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Kausar Jan: A Victim of Conflict in Danesh Rana's *Red Maize*

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Abstract:

Kashmir conflict has been a theme of many contemporary fictional and non-fictional narratives. The conflict has been presented by the writers from different perspectives. Danesh Rana, an Inspector General of Police in Jammu, too has transmuted his experiences in the novel *Red Maize*, wherein, the main protagonist becomes a victim without being a party to it. Kashmir conflict spread its vicious tentacles towards the other regions of the state and ruined the lives of many innocent people. The women have been the worst sufferers as they experienced conflict in diverse ways. This paper examines *Red Maize* in the backdrop of Kashmir conflict using Althusser's concept of ideology.

Keywords: torture, conflict, military, mother, interrogation, ideology, apparatuses.

Set in the period of late nineties, the novel *Red Maize* portrays the Kashmir conflict spreading over to the adjoining regions and the human tragedies associated with it. The locale of the novel is non-descript village of Morha Madana of Doda District of Jammu province, where militancy had started entrapping people in its poisonous tentacles. As long as there has been war, many writers have struggled to tell the truth but Danesh Rana has unmasked many forces involved in the conflict who have exploited everything with the power of authority and gun in their hands.

The writer has shown that in the conflict zones both Ideological Apparatuses and State Repressive Apparatuses ruin the common people for their own vested interests. The story revolves around a widow Kausar Jan, who loses all her three sons in this conflict. Kausar Jan represents all those mothers of conflict who have undergone various shades of oppression.

The tale of miseries begin in Kausar Jan's life when her son Shakeel joins the militant outfit and becomes the area commander and the most wanted militant of the area. Like all the youngsters, Shakeel, too is fascinated by gun-toting militants and is entrapped by them in the name of jihad and *azadi*. Shakeel's one wrong step drags his family into the slough of troubles. Shakeel is

ideologically tempted by Rehmatullah Peer, one of the oldest militants of the area. He convinces the young boys and prompts them to wage war in the name of religion.

Althusser argued that the Ideological apparatuses control the people by convincing them through their ideologies and by brain washing them. Rehmatullah Peer too colonized the young boys by his impressive oratory skills and ostentatious display of his religiosity. He mesmerized the people in the following way:

The earth belongs to Allah and there should only be His rule on it, he began his sermon .Everyone grew attentive .We propagate peace, but if you are not willing to acknowledge our right to offer Namaz five times a day, we also have the courage to wield guns and send our Hindu enemy to their well-deserved pyres. He spoke for ten minutes and concluded dramatically, quoting from the Hadith. (*Red Maize* 50)

The euphoria of *azadi* and the magnetism of militants like Rehmatullah Peer attracted young people of the village and dragged them into a quagmire of miseries. Under the influence of Rehmatullah Peer Shakeel becomes the first militant of Morha Madana. The poor widow Kausar Jan's life is torn into pieces by Rehmatullah Peer and his fake ideology when she becomes the mother of a militant Shakeel, who left his mother crying and veiling for three years.

Kausar Jan's second son, Khalid is not ideologically inclined towards jihad but he becomes a victim of circumstances. His brother's one step wrecks their whole family. Khalid is dragged into the conflict after he is repeatedly picked up by an army officer Major Rathore and tortured because his brother happens to be the most wanted militant. Major Rathore, a representative of Repressive State Apparatus, is a swanky army man in his late twenties who likes listening to Pink Floyd and dreams of going back to his home town Jaipur where he could marry and go shopping in malls. Khalid is being brutalized by Major Rathore only to capture or kill Shakeel. For him Shakeel's death means a lot-his transfer to his home town and his reunion with his family. The torture not only bruises Khalid's whole body but lacerates his psyche. The evil treatment given to Khalid in interrogation centre has been described in the novel as:

He is asked to sit with his legs open. Two soldiers hold him down with his thighs and say, 'Now do the ultra-Namaste. Take your legs back and join the soles of your feet and do the ultra-Namaste.' The soldiers forcibly wrench his thighs apart and he shrieks in pain. They try to stretch them even more till it comes to a point where his thighs could almost tear apart. Khalid howls in agony, 'Ya Allah *reham kar*'. (*Red Maize* 39)

Khalid felt humiliated when he is stripped off his clothes leaving him naked, he is completely shattered and disillusioned and develops hatred for the security forces and his brother Shakeel. As the events unfold, Khalid is forced to pick up gun and he disappears. Khalid's disappearance crushes Kausar Jan and is caught in the cross fire between the militants and the army, like the

hundreds of mothers of the state, she is completely shattered. The mother of three sons becomes the mother of a militant and then half mother. She never wanted her sons to become militants, she worked very hard after her husband's untimely death to raise her sons to become loving brothers and good Muslims. She worked hard in her fields to raise her crops, Being a widow she set all her hopes on the maize and her three sons, she nurtured both with tender and care. Maize for her was like her sons. When she lost all her sons she was left with nothing but maize:

Year after year, she would tend to the maize crop as if she were raising another child. When the summer rains heralded the maize season, she would meticulously plough the wet earth and smoothen it with a wooden plank. After sowing the seeds, she would eagerly wait for the tender saplings to sprout. As the days passed, and the first green tassles appeared, she would have a tough time running after her sons to stop them from plucking the white flowers. 'Maize is all we have', she would reprimand them. (*Red Maize 7*)

The lives of Kausar Jan's sons revolved around their mother and she would always act like a judge to resolve the disputes among her sons acting as a "harbinger of peace." Kausar Jan's life was very peaceful until the call for azadi crossed over to the mountains of her village, with a bloody price tag attached to it. Initially the villagers welcomed the militants wholeheartedly and eulogized them; they considered themselves to be chosen ones of Allah to welcome the valiant warriors. All kinds of cuisines were fed to the militants and ladies sang songs to greet them. Soon the dark side of *azadi* began to reveal its dirty face to the people when the demands of militants increased. The enthusiasm fizzled out slowly which has been reflected in the novel as:

Young men were often picked up and used as porters, couriers and guides. Money was extorted on one pretext or the other generously, 'The mujahids are collecting money for constructing new mosques in the villages and people must donate generously, 'was the diktat.' The money is required for the wellbeing of the families of our fallen brothers. The hapless people of Morha Madana could admit only in their private comfort that, 'It is *fasaad* and not a jihad.' It is a riot and not the holy war. (*Red Maize 11*)

The Ideological State Apparatuses initially convince the people by ideology and later on by repression suppress them. The militants inflicted atrocities on people by forcibly kidnapping their daughters to gratify their desires. In the past years of conflict there had been many stories wherein, the militants demanded their daughters from parents on gun points and the poor parents watched helplessly.

Shakeel's appearance after three years makes his mother Kausar Jan's life miserable. Her agony and grief increases when she meets her son after a long separation. Her eyes are flooded with tears when she hugs her son. Her pain and agony has been depicted in the novel as:

Shakeel! Kausar Jan exclaims. A mother does not need light to recognize her own son, not even three long years of pain and separation. 'Piece of my heart, where have you been all these years? Did you care to even know if your mother was alive or dead?' as she cries. Tears well in her eyes as she reaches out to kiss her son's forehead. (*Red Maize 2*)

Kausar Jan feels that as a mother she had failed in raising her son Shakeel, who had left his home to embrace the new life under the supervision of Rehmatullah Peer whom the people revered blindly. Initially, Khalid too wanted to emulate the militants and desired to join militant outfit but Kausar Jan lamented over her son's wish and made him vow not to fall prey to such desires. She could stop her elder son from becoming a militant, but she could not stop her younger son from embarking on the path of jihad or holy war.

With Shakeel's entry into the village, Major Rathore conducts searches, interrogates people, and Khalid is taken inside the army camp and different questions are posed to Kausar Jan to extract information about Shakeel. With Gul Mohammad's help, the head man and the informer, Rathore comes to know of Shakeel's visit to his mother. Kausar Jan being an honest lady could not hide anything from Major Rathore. She is being caught up in her motherly love for her son and the tension and terror created by the armed forces. Khalid being an innocent, becomes a victim, he receives inhuman treatment and is beaten ruthlessly during his confinement which transforms the whole course of his life. His self-respect and psyche is tormented and after his release from the captivity, he takes recourse to religion. Outwardly his wounds appear to be healed but his inner scars were too deep to heal:

He starts to grow beard and offer Namaz five times a day. He seems to age many years in less than a week. He sits at the window of attic and stares at the outside world all through the day. Sometimes he cranes his neck to peer at the jungles surrounding the mountains. In a few weeks, the wounds on his body heal, but his soul feels scarred forever. (*Red Maize 41*)

Kausar Jan showers her affection on her elder son Khalid, she nurses him and tries to shield him from unseen catastrophes, but her agony doesn't end here, she lives in constant fear of losing her son Shakeel. Her mind remains engrossed in his thoughts and her pains aggravate when she visualizes the death of her son in an encounter with the armed forces. She always prays for the wellbeing of her son Shakeel but when her innocent son Khalid is being targeted and the villagers are tortured during crackdown, Kausar Jan bursts out in anguish, "You can go and kill my son and liberate us from this ordeal. Please go and kill Shakeel and let us live a peaceful life". (*Red Maize 97*)

Kausar Jan is convinced of her son Khalid's innocence and she approaches Major Rathore for help in tracing her missing son but she is disillusioned. Gul Mohammad, the head man of the village acts as a double agent working both for army and the militants, he too doesn't help her

but he usurps her money every time. She resolves to find her missing son Khalid and sells her two goats to Gul Mohammad for very meager price. In the search for her son Khalid, she comes across hundreds and thousands of such women who were caught in the conflict and were left with no choice but to play the role of survivors and resisters. This is the same ordeal that hundreds of women go through in their daily routine if their kiths and kins have taken recourse to militancy and the poor women have to pay the heavy price for it. To trace her son Khalid she wanders through the narrow streets of Doda.

The novel depicts the mental turbulence of a mother who makes relentless efforts to find out her missing son:

She imagines him appearing miraculously and wrapping his strong arms around her. In her relentless pursuit, she walks about the busy squares and bazars bustling with people. She asks strangers, jaywalkers, soldiers ensconced in their bunkers, about her son. People laugh at her and assume that she is mad. Some give her alms, thinking that she is a beggar. (*Red Maize* 107)

Kausar Jan doesn't turn any stone unturned to know the where- about of her son. She visits shrines, orphanages, hotels, hospitals and even consults higher authorities but receives only fake verbal assurances. Some clerks ask for money to provide the information but like a hapless mother she relies on God and the blessings of seers and saints. In the *Red Maize*, Kausar Jan is a stereotype of women belonging to the conflict ridden areas.

The immense pain and trauma changes Kausar Jan rapidly. Her hair starts greying rapidly and her wrinkled face explains her helplessness. "She feels that she has nothing to lose except her own wretched existence and the God she blindly believes." (110)

The novel *Red Maize* highlights emotions of an ageing mother Kausar Jan, who is faced with calamity after calamity. The conflict does not obliterate her present, but it also mutilates her future. Shakeel's death petrifies her completely and tears in her eyes are dried as she has completely forgotten to cry. Her agony has been portrayed as:

There are no tears left in her eyes. Women embrace her and cry into her shoulder, but she remains indifferent. (*Red Maize* 212)

Kausar Jan had anticipated the death of son Khalid also and her all hopes were pinned on her younger son Firdous. The cruel inspector of Task Force Mustafa hatches a conspiracy to entrap innocent Firdous in the fake encounter. Firdous is recruited as an SPO in the Task Force and Kausar Jan feels contented and happy to see her younger safe from the tentacles of militants. Her happiness has been described in the novel as:

This is the happiest Kausar Jan has been in the long time. Life appears to be a sweet song, finally devoid of jarring notes and coarse lyrics. She enjoys her

dinner and twirls the rosary before sleep fills her eyes. She slips into a deep slumber and smiles as if in a joyful reverie. (*Red Maize* 227)

Firdous became a pawn in the bloody game of politics, he reminiscences his school days as his innocence has been snatched by the dreadful Klashinkov. The sight of killings and fake encounters by the Task Forces had left him sad and he planned to quit this deadly job. He and many people like him are made scape goats by the security forces to earn goodwill and promotions. Firdous, the last hope of Kausar Jan is killed in a very deceitful way in a fake encounter and he is labeled as a militant by the security forces. Mustafa's heinous act pierces Major Rathore's soul and he feels guilty conscious. Danesh Rana explains his turbulence as:

Major Rathore is stunned into silence. The terrible betrayal sinks in slowly; an innocent young boy has been trapped and murdered in cold blood. This blood is on his own hands too...Major Rathore's eyes flare with rage. He feels helpless and furious at the same time. Guilt chokes him in its vicious stranglehold. (*Red Maize* 263)

The novel beautifully portrays Kausar Jan as a mother who changes many descriptions—a militant's mother, half-mother and finally not being a mother at all when she loses all her three sons to the bloody conflict. Danesh Rana has summed Kausar Jan's pain and suffering in these lines:

Kausar Jan was being ripped apart at the dilemma of being the mother of two mujahids and a third who was an SPO, fighting against the tanzeem. Her loyalty was being pulled in opposite directions; she was being pricked by a million needles of guilty love, and her endurance was reaching its threshold. No mother could ever choose between her sons...She had become a metaphor for Kashmir—the coveted valley of conflict...She was being wooed and humiliated at the same time. She was the vast meadow of a million blooming flowers and she was the land strewn with deadly thorns. (*Red Maize* 243)

Danesh Rana has unmasked these Ideological and State Apparatuses who for their own benefits made Kausar Jan a victim of conflict. All her hopes were buried with the three graves of her sons who could have brought solace and comfort to their mother. Danesh has highlighted the emotions of an ageing mother who faces calamity after calamity in the dreaded conflict. Kausar Jan becomes a metaphor for Kashmir and an obdurate hope that peace shall return to the beautiful valley.

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