The Criterion: An International Journal in English
Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed Open Access e-Journal
(ISSN: 0976-8165) Vol. 17, Issue-V, October 2026
www.the-criterion.com

Maternal Grief, Enforced Disappearance and State Violence in Shahnaz Bashir's *The Half Mother*

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https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n5.6

Abstract:
This paper examines maternal grief, enforced disappearance, and state violence in *The Half Mother*, situating the text within the context of conflict-ridden Kashmir and explaining the disastrous impact of militarisation and forced disappearances on common families. The paper explores the psychological and emotional trauma of the victims' families who are left in an uncertain and unresolved grieving condition. Through trauma and postcolonial theory, this paper analyses how Bashir employs literary narrative to portray the gender-specific suffering of women and the silencing of women's voices. The novel reflects the courage of mothers who challenge institutional silence and systemic violence through their continuous struggle to find the truth and seek justice. The paper also examines how memory, trauma, and symbolism represent experiences of loss and uncertainty. The paper highlights how the novel reveals the humanitarian price of political conflict and redefines loss and survival.

Keywords: Maternal Grief, Enforced Disappearance, Kashmir Conflict, Trauma, Human Rights, Resistance.

Article History: Submitted-09/08/2026, Revised-04/10/2026, Accepted-11/10/2026, Published-31/10/2026.

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Introduction

The Half Mother by Shahnaz Bashir is a heart-rending novel that portrays the human suffering caused by political conflict in Kashmir. The novel provides a strong literary commentary on maternal grief, imposed disappearance, and state violence through the individual narrative of Haleema, after her son, Imran, was taken by the security forces: "The trooper bundled Imran into the Gypsy and hastily leapt behind him. He stood there, holding on to the railing of the Gypsy's roof. Haleema ran in front of the vehicle and knelt in front of its bonnet, breathing hard, begging and crying for Imran's release. A trooper dragged her aside and the Gypsy picked up speed." (Bashir 57) Literature from conflict-ridden areas give voices to the people whose experiences and suffering are often ignore or silenced. In this regard, the work by Bashir is a testimony of emotional and psychological torment of ordinary families who have to endure the process of militarisation and long-time political instability. The narrative focuses on people's personal experiences rather than abstract political arguments, showing how political conflict affects the inner parts of family and motherhood. It has been a common point among scholars that literature of conflict zones is not only a form of storytelling, but also a kind of social recording where the collective trauma and resistance are written down (Caruth 25). In this way, *The Half Mother* indicates how the suffering of a single family reflects the wider social and political struggles faced by thousands of families in Kashmir.

The socio-political history of Kashmir is a critical basis for the interpretation of the novel. The region has also been witnessing political instability, militarisation and armed conflict that have had a major impact on the day-to-day way of life of civilians in the region since the late twentieth century. Researchers of the Kashmir conflict have highlighted that the presence of a high rate of military, counterinsurgency, and political tensions has created an atmosphere of fear

and insecurity among the locals (Duschinski 648). These circumstances have also led to the rise of other human rights issues such as cruel acts of arbitrary arrests, custodial violence and enforced disappearance. From this perspective, literature provides a platform where the repressed experiences and shared pain can be expressed. Bashir presents Haleema's story within wider political conflict in Kashmir, which highlights the fact that the conflict is not just a geopolitical matter but a reality that deeply affects the emotional and social lives of Kashmiri society. As Bashir writes in the book, "An endless curfew followed. The government announced shoot-at-sight orders for anyone who defied the curfew." (Bashir 39) The protagonist's daily life reflects the tension, constant surveillance, and insecurity of living in a militarized region, where people often suffer because of circumstances beyond their control.

Enforced disappearance is one of the major themes explored in the novel and has become a serious human rights issue in conflict zones around the world. Enforced disappearance is the arrest, detention, or abduction of someone by the state or their representatives at that time being refused the choice of their destiny or location (United Nations 2). Not only does it violate basic human rights, but it also leaves the families of missing persons in a state of uncertainty and emotional distress. The disappearance of Haleema's son, Imran, is the central event in *The Half Mother,* which drives the narrative and shapes Haleema's struggle to discover the truth about her son's fate. The fact that Imran simply disappeared is indicative of the lives of many Kashmiri families who have also experienced the same situations in times of political turmoil. Bashir's description highlights the catastrophic effect of these practices on human beings and collective conscience of society.

The uncertainty surrounding Imran's fate becomes a central plot device with the help of which the author reveals the emotional effects caused by the disappearance of a loved one. The fact that

Haleema was searching for her son relentlessly shows that forced disappearance does not allow the grief and mourning process to proceed as usual. In contrast to traditional types of losses in which death is established, lack of information on a missing person leaves a psychological state which has been described as an ambiguous loss, where persons have been left in between the realms of hope and despair (Boss 45). This idea is especially applicable to the situation experienced by families in Kashmir who still seek their missing family members even after a long time. This uncertainty and the timeframe of it is seen in the way Bashir describes the experience of Haleema and puts emphasis on the emotional cost that such events are causing mothers and families: “Haleema said it was futile to complain at that late hour; wisdom lay in passing the night and not spending it awake. Since Kashmiris are unwelcome everywhere outside of our lands, a complaint might harm us more.” (Bashir 119) The story therefore indicates how political violence goes beyond physical harm and goes deep down into the emotional and psychological aspects of human beings’ lives.

In this context, maternal grief becomes a central theme of the novel. The character of Haleema reflects the great agony of mothers whose children have vanished under the war conditions. Her sorrow does not just end with the loss of a child, but is compounded by the fact that she has not yet gone through the grieving process and has no idea what happened to Imran. Gender and conflict scholars have often highlighted the fact that women usually experience special burdens in the time of political violence, especially as mothers or caregivers (Enloe 67). Mothers in conflict regions usually become the main actors in information seeking of the lost family members, interacting with human rights organisation and demanding accountability from the government. This fact is manifested in the story of Bashir, who uses Haleema as a strong woman who does not give up her quest regardless of all the challenges. “I am broke. I don’t have a penny

now… But I have hope. I wish to die but this hope pulls me back. I have spent everything looking for him. I have not let my feet rest anywhere. It seems I have just walked and walked all my life." (Bashir 109)

The allegorical concept of the half mother, on which the novel title is based, is the feeling of the women whose children are lost. These mothers experience a sense of incompleteness because they cannot completely accept the death of their children. They are deprived of their children's presence and continue to live with the uncertainty of their fate. According to literary critics, such symbolic representations are strong means of communicating the emotional dynamics of loss and trauma in conflict literature (Alexander 12). The term half-mother in Bashir's novel represents not only individual mother's sorrow but also the collective suffering Kashmiri women who have experienced similar losses and pain. By doing so in this symbolism, the author draws attention to the social implications of forced disappearance in general and shows how the trauma of a single family is brought into a bigger context of common trauma. Moreover, the theme of maternal grief in the novel is also a criticism towards the systems of power and authority that support violence and silence. The case of Haleema in her struggle to get information about her son shows the institutional disorder and apathy that families are subjected to in the search for justice. In this way, Bashir's novel is not merely a literary work but also a form of resistance that gives voices to people whose experiences are usually ignored in political discussions.

Besides the point of grief and suffering, the novel also puts emphasis on the resilience and perseverance of the mothers who still seek the truth despite the overwhelming challenges. The continued attempts of Haleema are the iconic representation of all the women who do not want to remain quiet because of injustice. Her experience reflects an additional struggle for recognition, accountability and dignity in conflict-ridden society. In her contribution to the cause by showing

the life of one of the mothers, Bashir ends up enlightening the people in general, even though their lives have been influenced by violence and confusion. *The Half Mother*, with its emotionally powerful storyline and focus on human rights issues, turns out to be a valuable contribution to the modern conflict literature, giving the reader a better insight into the human impact of the political violence and the enduring power of the maternity love.

The Figure of the "Half Mother"

The term half mother carries deep symbolic and emotional significance in *The Half Mother*, as it represents a mother who suffers the loss of her child in a political conflict and is left to endure pain surrounding her child's fate. "He couldn't be certain what status of victimhood should be attested to her. 'So am I a half mother?' Haleema repeated." (Bashir 143) The phrase symbolises a special type of sorrow that lies between certitude and uncertainty, life and death, hope and despair. Haleema represents this tragic identity in the story following the loss of her son Imran who is abducted by security forces and never returns home. In contrast to traditional grieving process, in which mourning begins after the death of a loved one, Haleema's suffering is markred by uncertainty and the endless wait for news about her son's fate. This uncertainty prevents her from completing the grieving process. Researchers of enforced disappearance have referred to the phenomenon as an ambiguous loss, in which the lack of a loss procedure creates a state of psychological suspendedness to families between hope and mourning (Boss 45). The uncertainty portrayed by Bashir concerning Haleema describes how the motherhood itself becomes meaningless as the identity of the mother is torn and uncertain. The concept of the half mother is also representative to the collective life of women in Kashmir who have lost their children to enforced disappearances and is still seeking responses amid ongoing conflict. The novel shows

the tenacious fight by mothers trying to find out the truth about their lost children by taking Haleema through police stations, detention centres, and government offices. This identity reflects the emotional desolation and the continuation of hope, because mothers do not want to accept the silence established by the authorities. It has been frequently stated by the literary scholars that the literary stories on maternal suffering in conflict literature are effective criticisms of political violence because it exposes the human face of the policies and military actions that would not be known to the official discourse (Das 25). In this regard, the image of the half mother emerges as more than the actual label of a person; it transforms into the symbolic embodiment of the unresolved grief and opposition to the imposed forgetfulness. Bashir portrays these unresolved disappearance as a reflection of incomplete nature of justice and the unresolved past of the region. In this way, the personal trauma of Haleema is being turned into the story of collective trauma and struggle for survival experienced by the Kashmiri people.

State Violence and Militarisation

The other major theme of the novel is the endemic nature of state violence and militarisation, which is the order of the day in Kashmir. “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, killing, bunkers, an exodus of people, burning markets, schools and buildings.” (Bashir 32) Using the writing style of vivid descriptions, Bashir depicts a society in which military checkpoints, spy cameras, and armed patrols are now established elements of the terrain. The Heavy presence of security forces in civilian areas creates a culture of fear and uncertainty that dictates the behaviour, communication, and interaction of people within their communities. Theorists who have studied

militarised societies have observed that a long-term presence of the military can lead to a culture of mistrust and fear where the common citizens are viewed as people who can harm them instead of those who are safeguarded (Bose 45). In *The Half Mother*, such a sense of fear can be observed in the way Haleema and other locals live in a world where those in position of authority have an enormous control over the lives and destiny of civilians. Disappearance of Imran can be taken as a pivotal narrative moment that reveals the processes of state violence inherent in this militarised space. His arrest and eventual disappearance are an example of how institutional power may act without being accountable and leave the families helpless in their quest to seek justice. Bashir is not isolated in his story but represents the wider issues brought by human rights thinkers on the normalized utilization of extraordinary powers in war-torn areas, where the law might take a back seat to safety demands (Duschinski 648). The search conducted by Haleema after a series of encounters with bureaucratic apathy and official denial helps to outline the barriers at the structural level that do not allow the families of victims to find out any information or seek legal redress. The novel thus does not show state violence as just some occasional acts of cruelty but as a system of greater scope of control and silence that pervades ordinary life. Furthermore, the authoritarian existence of militarisation in the novel has some other impacts on the social relations and the psychological well-being in the community. Fear of being spied on and arrested at any time prevent the open sharing of the disappearance and compel numerous families to live in silence and solitude. The story of Bashir shows how this atmosphere of fear is slowly undermining trust between neighbours and destroying the social structure of Kashmiri society. It has been argued by literary critics that fiction based in conflict zones tends to display how political violence secretly permeates the domestic space and emotional lives (Caruth 25). *The Half Mother* is another story where the impact of militarization

can be experienced first-hand because the home where Haleema lives is changed by the absence, anxiety, and the constant belief that Imran will come home. In this description, the novel highlights the fact that state violence goes well beyond physical force and that it is influencing the psychological and social reality of people who have to live in a state of long-term conflict.

Gendered Dimensions of Conflict

The gendered aspects of political struggle are also revealed in the novel as they reveal how women are affected by the effects of violence in unique and, in many cases, more lasting ways. Although armed conflicts are often positioned in the context of men as the participants and the political entities as the subjects, the story of Bashir alters the situation because the women are human beings who suffer emotional and social consequences of a long period of instability. As evidenced by the experience of Haleema, mothers, wives, and widows are turned into mere spectators of violence with the burden of holding on families without their male counterparts. Feminist researchers have persistently stressed that women in war zones are often forced to bear a double burden in that they suffer both the direct effects of violence and the burden of keeping the house afloat in times of desperate circumstances (Enloe 67). In *The Half Mother*, this weight is felt when Haleema endures economic, social and emotional abuse in her pursuit of finding her lost son. “After Ab Jaan, I have only one reason to live and that is Imran. I don’t know what will happen to me. I might faint and fall on a burning stove someday or I might not wake up one morning. But while I exist in this world, I have one reason to live.” (Bashir 109) The displacement that enforced disappearance introduces also puts women in a very precarious situation in the context of traditional social structures. Unless death or survival is confirmed, women such as Haleema are left in a grey social position, which makes life hard in both family

and community life. The anthropological analyses of conflict areas have revealed that this uncertainty can often cause a long-term emotional trauma and marginalization because families have to re-determine their identities and roles (Butalia 49). The discussion of Bashir about Haleema and the loss of Imran shows that the lack of maternal relationships affects not only the life of the family but the whole family structure, which compels women to bear roles that are not limited by their expectations. Besides, the novel stresses the fact that the grief of women is frequently a strong force of memory and opposition. Haleema refuses to accept her son's disappearance without knowing the truth and continues searching for him, thereby challenging the systems that deny or ignore the suffering of families of missing persons. Scholars suggest that the stories of loss women share are often very important repositories of the social pain in societies where political violence has been witnessed (Hirsch 29). In her constant search towards answers, Haleema as represented by Bashir shows how the maternal memory is a way of sustaining the identity of the disappeared and the impetus against the normalization of violence. *The Half Mother*, therefore, indicates that although conflict might seem to be a political or military phenomenon, its most profound effects are usually felt in the intimate and gendered difference of the family institutions, where women are the long-term emotional and social victims of violence.

Trauma, Memory, and Psychological Impact

In *The Half Mother* the trauma is not depicted as a momentary emotional response but as a long-term psychological disorder predetermined by the ambiguity, loss, and the endless quests of the truth. "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) The enforced

disappearance has left a deep psychological scar on Haleema, since her thoughts about her son Imran constantly come back to her throughout the story, further aggravating her emotional distress. The scholars have insisted that the experiences of political violence usually interfere with the regular operations of memory that makes an individual relive the painful experiences through recollection, imagination and constant yearning (Caruth 25). The recollections of memories of Imran as a child, his voice, and the way he looks constantly remind Haleema of his absence, which has become a painful part of her everyday life. These memories cannot help her; they only make her psychologically miserable as they support the painful uncertainty about what happens to him. The psychological consequences of the enforced disappearance are especially drastic as they result in the so-called ambiguous loss, a state whereby people lack the ability to fully grieve or have a detached attitude towards loss, owing to lack of certainty of death (Boss 45). This uncertainty is what characterises the life of Haleema, who is still hoping that her son could be alive and at the same time face the prospect that he could be dead. This uneasy situation does not allow her to come to emotional balance and makes her everyday life a living chain of sorrow and expectation. The story written by Bashir describes the way trauma slowly diffuses into the identity of Haleema so that it influences her connections, her own concept of time, and her possibilities to have a life after loss. The mental agony described in the novel is thus an extension of the general experiences of the families residing in the warring countries where the state of uncertainty and the silence of the institutions exert a greater effect on the emotional suffering. The novel discloses the long-term psychological effects of political violence through the memories of Haleema and the emotional conflicts she is going through, as well as the collective experience.

Symbolism and Narrative Technique

Shahnaz Bashir uses various literary devices to render the emotional sting and the political undertone of the story. Symbolism, particularly the central metaphor of the half mother, is one of the novel's most powerful literary devices, representing mothers who experience incomplete grief because the uncertain fate of their missing children presents them from fully mourning their loss. This reflects the paradox of her identity: she remains a mother, yet she is denied the very assurance of motherhood. Through this metaphor, Bashir transforms personal experience of a mother into a symbol of collective suffering of many families across Kashmir. The most common argument among literary critics is that symbolism enables an author to convey intricate emotional and political truths in a manner that surpasses a literal depiction, allowing the reader to read between the lines of the text and find some deeper meaning within it (Barry 45). Besides symbolism, the narrative style of Bashir is greatly based on imagery and descriptive storytelling to capture the emotional scenery of loss and silence. The description of empty streets, quiet houses and nervous waiting is a strong effect that covers the psychological condition of the characters. "That night, the Joo house resounded with wails underneath the dark starry sky. The orchard was full of mourners. The Joos' kith and kin had already turned up. Amid the mourners, conscious yet unsettling and inconsolable, Haleema was reclining against the lap of Shafiqa." (Bashir 52) This kind of imagery assists in expressing the sense of emptiness, which pervades the novel, in which the physical loss of people causes a lack of feeling in families and societies. Moreover, Bashir's narrative style focuses on personal experiences and intimate perspectives rather than grand political narratives, enabling readers to witness the conflict through the eyes of common people. Such a narrative approach is consistent with the literary traditions according to which a personal testimony is a tool of revealing the human effects of political violence (Das 29).

With the use of symbolism, imagination, and emotion-centred narration, Bashir can bring out the extent of grief, silence, and the endurance that define the lives of people who have been victims of enforced disappearances.

The other noticeable theme in the novel is the never-ending pursuit of justice by Haleema that slowly transforms into some form of rebellion against institutional indifference and silence. After the loss of her son, Haleema does not want to face the ambiguity which is dictated to her, and she starts a process of ruthless quest to find out the truth. She goes to police offices, detention centres and government offices, hoping that she will get a lead regarding the whereabouts of Imran. Though these attempts are usually denied, treated indifferently or hindered by bureaucracy, Haleema's persistence reflects the determination of people who refuse to let their loved ones bee forgotten or lost among the general population. Researchers on the social consequences of forced disappearance have observed that oftentimes this leads to the family of the disappeared becoming activists and champions of the truth as individuals turn personal sorrow into mass action (Robben 67). The fact that the main character Haleema is on the hunt to find her son is a symbolic representation of the larger fight for recognition and justice that is faced by countless families in war-torn countries. Her actions question the power structures that seek to suppress information and silence the voices of victims. By refusing to accept official accounts unquestionably, Haleema affirms that her son's life had value and institutions that are not able to offer proper resolutions must also be responsible. This perseverance demonstrates the way of resistance which may occur not only due to the organised political movements but also to the personal attempts of remembering and not forgetting. On the literary level, Bashir makes the journey of Haleema a moral challenge to the authority structures making efforts to eliminate traces of violence. Through Haleema's uncompromising quest for truth, the novel underlines the

idea that the necessity to pursue justice frequently starts with the will of the people who are not ready to believe that silence is the ultimate result of the process.

Human Rights Perspective

The topics that are covered in *The Half Mother* are also closely connected to the world-wide debate on human rights infringement especially the question of enforced disappearance. It is also commonly known that enforced disappearance is a grave violation of human rights since it deals with loss of freedom, denial of law, and covering of the fate or location of the person. Human rights instruments such as the United Nations Declaration on the Protection of All Persons against Enforced Disappearance (1992) have highlighted that not only the disappeared individuals suffer but their families and communities also are devastated by such practices. This is the reality reflected in the novel by Bashir as the author attempts to show how the loss of one person can have a ripple effect of emotional, social, and psychological ruin to the people left behind. Literature usually has a significant role in providing awareness on the human rights issues which are likely to be concealed in the official accounts. Bashir has provided the humanitarian impacts of institutional silence and political war by putting the personal stories of Haleema, as well as other families, into the limelight of disappearance. The argument of scholars has been that the literary manifestations of human rights crimes serve the purpose of raising awareness among the general population by making the abstract legal terminologies into emotionally touching tales that emotionally connect with the audience (Hunt 27). In this regard, *The Half Mother* is more than a work of fiction; it serves as a piece of testimony that captures the reality of people who experience injustice. Having explored the issues of maternal grief, trauma, and seeking the truth, the novel makes it clear that the problem of accountability and recognition

of victims' rights in cases of political violence is urgent. Therefore, the work by Bashir allows relating the experience of Kashmiri families to the greater global discourse on the topic of justice, memory, and the right to human dignity during conflict periods. As one of the characters from the novel explains, saying, "You know, Izhar, the government has already stopped advertising with us because we publish this human rights stuff. They have been accusing us of sensationalism. Ha! Ha! They say that we do not follow their policy." (Bashir 76)The gendered effects of conflict and silent sustenance of mothers whose children have vanished are brought out in the story as it focuses on the emotional journey of Haleema. These depictions expand the conflict literature by taking the narrative out of the heroic or militarised literature, and presenting it as one of survival, sorrow, and perseverance. *The Half Mother*, in that regard, turns into a crucial literary intervention increasing the experiences of Kashmiri families, who were left to live with uncertainty and loss. The novel is a literary archive that safeguards the emotional backgrounds of families who were victims of enforced disappearances. The text makes the personal pain of Haleema a collective memory of her mourning by telling of her constant quest for the truth so that the victims and their families are not seen as forgotten by people.

Conclusion

As seen in the analysis of *The Half Mother*, maternal grief, enforced disappearance, and state violence come together in a very strong story of how political war can affect the human being. Through the character of Haleema, the novel depicts strong emotional pain of mothers who have lost their children and end up in a state of desolation that is neither hope nor despair. The fact that it turned Haleema into a half-mother is a representation of the brutal psychological effects of unexplained disappearance when the lack of resolution does not allow mourning to be finished

and finds a new meaning of identity. Through this story, one can understand how forced displacement does not merely take away essential human rights but also creates a long-lasting trauma that can be experienced by families and generations. Meanwhile, the novel reveals the pervasive militarisation and institutional control that shape everyday life in Kashmir. By illustrating the themes of surveillance, fear, and bureaucratic apathy, the story draws attention to the fact that the silence and uncertainty of the victims' families are also produced by the system of power. The fact that Bashir describes how Haleema frantically tries to find her son depicts how personal losses can be turned into some form of protest, defying systems that do not want to remember the existence of the lost people. This ongoing need to find the truth and be accepted highlights the wider fight for justice that most families residing in war zones face. Finally, the novel transcends the story of an individual mother and becomes a reflection of the wider tragedy experienced by countless families affected by political violence. Through the emotional and psychological aspects of people left behind, Bashir turns the story into a strong commentary on the humanitarian impacts of war. Therefore, *The Half Mother* is a literary study of grief and strength as well as an invaluable witness that brings to light the problems of memory, justice and human dignity under prolonged political violence conditions.

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