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The Untold Story of Kashmir: Shahnaz Bashir's *The Half Mother*

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Abstract:

After Basharat Peer's 'Curfewed Night' and Mirza Waheed's 'The Collaborator', Shahnaz Bashir's 'The Half Mother' is yet another attempt by a local author to focus on Kashmir and give voice to what has been untold. Set in trouble torn Kashmir, the novel brings to us the sad plight of occupation. The paper focuses on the somber, uncertain but hopeful Haleema and her fight for justice and dignity. The paper, taking recourse to the different incidents and episodes in the novel, focuses on Bashir's attempt to give voice to the victimized and the oppressed and forge a counter hegemonic discourse to bring to light the Indian atrocities in Kashmir and dismantle the myth of national security.

Keywords: Kashmir, Occupation, Resistance, Crackdown, Disappearance, Hegemony, Discourse

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... (Bashir: 2014, 156)

Kashmir finally has its own crop of fiction writers who have not only been able to add to the genre of novel, but have also been successful in presenting to the world readers the untold stories of Kashmir. After Basharat Peer's memoir "Curfewed Night" and Mirza Waheed's "The Collaborator", a young academician Shahnaz Bashir has come up with "The Half Mother", a novel which won him the 'Muse India Young Writer 2015' award. Commenting on the novel, Mirza Waheed, the author of "The Collaborator" writes:

"With delicately drawn characters Shahnaz Bashir tells the heartbreaking story of one woman's battle for life, dignity and justice" (Waheed: 2014). The Half Mother, Shahnaz Bashir's debut novel, is a heart-wrenching yet inspiring story of a Kashmiri woman Haleema who after the killing of her father by Indian soldiers is face to face with a greater misfortune that of the involuntary and enforced disappearance of her only son Imran. She leaves no stone unturned to

trace out her missing son only to die disappointed at the end. The novel, “finding the truth in fiction” (Hindustan Times: October 13, 2014) not only tells us the poignant tale of a woman as a daughter and a mother, but at the same time chronicles the history of Kashmir during the peak hours of turbulence in 1990’s. The novel at the same time highlights the plight of a commoner living under occupation. Shahnaz Bashir has very skillfully woven the story and presented to us the tale of Haleema which in fact is the tale of thousands of mothers in Kashmir who have lost their sons to military oppression. In an interview with Pallavi Aiyar, Bashir says that “The Half Mother is about how loneliness settles in people’s lives. It is about the battle between despair and hope, between death and life, between barbarism and helplessness, between uncertainty and longevity” (New Asian Writing: April 04, 2014). Although fictional, it has a great semblance to reality of Kashmir. The novel “brings to light one of the greatest human tragedies of the covert war in Kashmir” (The Hindu: September 06, 2014).

The novel revolves round Haleema, a courageous woman, a daughter, a wife and a mother, who is caught up in the ugly webs of occupation. Her misfortunes and ordeals begin when she is just a child. After her mother’s death, she has to be at the helm of affairs to run the daily course at her home from cooking and washing to cleaning and doing other household works. She spends her childhood in absolute penury and poverty and has to give up her studies to turn her focus to domestic affairs. On her last day at school, she donates her textbooks to her classmates and calls it a day.

“Tearful, Haleema’s teachers and friends embraced her for the last time. Her class teacher wrote on her black, bottle-rubbed glossy mashq, the wooden slate, in Urdu:

Hamaari Pyari Haleema, Hum Dua Kartein Hain Ki Tumhari Zindagi Bahut Khoobsurat Ho.

(Our beloved Haleema, we wish you a very beautiful life)” (Bashir: 2014, 10).

However, fate has something else in store for her. She grows up and gets married to a man who proves unfaithful to her. She married a man, a medical assistant by profession, who shortly after marriage is suspected of having an affair with a nurse at the hospital. “Haleema learned of the affair after finding two roughly folded pink tickets from Naaz Theater in a pocket of one of his pants. As days passed, the doubt intensified. She began rummaging through his clothes for more signs, finding kohl stains and strands of blond hair around the sleeves and collars of his shirts” (Bashir: 2014,13). Notwithstanding this desertion, Haleema decides to take a final call on her marriage and divorces her husband: “Haleema became reticent, and let him go... the marriage ended in a whimper when Haleema divorced her husband in just three months” (Bashir: 2014, 13).

In this way her teachers’ good wishing for her seem far from being fulfilled.

Bringing some solace to her life, Haleema gives birth to a male child she names Imran and lives more or less happily with her son and her father Ab Jaan at their ancestral house in Natipora. She

brings up Imran, her only child and the hope of her future. The boy is keen on learning and has high ambitions in his life. On his note book he fills the particulars with quotes like “success doesn’t matter, what matters is hard work” and “citizen of the whole earth” (Bashir: 2014, 19). But these days of happiness prove to be short lived. Armed militancy begins to sprout and spread to every nook and corner of Kashmir. Heavy militarization and mushrooming of army bunkers starts threatening common life everywhere. There are encounters with local militants, frequent crackdowns, nocturnal raids, arrests, killings and disappearances. The novel describes it like this: “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” (Bashir: 2014, 32).

Haleema’s father Gh. Rasool Joo aka Ab Jaan becomes one of the first victims of this army brutality. To avenge an attack on army by militants, Major Aman Lal Kushwaha unleashes terror on the local people. “They saw troops burning the chicken coops outside the butcher’s shop. They watched the dancing flames and heard the troops hurl incentives loudly and wildly. They heard the slamming of doors and shattering of glass and the screams of young boys pleading for mercy” (Bashir: 2014, 44). The story of atrocities does not end here. House to house searches and beating people wholesale becomes the modus operandi of the Indian army. “The next morning, a patrolling party led by major Aman Lal Kushwaha began to search the house. Almost all men in their neighborhood received their share of beating in turns. The army was still angry over the attack” (Bashir: 2014, 47). There is no caring for human rights and killing becomes as easy as anything. Anybody who dares to protest or even ask a question is silenced in the most brutal manner. Ab Jaan too has to pay and that too with his life. He is killed mercilessly by Kushwaha and his troops for arguing with them:

“Enough! Kushwaha held Ab Jaan by his collar and dragged him towards the large mortar beside the small ornamental lawn in front of the house. Two troops held Haleema and Imran back. Haleema screamed for help. ‘Kuni kahh chhu na? Anybody? Help! Please don’t kill him. Please! She screeched.

Three bullets were pumped into Ab Jaan. One in the neck. One in the heart. One in the stomach” (Bashir: 2014, 48-49).

The killing of Ab Jaan jolts Haleema severely and she is yet to recover from this shock that another misfortune hits her. This time, Imran, her only son is picked by major Kushwaha never to be returned. Haleema pleaded: “You killed my father! Leave me someone to live with! How could you be so cruel?” Haleema begged the inscrutable Kushwaha” (Bashir: 2014, 56). Haleema spreads her shawl at his feet and pleads fervently:

“What is his crime?... He is a small child! Don’t you see? ... I beg you, balaai lagai, he is innocent! She reiterated effusively... ‘Kuni kahn chhu na khudaaya! She screamed out. Anybody, please help, for God’s sake!” (Bashir: 2014, 56-57).

But the soldiers “bundled Imran into the Gypsy” and “vanished in the thick blanket of darkness” (Bashir: 2014, 57). From here begins Haleema’s search for her son. She visits every army camp, every police station to trace out her son but fails. From the infamous Papa 2 to Tihar, she searches every army installation and jail but in vain. In those days and even now, in Kashmir people were subjected to enforced disappearance by the ‘security agencies’ and those taken were actually never returned. In this sense, the story of Haleema’s search for her son is the story of all those mothers, daughters, wives, and sisters whose kin were taken away and never returned. “This is a story that Kashmiris know. Every corner of the Valley has a story. Bashir has tried to show how it feels for a mother to lose her only son, something she never imagined would happen in her own lifetime” (Hindustan Times: October 06, 2014).

Haleema fails to find her only son but she does not stop. Like the Old Man in the sea, she is ready to “be destroyed but not defeated” (Hemingway: 2014, 107). She does not know whether her son is dead or alive, but she has hope that one day Imran will be with her again:

“Imu is not alive, her heart was telling her. I have to keep hoping, she murmured to herself minutes later. I cannot be defeated like this. I cannot lose him like this. She wiped her tears, corrected her dupatta and pulled herself together. I have to go home and keep waiting. Yes. That is the only thing I have to do” (Bashir: 2014, 154).

The novel very poignantly tells us about the sad repercussions of occupation and how truth and justice become the first casualty in such situations. Running from pillar to post, knocking every door, and narrating her ‘brief’ as well as ‘full version’ of her son’s disappearance, Haleema seeks answers, but returns with ‘no’ every time. The state machinery, the police, the army, politicians and even the media, all refuse to help her in the quest of her son.

“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” (Bashir: 2014, 63).

Devastated, life falls apart for Haleema and she slides into schizophrenia and insomnia murmuring:

“O crescent moon, why do you hide from me?
Sulking as you are, why have you kept me?” (Bashir: 2014, 70)

Throughout the novel we have instances of inhuman torture and violence that is rampant in Kashmir. During one of her visits to a morgue at Srinagar, Haleema meets a man called Khizir, popularly known as Khizir post-mortem: “Though his full name was Khizir Muhammad, everyone referred to him as Khizir Post-mortem- he had performed over ten thousand post-mortems throughout his service” (Bashir: 2014, 132). He has been performing postmortem of the dead killed in violence and has gruesome tale of torture to tell:

“Then there was a young boy- in whose stomach I found coals and strips of cloth. His gut smelt 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” (Bashir: 2014, 134-135).

Strangely, violence and torture, rape and enforced disappearance has been used as a state sponsored tool in Kashmir to quell any resistance by the local people. In his review of the novel, Fahad Shah writes that “this may have been written as a work of fiction but it adds to the narrative that the people of Kashmir are trying to frame about the reality of the region” (Hindustan Times: October 06, 2014). The novel tries to expose these extrajudicial measures taken up in the name of ‘national security’, ‘sovereignty and integrity’ and gives voice to the suppressed that are otherwise silenced by the dominant hegemonic state discourse on Kashmir. The myth of ‘national security’, which legalizes killing and torture and gives impunity to the perpetrators and is continuously (mis)used to justify oppressive state policies in Kashmir, is challenged and debunked. The novel assumes significance as a piece of resistance literature and a counter narrative discourse as it gives voice to the voiceless occupied subjects of Kashmir in the wake of a total media blackout of news from Kashmir, especially the news related to the issue of mass graves and estimated eight thousand cases of enforced disappearances. By giving us the account of Haleema’s victimization, Shahnaz Bashir has actually highlighted it as the reality of Kashmir. The novelist becomes a spokesman of the victims of Kashmir. For this reason the novel is “widely lauded in literary circles for its bold new voice” (New Asian Writing: April 04, 2014).

Throughout the novel an atmosphere of awe and insecurity is evoked by a faithful depiction of reality in Kashmir. The story is told in a bold and uncompromising manner, in a way it needed to be told. The Half Mother is a counter hegemonic discourse that not only helps us in understanding oppression but also shows resistance and gives hope.

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