, disappearances resistance, oppression, freedom.**

Prior to the young and bold Kashmiri voices who write to bring global attention to Kashmir and its sufferings; Agha Shahid Ali, the first Kashmiri-English poet, had already started writing about the wrath of on-going war in Kashmir and the innocent killings of people there. He wrote poems detailing the heart-wrenching stories of sorrow and longing of Kashmiris who were put under siege, picked up, interrogated and imprisoned in the dark cells to wail, cry, and finally succumb to death. The troubles in his beloved Kashmir during 1989, the year the revolt against Indian forces broke out following an extreme repression which continuous to this day, left an indelible scar on his mind, and forced him to utter:

“The city from where no news can come  
Is now so visible in its curfewed night  
That the worst is precise: From Zero Bridge  
A shadow chased by searchlights is running  
Away to find its body. On the edge  
Of the Cantonment, where Gupkar Road ends,  
It shrinks almost into nothing, is  
Nothing by interrogation gates  
So it can slip, unseen, into the cells:  
Drippings from a suspended burning tire

Are falling on the back of a prisoner,  
The naked boy screaming, "I know nothing"....  
(The Veiled Suite, 178)

Agha Shahid Ali, being a keen observer of the turmoil and pains inflicted upon Kashmir, described wonderfully and succinctly the agonies suffered and endured. After caught and locked up in detention camp like Papa 2 near Gupkar Road, prisoners were brutally tortured. Drippings of a burning tire were put on the backs of prisoners so that they would speak something, but their only answer was they knew nothing.

Agha Shahid Ali, in one of his poems, dreams Rizwan who tells him, "Don't tell my father I have died" (The Veiled Suite, 179) and then, describes the horrific scene of a funeral procession on which the armed forces opened fire:

"And hundreds of pairs of shoes the mourners  
Left behind, as they ran from the funeral,  
Victims of the firing. From windows we hear  
Grieving mothers....  
Kashmir is burning". (The Veiled Suite, 179)

Agha Shahid Ali, the first ever ambassador from Kashmir to the world of literature, broke the long Kashmir silence with his sumptuous poem 'Farewell' and effectively narrates the deplorable tale of his burning land to the world:

"They make desolation and call it peace" (The Veiled Suite, 175)

Although we feel a bit unfortunate as Shahid died young just at fifty-two due to brain cancer, for we didn't get a novel from him, yet we are lucky enough to have new bold voices—Basharat peer, Mirza Waheed, Shahnaz Bashir— who, like Shahid, write heartrending tales and express their protest against the unkind treatment given towards innocent masses of Kashmir.

Basharat Peer, a Kashmiri journalist, penned a faithful account of the war of 1990s in his debut memoir *The Curfewed Night*. As an eye witness to happenings that led to the uprising, the author captures the factual incidents accurately and chronicles the every possible detail that occurred: kidnapping of Indian home minister's daughter, the Gawkadal massacre, young Kashmiri men and boys crossing over to Pakistan for arms training, his fascination for militants during his adolescence year, their killing in actions, mine blasts, men taken captive-interrogated and beaten- and his own role as reporter. Peer, when just eleven years old, narrates the situation in Kashmir as:

"A year later, in December 1989, I returned home for my winter holidays.... A week later, a group of armed young Kashmiris led by a twenty one year old political activist, Yasin Malik, kidnapped the daughter of the Indian home minister. Malik and his comrades demanded the release of their jailed friends. After negotiations the Indian government gave in..." (Curfewed Night, 10)

And then he writes, though he grew up as popular child for his parents, had good cricket playing mates and a loving milieu, that:

"It was January 1990; I was thirteen... the war of my adolescence had started'. (14)

The war virtually had started way back two centuries when Akbar invaded Kashmir and it was then that Kashmir had lost its freedom. In this connection, the author, too, has to state:

“Akbar, the Mughal emperor of Delhi, invaded Kashmir in December 1585... Kashmir lost its independence. Akbar imprisoned Yusuf...after whom Kashmir was never free”. (Curfewed Night, 134-5)

And it's a fact that after Yusuf Shah's reign, Kashmir didn't get freedom. It became a map of sorrows and longings. Sorrows, because Kashmir continued to be the victim of oppression; and longings, because- since Akbar's invasion- Kashmir didn't rest, but went on to demand independence which never came.

For this independence, Kashmir witnessed its first massacre during 1990, when Indian army and Central Reserve Police Force opened the fire on a huge gathering of protesters at Gawkadal Bridge in Maisuma:

“More than fifty people were killed. It was the first massacre in the Kashmir Valley.” (Curfewed Night 14)

Peer, renders reliably every detail that he saw during the uprising- ‘to go with them I learned new phrases: frisking, crackdown, bunkers, search, identity card, arrest and torture (Curfewed Night, 18)’ and continues to capture the events that created terror in the minds of the people. More and more youth crossed the Line of Control to fetch arms to fight for the freedom Kashmir had lost. To resist the occupation, Kashmir started burning. Day in and day out, encounters between militants and Indian army shuddered and paralyzed the life in Kashmir. Hearing crackdown calls became a routine:

“Morning came abruptly with a loud announcement over the mosque public announcement system: ‘Asalam-u-Alikum! This is an urgent announcement. The army has cordoned off the village. Every man and boy has to assemble in the hospital lawn by six. It is crackdown...’” (Curfewed Night)

Shahnaz Bashir, a bold new voice from Kashmir and the winner of Muse India Award for young writers for his debut work of fiction ‘*The Half Mother*’, wrote an essay ‘A Crackdown In Natipora’ published in ‘*Of Occupation and Resistance*’ edited by Fahad Shah, in which he describes a frigid winter dawn in the late 1990s when a loudspeakers announces crackdown:

‘The voice of the announcer... befuddling... made everyone groggily ask each other certain things: Where were the men going to be assembled for the identification parade? What was the cut-off age of boys to stay back with women at home’ (Of Occupation and Resistance, 36)

And how the people- old, young- of Natipora assemble in a plum orchard, how some revered elders of the vicinity are punished and abused when they arrived late and how they are made to stand upside down and abused for hours together till an old man in the gathering stands up and shouts at the army officer:

‘What the hell you think you are doing with us? Are we animals? Don't you have elders at home? Do you treat them the same way? Turn them upside down and beat them with a cane?’ (Of Occupation and Resistance, 44)

Like Shahnaz Bashir, Basharat Peer, too, writes the day there was crackdown in his village. Two soldiers come and ask for him:

‘Is someone called Basharat Peer here? He is a ninth class student... come with us...’ (Curfewed Night, 52)

They take him to doctor's residence- an interrogation centre- and ask him to sit in a storeroom. After some time, he hears loud cries over and over:

'Khodayo bachaav' (Save me, God) and 'Nahin pata, sir' (I don't know, sir)'. (53)

As encounters between army and militants, crackdowns, tortures, kidnappings, killings, attacks on convoys, mine blasts, became more intense; going to schools and colleges became tougher. Rich parents started to send their wards out of the state for education. Peer, too, was sent off to school in Aligarh where he might be safe. His grandfather, he writes, fixed his watery green eyes on him and asked, "How do you think this old man can deal with your death (Curfewed Night, 48)?" Although physically far away from home, yet the memories of his war-torn homeland haunted him. He received college education and then, became a journalist.

Peer returns home and searches out the stories and incidents that obsessed him continuously. He interviews boys, Shafi, Ansar, Hussein etc, who were taken to Papa 2, an infamous torture camp and describes the tortures they were given like a genuine and faithful journalist:

'I was asked to undress, be naked. The first time I resisted, I was beaten, undressed forcibly and tied to a chair. Then they tied copper wire to my arms and gave me electric shocks... I fainted a few times. They brought me back to my senses and inserted a copper wire into my penis' (Curfewed Night, 146)

And Mubeena Ghani who was raped by a group of soldiers: 'I could not even remember how many they were. I had lost my senses' (Curfewed Night, 154). Not only did he cover stories about people detained and tortured in camps like Papa 2, but widows whose husbands were arrested and then never released, mothers whose sons were picked and beaten to death:

'...I happened to meet Noora, a seventy year old woman, in her run-down house near Lal Chowk. Her shop keeper son had stepped out to join his cricket team at the Pola Ground... Her neighbours saw a few BSF jeeps stop outside their house, near Ghanta Ghar, an old watchtower... the paramilitaries grabbed him, pushed him into the back of a jeep, and drove away. He had been missing for eight year when I met her in a dimly lit kitchen. 'For a few years, my daughters and I went to every police, every military camp, every politician we could. Everybody had 'No' for us... (Curfewed Night, 131-32)

In *Curfewed Night*, Basharat Peer touches almost every detail and this leads Pankaj Mishra to say in his review of the book:

'Curfewed Night is a tale of a man's love for his land, the pain of leaving home, and the joy of returns as well as a fierce and moving piece of reportage from an intrepid young journalist. Describing the ruin of Kashmir, it doesn't only shock, but also challenges our most cherished beliefs in democracy, rule of law and the power of individual conscience. Everyone should read it' (Pankaj Mishra).

So far untold and unknown to the world, *Curfewed Night* chronicles the story of the formation of separatist movement and insurgent cum militant organizations like Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) and Hizbul Mujahidin (HM) in Kashmir, emergence of Indian army on its soil, young boys and men crossing over to Pakistan for arms training, torture centres, mine blasts, disappearance of young boys and men, women getting raped, killing of people in thousands in the war between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, and Sufi shrines decimating in bomb blasts.

After Basharat Peer, Shahnaz Bashir's book *The Half Mother*, which this paper also attempts, is a gut-wrenching narrative. Centring on Haleema, the book details how, in the 1990s conflict and war in Kashmir, happy and innocent families collapsed, how their life became a hell, how young boys were arrested but never released, how mothers and wives were not allowed to meet their sons and husbands, how families went from pillar to post in search of their relatives but walked back with 'No', how every politician consoled them, how others even don't listen to them and home mothers, like Haleema, went to look for their sons till their last breath.

Shahnaz Bashir, in *The Half Mother*, debates a mother's distressed state after her only son Imran is picked up by the troops. Haleema, the half mother like myriad other mothers who don't know whether their sons are dead or alive, is tormented by not knowing whether Imran is dead or alive. She is torn apart by her own lonely existence and develops a habit of talking to herself:

'Dear collard greens, apologies, for you shall be cooked without salt once again'....  
'Where have you disappeared? Where do I look for you now?' She now called out to the often misplaced wooden ladle. 'Here you are! Where have you been? I have been looking for you everywhere' she said. (*The Half Mother*, 04)

Shahnaz Bashir, so evocatively and profoundly, tells the tale of one woman's battle for life, dignity and justice that tears roll down the eyes and one does not help but reads the story irrespective of other considerations and engagements till the last page. As an insider, the author mirrors the story of luckless Haleema. Brought up with great love and affection, she is married off to a medical assistant but is soon divorced. She then begins a new life at her father's house. Some months later, she gives birth to a son, Imran. Ab Jaan, whose real name is Ghulam Rasool Joo, and she take a good care of Imran. He grows up as a ray of hope for them, particularly for Haleema.

One evening, Ab Jaan returns home with a newspaper, *Valley Times* that reports about a gun battle in Srinagar. 'The war has begun,' Ab Jaan said with tired eyes, quietly, almost to himself' (*The Half Mother*, 23). He doesn't know that the war has stated to ruin them: their life, peace, and everything.

One fresh snowy morning, sometime later, Ab Jaan leaves to sweep the snow away from the walkway. After clearing half the snow from the path, Imran comes to help him. Picking up shovelfuls of snow to open the gate, Imran and Ab Jaan happen to see a couple of troops. 'Give us your shovel' Ab Jaan is told (*The Half Mother*, 26). Outside, on the road, there are a dozen of army men busy making a bunker. Ab Jaan doesn't like this and thunders at them: 'the bunkers will be a nuisance – you will always be intruding into our homes... please take the bunker a little away from here' (*The Half Mother*, 27). The soldier turns and pushes him back with the butt of his rifle. Ab Jaan falls down. Imran runs to help his stand up.

From here the life of the Joo family starts to fall apart and the life in Kashmir is shown nothing better than hell. Curfews are imposed, Natipora, symbolising all Kashmir, suffers, Shafiq's son Shaheen Bhat crosses over to Pakistan for arms training, her family is beaten, Ab Jaan is thrashed and killed, Haleem's son Imran is arrested and Haleema's journey for her son who is never released begins.

Shahnaz Bashir, so beautifully and reliably, narrates the war-torn region, its struggle for freedom, processions, killings, raids etc. that you start to be the part of every incident. Unlike

Basharat Peer who shifts the lens of his camera from one character to another, Shahnaz focuses his on Haleema and captures every detail minutely and through her, he universalizes the happenings that take place around her, for she represents every female soul rather every mother living in Kashmir.

Tempest, chapter 5 of the novel, symbolises the forthcoming devastation. It foretells the havoc in store for the Joo family in particular and for Kashmiris in general. It therefore, opens as:

‘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 curfew, crackdown, raids, encounters, killings, bunkers, an exodus of people, burning markets, schools and buildings’ (The Half Mother, 32).

*The Half Mother*, spread over 17 chapter and Random Notes and set in the author’s home town- Natipora, depicts the 1990s upheaval and anger against the outsiders (Indian army). As Shahnaz writes, people – men, women, children and young – took to streets and roads in an endless stream of procession. Wearing green headbands, held banners, waved flags, they shouted slogans of freedom over and over: ‘Azaadi’ (The Half Mother, 32) and it continues for months together. The author goes on to say about curfew days, peoples’ hell like life during these days, canings, beatings and terror in the minds of the people. In chapter 6 - the first attack- of the novel, the tempest in real sense blows and takes away the life of Joo family’s head member and sole bread earner:

‘Two troops held Haleema and Imran back. Haleema screamed for help... ‘Anybody? Help! Please don’t kill him! Please!’... Three bullets were pumped into Ab Jaan. One in the neck. One in the heart. One in the stomach...’ (The Half Mother, 49)

And the death of Ab Jaan breaks the back of Haleema. People in the vicinity tried to come for help but army Major fired some warning shots in the air and threatened them all there to stay back:

‘No one will come here. Whoever does shall meet the same fate’ (The Half Mother, 49).

How everyone in the neighbourhood aspired to come forward for help and with what enthusiasm the funeral procession was led by the people- young, old, children and women- is heart piercing. Haleema doesn’t believe her eyes that her father is dead and wails:

‘I don’t believe this, my father isn’t dead! Isn’t this a lie, my father? Your death has battered me, my father!’ (The Half Mother, 52)

The Raid, chapter 7 of the novel, begins like the World War Second in the life of Haleema and annihilates all her hopes and expectations. Soldiers besiege Haleema’s house and demand Imran, her son. They break in the house, catch him and take him along. Haleema pleads for his release:

‘You killed my father! Leave me someone to live with! How could you be so cruel?’... What is his crime? ...He is a small child! Don’t you see? ... I beg you, he is innocent! Anybody, please help, for God’s sake! (The Half Mother, 56-7)

As the trooper bundles Imran into the Gypsy, Haleem runs and kneels in front of the vehicle, cries and begs for Imran’s release but she is dragged aside and the army Gypsy leaves. Haleema chases the Gypsy until it disappears. In no while, all the neighbourhood people assemble, they try to calm and console her but she yells:

‘I am a perforated soul, my son’ (The Half Mother, 57)

Haleema now alone visits a local imam and pleads him for help. With imam and Shafiq, she visits a nearby police station- the Saddar Police Station- to file an FIR. The reply she hears from there is:

‘We cannot lodge an FIR against the army... Our job is now confined to identifying, carrying and delivering dead bodies to their families. This is the job of the police now... Sister, in your case, the only way is to approach the army itself. They take everyone they pick to their local camps’ (The Half Mother, 63)

From this part of the novel, Haleema battles for answers and– narrating her brief and full version– visits every police station, every military cum torture camp, politicians for help, Radio Kashmir to give her news, news agencies, Abdul Salaam- the barber’s home, morgues, and jails for any sign of Imran. Every times, she returns home disappointed except one possible hope Izhar, the BBC journalist. Izhar helps her escort press enclave to publish the news regarding her missing son in the Urdu newspaper Waadi ki Awaaz. Though it gives her a little bit hope and relief, yet the truth about Imran remains lost in the shadow of war. Now disappointed and hopeless, she approaches the court and in the summer of 1999, Justice Aadil Khan concludes the long inquiry and summons the army in the court of law. Haleema is thrilled; for it is the day she thinks she will finally know what happened to Imran after he was picked up. But to her dismay, she hears:

‘The least I can tell you is this: Major Aman Lal Kushwaha was killed long ago in an attack on the border’. (The Half Mother, 154)

This saddens her as Kushwaha was her only hope for Imran’s whereabouts. Though the news stuns her, yet she goes on to believe Imran is living:

‘I have to keep hoping... I cannot be defeated like this. I cannot lose him like this... I have to go home and keep waiting. Yes. That is the only this I have to do.’ (The Half Mother, 154)

Turning psycho in memory of her son, she waits and waits and waits:

‘In my long solitary walks,  
Some times  
I have imagined you as  
Someone,  
Distant to me,  
Somewhere,  
Walking in the middle of a lonely road,  
Then turning around  
Only to become someone else.  
Your face blurs,  
Tiring my eyes.

The night is tired now,  
The old moon, hanging in the dark sky,  
Is tired too,  
The roads are tired,  
Your footprints are tired,  
The candle, the windows, the doors are tired-  
I am still waiting,



Come now... (The Half Mother, 155,6)

This reflects the situation of every mother who lost her son in the on-going frenzy of war between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. This book, like *Curfewed Night* by Peer, *The Collaborator* and *The Book of Gold Leaves* by Mirza Waheed, and Agha Shahid Ali's poetry, is the witness for the injustice against Kashmir. Now, Haleema dreams her son walking back home and asks him where he had been. His reply she imagines is:

'Don't ask where I have been' (The Half Mother, 159)

Frustrated and tired after a long waiting, Haleema dies uttering:

'Imran saeba? Aakha?'

'Imran. Have you come?' (The Half Mother, 178)

Reading Shahnaz Bashir improves your knowledge about the sufferings people endured in Kashmir. Going through the pages of the novel makes you wonder about the tyrannies inflicted on old, young, women and children alike and at the same time, makes you aware about the defunct, corrupt and handicapped political, and defence set up there.

To conclude, all the indigenous voices, Basharat Peer, Shahnaz Bashir, Mirza Waheed write Kashmir (though Shahid, did his job, is no more) and its tearful tales genuinely and they, as writers, know their job well. Before them, there were writers, too, but they didn't write as insiders. They failed to portray the true picture of conflict struck valley of Kashmir. But now, Kashmir has given birth to new bold voices who work their best to put it and its conflict history through literature on the international map.

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