



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue.4.,2016 (Oct.-Dec. )



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

THE HALF MOTHER: AN EPITOME OF MOTHERLY PAIN

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ABSTRACT

The novel is a painful chronicle of a family that becomes the victim of military oppression and state sponsored terrorism in the 1990's. Through a vivid artistic expression, the novelist reminds the readers of dreadful memories that still haunt the people of Kashmir. Besides, it pictures the period when torture, custody and detention meant death and disappearance. The chief protagonist of the novel, Haleema exemplifies those mothers of Kashmir who have lost their dear ones in the cunning conflict. It questions the Indian leadership and democracy because of its implementation of harsh and draconian laws on the people. The novelist deals with several aspects of life in Kashmir under the ugly and illegitimate military occupation. The paper deals with the unending pain which the unfortunate mother Haleema undergoes following the enforced disappearance of her son by the military.

**Key words:** Victim, Oppression, Memories, Custody, Disappearance, Torture, Child, Leadership, Democracy, Laws, Trauma.

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Since 1989 Kashmiris have witnessed an intense pain and suffering because of the turmoil and conflict prevailing therein. This conflict in Kashmir over the decades has left many scars and wounds in the hearts of the people of Kashmir. It is estimated that there are at least seven lakh Indian military personnel in Kashmir, which makes it the most militarized zone in the world. The common figure which most of the people in Kashmir believe to be true is that more than a lakh of people have been killed and thousands disappeared during the conflict. A 1993 report by Human Rights Watch states that Indian forces have "assaulted civilians during search operations, tortured and summarily executed detainees in custody and murdered civilians in reprisal attacks." (*Greater Kashmir*).

Over the years Kashmir has produced a number of writers, who in one way or the other were influenced by the prolonged conflict in Kashmir and later made it stuff for their works. The writers like Mirza Waheed, Basharat Peer, Shahnaz Bashir and many others are worth appreciating in trying to present the actual situation of the conflict-led region of post 1990's. They to a large extent were successful to convey to the world a message about the privation and ruination faced by the people which was for pretty long time unknown to the rest of the world. It is possibly because of the fact that most of the literature available on Kashmir conflict was either in Kashmiri or in Urdu language and there was not much enough material available in English language.

*The Half Mother* by Shahnaz Bashir is set in Natipora area of Srinagar. It is an excruciatingly sad tale of the poor family that becomes one of the victims of repression, suppression and barbarity at the hands of Indian army. The novel is a prime example of motherly love for her child and conveys the message that the love of mother for her child is unmatched and un-paralleled. Tragic figure of the novel Haleema from the beginning of her childhood has seen only sufferings and tragedies after tragedies. She lost her mother at the age of eight and consequently had to leave the school to look after the household activities. After the disastrous marriage with the medical assistant, Haleema gives birth to a baby boy, an 'apple of her eye', and a dear one to her father Ghulam Rasool Joo (Abajan). The boy was named Imran and Haleema would have thought that her son may provide her a healing touch and would be solace to her but the case turns something different and Haleema becomes the woman of tragedies later. Imran like other boys of his time has grown up in an atmosphere when the valley was overwhelmed by horror and turmoil of the 90's. It was the period when the turmoil and insurgency was at its peak and crackdowns, torture, detention, killings, fake encounters, curfews were rampant. It was during this period that thousands of Kashmiri's were killed in one way or the other. Agha Shahid Ali mirrors it as:

“ ...Empty? Because so many fled, ran away,  
and became refugees there, in the plains,  
where they must now will a final dewfall  
to turn the mountains to glass. They'll see  
us through them-see us frantically bury  
houses to save them from fire that, like a wall,  
caves in. The soldiers light it, hone the flames,  
burn our world to sudden papier-mache...” (*A Country without a Post Office*, 26)

During winter after the snow fall, Imran and his grand-father went outside to clear snow from the path. Both were puzzled to encounter the army men forcibly trying to construct a bunker just few meters away from their house. The duo had a little skirmish with them and resisted the army's move. Imran turns out to be sore in the eyes of army personnel when unable to tolerate the insult inflicted on Ab Jaan, he retaliates very angrily to them, which later becomes the only reason Major Kushwaha starts to hate them and brings catastrophe to the whole family.

“Imran furiously sprinted towards the trooper who had punched Ab Jaan, ramming into his legs and pummeling his thigh. ‘ How dare you touch my Ab Jaan? How dare...I'll kill you,’ Imran screamed and growled fiercely.”(*The Half Mother*, 27)

One morning, a patrolling party headed by Major Kushwaha begins to search the houses of Natipora vicinity after the attack on them a day before. After Severe beating to the people of the locality, army infiltrates Joo's house and there follows a heated argument between Ab jaan and Major Kushwaha, ‘What is this? You beat everyone. There are civilians in this locality, yet you burn down our shops, you snatch away our living and now you are torturing us. Don't you have any shame?’ Ab Jaan argued bravely, yet trembling.’(*The Half Mother*, 48).

Major Kushwaha catches Ab Jaan by his collar, drags and fires at him ruthlessly which leads to his death. It was thing which Haleema would have never thought and expected that such a sudden calamity will befall on her. After the cold-blooded murder of Ab jaan, the poor and unfortunate family starts shattering and crumbling. The death of Abjaan breaks the back of Haleema and was another setback and blow to her after the death of her mother and separation from her husband.

The death of Ab Jaan heavily traumatizes Imran and stays awake for late hours at night. It was Ab Jaan who used to provide him gifts after getting over to the next class and he knew that Ab Jaan would have certainly astonished him by providing him a new gift. One night, a sudden noise wakes him up and trembles him. After unbolting the door, Haleema was shocked to see troopers. The remaining troops positioned outside, caught Imran and willy-nilly took him in a gypsy forever. It adds salt to her wounds of her painful past which

were not healed yet. She couldn't believe that her only son is being taken away and to prove the innocence of his son, she starts pleading and begging to Major Kushwaha.

"What is his crime? What has he done? You are mistaken! You know you are mistaken! Why do you this to me." (*The Half Mother*, 56).

After the disappearance of Imran, Haleema starts her mission of tracing her missing son. She goes from pillar to post and visited different jails and police stations, marshy lands and mortuaries. She also approaches politicians, bureaucrats, and journalists to get any clue about her son but of no avail and had to leave empty handed all the time. While searching for her son, she discovered that she is not the only mother but there are number of mothers like her who had lost their loved ones. Like Imran, there are thousands like him who were kidnapped, involuntarily disappeared and tortured in infamous and notorious detention centers like Papa 1 and Papa 2.

Years of struggle and untiring efforts to find her son bears no fruit to Haleema. A time reaches, when she had to sell her land Property, jewellery, cattle as she was broken now and had no money left. The words of Haleema during interaction with local Imam about land deal are distressing and heart breaking: "I need your help. I need some money. If you could help me sell my orchard... I don't need that land now. Ab jaan would take care of it; prune the tress, sprays pesticide. After him...any disfigured fruit that grows rots untouched. Even my cattle are gone." (*The Half Mother*, 109).

Haleema sacrifices both her health and property to achieve her only goal that was Imran. Her affection towards her son forces her to leave no stone unturned for the sake of her missing son. After many years of enforced disappearance of Imran, Haleema was shattered physically, mentally and economically. She acted like an insane and starts talking to the walls and it seems to her that the things around her are responding as well. Her health had given her an answer now and it was difficult for her to sleep and often forgets to take her medicine. She used to take out Imran's clothes to kiss and converse with them. Then, in a mournful voice, she crooned a painful Kashmiri throbbing song in a low voice:

*Kyazi tscaai'l roodham maah-i-nam ke hilaal tai?*

*Doh goun pyaraan , chhi na tsalaan malaal tai?*

O crescent moon, why do you hide from me?

Sulking as you are, why have you kept me? (*The Half Mother*,70).

The separation from her dear son breaks the back of Haleema and after his disappearance the aching and agonizing memory of Ab jaan's death had started to fade now and it seems to her that Ab jaan has been killed decades ago. She even loses the count of days and forgets her age as the memory of Imran has dejected her. Imran had taken a permanent place in the mind of Haleema and everything around seems burning to her after his disappearance:

"What if Imran suddenly came from behind and covered my eyes with his hands? Haleema imagined. One evening, as she laid out the utensils to serve herself dinner, she ladled the rice onto two plates. Then suddenly, while serving the collard, she stopped, and sat down on the wooden stool in the corner of the kitchen. She began to sob, followed by a low wail that reverberated in the empty house." (*The Half Mother*, 108).

Consolation from shafiq, Rukhsana and help from time to time by Izhar may have given her little hope, but her joy would have no limits, had Imran returned to her. After his appointment with the so called Chief Minister Dr. Aiyash Mir, she had thought that approaching him would bear some fruit in tracing her son but the man mocks and plays with the grievances and her painful story by taking no pains and said:

"I have gone through the same madness myself,' he said. 'My wife is in America. My son is in America. My daughters are here and there. My family is scattered. I am here. I keep no trace of my family. I am like you. Actually we are all the same. We can't do anything. I can just pray for you." (*The Half Mother*,151).

This gibberish, balderdash and contemptible nonsense from the stooge clearly allude to all those politicians who have sold their soul to sit on the coffins of thousands of innocents for their own interests and political means.

Haleema keeps hoping to find her son which kills and resurrects her at the same time. After years of waiting and agony, she joins an assemblage of persons known as APDP (Association of parents of disappeared persons), whose relatives are disappeared because of military and police high-handedness. The association provides a real picture of Kashmir which is totally different from the landscape and the beauty for which it's admired. Every year on December 10, the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) pays tribute to thousands of disappeared persons of Jammu and Kashmir. The tribute is a reminder of the fact that struggle will continue until justice is delivered.

The dismal tale of Haleema reaches its climax when she is admitted in the hospital and dies with unfulfilled desire. The words which Haleema utters at the time of her death are certainly moving and make one cry: "Imran Saeba ? Aakha (Imran. Have you come?)" (*The Half Mother*,178). Helplessness and pain of Haleema will live and remain in the readers mind for a long time. She symbolizes every mother of Kashmir whose loved ones are disappeared and do not know whether they are dead or alive. They still live with the hope that their *Lakhte jigar* (*Dear ones*) may return some day. The bond between mother and son is an unimaginable one and only the mother knows the pangs when she gets separated from a son. It reminds me of Allama Iqbals poem "*A Mother's Dream*";

    "...Involved in this thought was I  
    When in this troupe my son saw I  
    He was walking at the back, and was not walking fast  
    The lamp he had in his hand was not lighted  
    Recognizing him I said "O My dear!  
    Where have you come leaving me there?  
    Restless due to separation I am  
    Weeping every day for ever I am  
    You did not care even a little for me  
    What loyalty you showed, you left me..." (*Bang e Dara*, Part 1)

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it can be said that the novel presents a dismal picture of that place of the world where the army and the police have been given free license to kill innocent people at will. It is the place where no Indian military man has been tried in any civilian court after gross human rights violation. Besides, the novel ridicules the justice system that is impotent to provide justice to thousands of cases like Imran. Shahnaz Bashir taunts the Inhuman and draconian laws like Armed forces special powers (AFSPA) , Public Safety act (PSA) and Jammu and Kashmir Disturbed Areas Act which provide excessive powers to security personnel to arrest, detain, search and to shoot any person on mere suspicion. The novelist very vividly portrays the image of affected and victimized families of the terror, let loose by the army and state sponsored terrorist policies. Suffering and struggle is interlaced in the novel in such a way that it creates painful emotions in a reader. Tragic figure Haleema despite facing all the hardships and agonies continued her struggle from the day Imran was forcibly kidnapped till her last breath. Haleema symbolizes thousands of half mothers in Kashmir, whose sons have been disappeared enforcedly with no information about them for decades. It is a disgrace and slur on the authorities and security forces to treat humans in inhuman and callous way. The words of Natasha Kaul are highly relevant who says:

    "The women of Kashmir are in the tens of thousands of widows and half-widows; wives of killed and disappeared men; as well as mothers and grandmothers of missing children. Vulnerable, often impoverished, the sorrows, struggles and humiliation of these women of Kashmir are a catalogue of charges against the occupation of Kashmir." (*Of Occupation and Resistance: Writings from Kashmir*, 253).

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