

Jammu & Kashmir Conflict: a Mother Abscess: Victimised mothers in the novels *The Half Mother* by Shahnaz Bashir and *Red Maize* by Danesh Rana: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

The violence that has marred Jammu & Kashmir, particularly since the onset of the armed insurgency and counter-insurgency in 1989, has become the theme of many contemporary fictional and other narratives. Writers from J&K and writers who spent some time in the vale too have begun to paint the conflict in which the people have been engulfed since long in a variety of literary narratives like poetry, novels, and shorts stories. These literary narratives struggle to give expression to the effects of the conflict on an individual and masses. People shattered by the violence and suffering live a very torturous life.

Though being a mother is not a problem for a mother but she being in a problem is a mother problem for any nation. They are never found unhurt, spared whenever the conflict shows its bare cruel fangs. In J&K though they are not the only, but are the most victimized by the conflict. Their sufferings fill voluminous portion in the conflict literary narratives as they are always hit directly or indirectly, physically or emotionally by the prevalent violence in J&K. The present paper attempts to bring out how the mothers are the most hit community in J&K whether they lose their husband or their son or daughter. The paper also deliberates on how two mothers suffer losses in the conflict and how their lives are completely ruined.

Keywords: Mothers, Conflict, Insurgency, Contemporary, Corturous life, Bare cruel fangs, Prevalent violence, Most victimised

Introduction

Many novels give reflection of J&K and have touched a significant issue of contemporary times. The J&K dispute remains unresolved for the last more than sixty years, but the conflict has consumed thousands of lives in Kashmir, not to mention the casualties. The conflict, in particular the gory happenings of the last two and a half decades of insurgency, present enough material to a sensitive writer to explore and produce the works full of sighs and sobs of mothers caught in the conflict. The mothers faced the worst kind of both physical and psychological problems, losing their dear ones whom they fed with their warmth expecting the support in return from them in the last years of these mothers. The two novels one by a native Kashmiri novelist Shahnaz Bashir's *The Half Mother* and other one *Red Maize* by Danesh Rana, who spent some time in the region and recorded the experiences in it, depict besides other issues, how mothers most victimized of all, are badly caught in the conflict and their dreams shattered when they have to face the losses. Both the novels document the tragedy which has befallen on many families in Jammu and Kashmir.

Discussion

Shahnaz Bashir was born and brought up in Kashmir valley of J&K. He studied Journalism and creative writing in India. Shahnaz Bashir is the recipient of the university gold medal and the acclaimed *Shameem Ahmad Shameem Memorial Kashmir Times Award* in the year 2007. His novel *The Half Mother* was listed on Forbes' best books of 2014 in which he has attempted to focus on the courageous Haleema, a mother, a daughter and a woman full of hope and the energy to fight against her suffering. Haleema and Ab Jaan (Ghulam Rasool Joo) are a

family of two – a close unit of a father and daughter. With Haleema's mom's passing, Haleema is forced to drop out of school and help her father out. When she is of marriageable age, Ab Jaan marries her off to a Medical Assistant, only to be divorced within three months. But then, the marriage yields her the love – Imran, a son who is obedient and a brilliant. Just when Haleema is settled in her happy life, a nightmare strikes, first taking her father away and then taking her son away.

From the marriage what remains is her only son, Imran, whom she brings up. On his school notebooks, the boy writes that success doesn't matter; what matters is hard work and being a citizen of the whole earth these words are fully though unknowingly put into real life by his mother. The novel goes on from this cheerful life of family to the wounds that remain unhealed. The novel brings into light the appalling state of mysterious disappearances that has been happening since the late 1980s in J&K.

After an attack in the neighbourhood of Natipora, the army stationed in the region to fight the armed rebels exercises its anger against the locals. In a raid Imran's grandfather (Ghulam Rasool Joo) falls to merciless army bullets. Sometime later the house is raided again and innocent Imran too is arrested on the pretext of his involvement in militancy related incidents. Haleema fruitlessly pleads with the army to leave him. Yet her tearful pleas and requests are mercilessly rejected. Bashir vividly portrays the heartrending incident of Imran's arrest with a desperate mother begging before the troops for mercy. From the infamous torture camp Papa 2 to local army camps, she visits every place hoping to find him. Every passing day is a struggle for survival and longing. Her lullabies for her son are heart rending sobs:

"O crescent moon, why do you hide from me? Sulking as you are, why have you kept from me?" Italics added)

Though the author has dealt with several aspects of life in Kashmir including the policies of the government, the army's inhumane rule, the torture, the helplessness of people, and the media that is dominated by the State the novel revolves mostly round Haleema. "With delicately drawn characters, Shahnaz Bashir tells the heartbreaking story of one woman's battle for life, dignity and justice." (Mirza Waheed)

Red Maize is a novel by Danesh Rana which won *Tata Literature Live! First Book Award-Fiction at The Sixth Mumbai International Literary Festival*. Rana, having been a witness, as a senior IPS officer of J&K cadre of Jammu zone to the conflict for all these years, his book reflects the human cost of war especially its impact on the women of the war-ravaged region. Morha Madana is the village in Doda district of Jammu province by the river Chenab, where gun-toting militants of the Tanzeem have started to set their foot, is where the novel is set. Kausar Jan the suffering mother has three sons. Her life was full of satisfaction. The novel shows that how this poor woman loses all her three sons to the conflict, despite the fact that she had nothing to do with the issue. The main character of the novel, Kausar Jan was only concerned about her three sons, some goats and maize crop but she loses all these things. The tale of miseries begin in the life of Kausar Jan when her middle son Shakeel joins militant ranks and becomes most wanted area commander. Circumstances force her eldest son Khalid too to join-militancy and her third and last son Firdous joins anti militancy group of Jammu and Kashmir Police task forces. And she loses all her three sons to the gun culture.

Red Maize very beautifully portrays Kausar Jan as a mother who changes many descriptions- from being a militant's mother to a half mother to a policeman's mother to finally not being a mother at all when she loses all of her three sons to the bloody conflict.

"...Now she was also known as the mother of an SPO, a far cry from the time when she has been known as the mother of mujahids..." (242)" Italics added)

The novel beautifully sums up the female protagonist who has suffered immense pain and trauma in just two paragraphs:

"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. There was no way that she could let any one of them leave her.

She had become a metaphor for Kashmir, the coveted vale of the conflict. She was the battle between the mujahids and soldiers. 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. She was the mother of all disputes. She was victim and aggressor, terrorist and soldier, jannat and jahanum, Firdous and Shakeel.....She was both the witness and the

perpetrator, responsible for turning the maize red. (243) (Italics added)

Kausar Jan like Haleema comes across as hundreds and thousands of such women who are caught in this conflict and are left with no choice but to play the role of survivors and resisters by sometimes coping with the situation and defying at other times. "This is the same ordeal that hundreds of women go through in daily routine if their sons or kiths and kins have joined militancy and they have to pay a heavy price for it." (Kavetri Suri) Again like Haleema, Kausar Jan also runs from pillar to post to trace her missing son Khalid:

She imagines him appearing miraculously and wrapping his strong arm around her. In her relentless pursuit, she walks about the busy squares and bazaars 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 (107) Italics added)

Bashir's *The Half Mother* could very well be a tale of anyone of the numerous victims of war in Kashmir. With the vivid realism and purity of narration, it depicts an extraordinary and brilliant portrayal of a suffering mother. In spite of the author being a male, he could very effectively narrate the pain, sufferings, longings and loneliness of a woman/mother which is only possible because the writer has a firsthand knowledge of what is happening around. "In this strife-torn valley, I have always been tormented by feelings of indefinite and eternal uncertainty." *The Half Mother* is an outcome of those feelings." (Shahnaz Bashir) It is a heart wrenching and heart breaking story about a little girl, a daughter who becomes orphan, a wife, a mother, a mother who loses her son in the war torn J&K.

Interestingly, conflict in Kashmir is finding a voice in a number of contemporary fiction and non-fiction narratives. Each book helps to look at the Kashmir story from a different perspective and Danesh Rana also tries to draw a grim nuanced picture of one of India's colossal human tragedies. "*Red Maize* is probably the first book that talks about militancy in Jammu region which acquired a very brutal form." (Danesh Rana)

The book is not about Kashmir it is about the metastatic repercussions of the J&K conflict. Kausar Jan loses all her three sons in one way or the other, a widow pushed to the brink of destruction. There is little dignity in the conflict. Kausar Jan is made miserable:

She feels that she has nothing to lose except her wretched existence and the God she blindly believes (110). *There are no tears in her eyes. Women embrace her and cry into her shoulder, but she remains indifferent.* (212) Italics added)

Bashir too 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. Returning with no news of Imran, his mother doesn't stop. "...The Half Mother adds a nuanced layer to the local narrative, caught in the uncertainty of life and death. Bashir has painted the pain of Haleema, one among the thousands of relatives of missing people in Kashmir..." — HARDNEWS. Much like Kausar Jan Haleema moves, runs, walks, prays, and lives hoping that Imran will be with her again. Then one day, she looks into a mirror and realises that time has

passed and she is getting old: Imran hasn't returned; perhaps, he never will; perhaps life was just a dream; perhaps it was not her life but a nightmare that she couldn't have imagined when Imran's infant babble had made her smile.

"*The Half Mother* tells one of the stories from Kashmir, but it is the story of thousands of mothers. 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."(HT) The novel shows what many mothers in the Valley are going through. It gives a voice to these mothers, who, like Haleema, suffer, fight, struggle and don't give up. "The author also describes in a very subtle manner the agony of continuously facing the apathy and highhandedness of the authorities. Haleema continues to get pushed from pillar to post looking for Imran. In the process she visits places she wouldn't have visited even in her worst nightmares – army hospitals, dreaded interrogation centres, notorious jails, homes of ministers, offices of police officers – with the faint hopes of finding Imran often disappearing into the distressing mists of despair"(GK) It faithfully has cries, sobs and sighs of the half mother carved out of the full mother by the conflict prevalent in the vale. "Battered and bruised – mentally and physically – Haleema continues to fight. In a teasing dream she is reunited with Imran. The fanciful mental illusion doesn't last long though, as she is soon smitten back, by consciousness, into the domain of loathsome and unpleasant reality. As Izhar keeps on brooding over the tragedy of Kashmir Haleema breathes her last. With her perish also, she hopes of seeing her son again. Her last words,

"Imran saeba? Aakha?, Trans:(Dear Imran ,have you come?)
Italics added)

Rend the heart more than all other stirring words she speaks during her despairing struggle to find Imran."(GK) *The Half Mother* is "a mother's nightmarish quest for her missing son" (First Post) the story of Haleema-a mother and a daughter yesterday, a 'half mother' and an orphan today, tormented by not knowing whether Imran is dead or alive, torn apart by her own lonely existence.

Similarly, Rana shows how a long-term military deployment inevitably brutalises the local population. A searing chronicle, *Red Maize* also makes you witness the plight of a militant family. How they are tortured, insulted even when they have given up on their children who have gone to the other side. It's like tug of war from them, one end with Army and another end with Militants, both trying to establish their kind of patriotism in their hearts. And when the game ends, either the family doesn't survive or a new militant is born in the family.

In *Red Maize* the battle between the two forces, Kausar Jan loses son after son, the eldest innocent son Khalid is often beaten, tortured and cajoled to act as informer, repeated threats by army leads him to the doorsteps of jihadists. Shakeel, the middle one, is allured by militants and trained to be the area commander of a mujahedin group. He is the most wanted person his head can bring reward to an army officer, for that he can go to any extent torturing and bribing the residents of the village.

The youngest, Firdous a school going kid is enlisted in the Indian army where he is ill-treated and finds himself to be misfit. His most agonising moment comes when he is forced to torture his own mates from school. He is killed so that the army officer claims to complete his assignment and can move to his new posting. Kausar Jan, like J&K itself is caught in the crossfire

between militants and the Army. Day by day dreaming of her maize crop, this turns into red maize, soaked in the blood of her family and other innocent lives. This novel faithfully makes us know and understand the human cost of conflict. Shahnaz Bashir and Danesh Rana have shown that conflict is the mother abscess in the life of common people of the land.

Conclusion

Whether it the Natipora (Srinagar Kashmir) of *The Half Mother* or the Morha Maidan (Doda Jammu) of *Red Maize*, both these locations represent the whole state of Jammu and Kashmir. The focus of author has been to show that how common people especially mothers got crushed in the conflict without being party to the issue. The tragic happenings of the last two and a half decades have been crafted into the lives of Haleema and Kausar Jan in such an enthralling way that it sometimes gets difficult for the reader to realise whether he is reading facts or fiction. The description of Haleema's loss of the father Ghulam Rasool Joo and her struggle to trace her son Imran is truly heart wrenching and one seriously start wishing that at least now, after all the sufferings, she gets some happiness. But she gets not.

One who reads about Haleema and Kausar Jan reaches the pain of not two but thousands of mothers' suffering in the same manner. *Red Maize* story of Kausar Jan - a mother who is caught in the conflict between the militants and the army; loses all her three sons, Khalid, Shakeel and Firdous, like the hundreds and thousands of women of the state. These novels are important book to understand the other side of J&K the Public Side or the mother's side. Both the novels highlight the emotional state of mothers and their journey from being the mothers to no mothers at all.

The novelists have painted the picture of pain of sorrow of a mother. They have faithfully carved out the miseries of the mothers from the humungous mass of the realities of J&K tragedy. Both Kausar Jan and Haleema are widows but their dear sons were their eyesight whom they lost to conflict. Their suns of hope were set when they lost their sons. They represent a thousand mothers who are miserably caught in conflict with their hearts always longing to say to their missing or dead sons like Kausar Jan:

'Piece of my heart, where have you been all these years? Did you care to even know if your mother was alive or dead? (2)

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