

**VOICE FROM THE MARGIN- A UNIVERSAL TALE OF LOSS, PAIN, TRAUMA AND  
VOICELESSNESS: A STUDY OF SHAHNAZ BASHIR'S DEBUT NOVEL *THE HALF  
MOTHER AND SCATTERED SOULS*, SELECTED STORIES**

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**ABSTRACT**

*No human civilization on the subcontinent would ever witness such a massive human rights violations in the form of bloodshed, rape, and torture than the recent upsurge in Kashmir, next only to the mammoth brutality and savagery of humanity during Partition in 1947. In the contemporary world, Kashmir is another name for war, loss, pain, violence and relentless struggle. The essence of life and living in such a conflict-torn and anarchic state take a heavy toll on the lives of ordinary civilians of the valley. The constant feeling of insecurity, stress, death, loss, and pain jeopardize their mental health and equilibrium. Shahnaz Bashir, another artistic, literary voice of Kashmir like Agha Shahid Ali, renders such a gruesome tale of pain and trauma of the valley to the world outside. Bashir's novel *Half Mother* and short story collection *Scattered Souls* poignantly records an agonizing account of human subordination and marginalization against the repressive mechanism of power, authority, and militarization. The present paper aims to explore how the ongoing conflict in Kashmir brings in untold tragedies of loss, pain, trauma and voicelessness, a study of Bashir's debut novel *The Half Mother and Scattered Souls, Selected Stories*. The paper also seeks to throw some substantial light on the transformation of the Kashmiri people's voicelessness to a rebellious and protesting voice, a journey from the margin to the 'Centre'.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Oppression, Panopticism, Custody, Death, Pain, Trauma, Marginalization, Voicelessness*

**INTRODUCTION**

Literature is a mirror of society which realistically and artistically projects the various ups and downs, conflicts and tensions among societies and the people living in it. This social ambivalence and chaotic state disenchanted the literary minds of that particular period. This is quite true of Kashmiri literature which draws some literary attention and finds expression in many literary genres like poetry, novel, and short stories. These literary genres are the outcome of loss, pain, and suffering, a form of outburst against the massive human rights violations in Kashmir. A barbaric and brutalized society always needs a messiah in the form of a literary writer to set things in order, to establish humanity in the dehumanized and anarchic world of oppression and marginalization. Writers like Basharat Peer, Nitasha Kaul, Mirza Waheed, Agha Shahid Ali, Salman Rushdie and Shahnaz Bashir take up their pen to write back to the 'Centre', to the world about the marginalization, seclusion and alienation of Kashmiri people from their culture, traditions and ethos in the world's most militarized zone. The first significant and major literary work that portrayed a realistic picture of the Kashmir story to the world is Salman Rushdie penned *Shalimar, the Clown*, published in 2005. The novel not only becomes an embodiment of Kashmiri culture and its social ethos, but it delicately brings out the pangs, agonies and tragedies of this land. Basharat

Peer's *Curfewed Night* is a poignant account of the Kashmiri conflict upon the lives of simple folks of Kashmir. Peer painfully recounts how a young teenager like him is swept up with the cry of 'Azadi'; how all failures and unsuccess compensate itself with the notion of being a part of something noble, something greater and larger. Peer's world is the world of conflict, full of violence, trauma, abuse, and humiliation. The most agonizing moment in this book is of Peer's inability to visit Kunan Poshpura where Indian soldiers gang-raped 20 women in the year 1990. The book *Curfewed Night* registers Peer's voice of revolt and resistance against the injustice unleashed upon the Kashmiri people by the cruel exercise of power and military oppression by the Indian Security Forces. The poetic sensibility in Agha Shahid Ali has never been alien to the painful and the poignant situation of present-day Kashmir. The torn poetic self of the poet captures the agony, oppression, sufferings, mass exodus of Pundits and the transformation of 'earthly paradise' into a 'burning inferno'. Writing about Kashmir, Gazala Javid Wani in her article *Agha Shahid Ali: Our Witness*, published in *Greater Kashmir* aptly remarks:

Kashmir's incessant struggle for justice, traumatic experience of people is reflected in his poetry. His most phenomenal work *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997) shows how very ordinary and basic facility in Kashmir became defunct during 1990's when post offices were closed for seven months. As he said: Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox/ My home a neat four by six inches". ( Wani )

Shahnaz Bashir's *The Half Mother* and *Scattered Souls* render the so long suppressed pain, agony and trauma of the Kashmiri people to the world outside. It's a bizarre and shocking account of human subordination where a mother becomes 'half- mother', where a woman is gang raped and is suffered from psychological trauma, where a petty misunderstanding can claim a person's life, where sons and daughters cannot arrange funerals for their dead father and where the conjugal happiness of a wife was substituted for an acute traumatic shock through the killing of her loving husband in a gunfire. The narratives of such writers posit a true and authentic account of the marginalization and victimization of Kashmiri people who have to experience brutal savagery and the human massacre at the hands of Indian Army in a tempestuous and deadly atmosphere of military oppression.

The valley of Kashmir has become a terror zone of an armed conflict between Muslim insurgents and Indian military and paramilitary forces. The present turmoil in Kashmir, which originates in the State's disputed accession to India long back in 1947, erupted violently with untold tragedies in the early 1990s when Indian Army unleashed a brutal savagery upon armed insurgent groups in combating the rising upsurge in the valley. The present of Kashmir is an untold tale of curfew, crackdowns, bullet, bunker, bloodshed, death, rape, murder and violence. It is torn apart within to fight against the military oppression in their longing to attain freedom or 'Azadi'. It becomes a terror zone where the civilians have to experience a perpetual chain of suffering and pain under the constant threat of violence and oppression. The common and ordinary civilians in Kashmir are interrogated, searched and sometimes taken into custody for a mere suspicion of being a militant or have some link with militant groups. They are kept hold under fatal gaze and surveillance, what in Foucauldian terms called 'panopticism'. It seems as if the Kashmiri civilians are constantly being watched and monitored. The constant feeling of insecurity, stress, death, loss, and pain numb the congenial current of their soul. Violence, bloodshed, tears, trauma becomes their daily food. Their lives are camouflaged with false hopes and nostalgic longing. But how long the Kashmiri people escape their destiny of death, torture, sexual abuse and psychic trauma under such a cruel military oppression? It is a grim world where you call yourself a free man, but your movement gets restricted; where you are threatened and tortured; where your imagination gets choked; where a mother or a woman becomes 'half-

mother' or 'half- widow'; where one feels alienated and his identity is always suspected; where a woman is brutally raped and killed. It is a world of chance, uncertainty, sorrow, and bereavement- are these not enough for one to suffer from depression, psychic disorder, schizophrenia or psychological trauma? The answer to such questions remains hidden in the narrative framework of Bashir's story *The Half Mother* and *Scattered Souls*. The present of Kashmir has aptly been reflected in the observation of Nitasha Kaul :

“ 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)

Bashir in his debut novel *The Half Mother* has poignantly portrayed an agonizing and heart-rending tale of a bereaved mother Haleema who has lost her only son Imran, the only mean of her existence. As a mother, she has to experience trauma, pain, and agony of losing her only son in the ongoing deadly conflict which claims thousands of young lives like Imran. Losing her only son Imran was one of many traumatic shocks that she experienced in her life. She is an absolute tragic figure who had lost her mother at an early age and was divorced months after her marriage. It is not that destiny stops being cruel to her, but strikes her more deeply and intensely with another acute traumatic shock. Her father was killed by Army in front of her eyes and now her only son Imran was detained for a mere suspect of a militant. Her eyes have gone blind in her search of Imran. She has begged every door for her son's information. Every day she has to experience psychic trauma in her tireless waiting for her son. Her motherly feelings always strive to resolve such unanswered questions- Is he hungry? Is he thirsty? Is he in jail? Is he dead or alive? This thought constantly torn her apart in her sleeping and waking hours. She begged, she pleaded with politicians, Chief Minister, Army, barber, doctors at the morgue and even tortured militants only to know the answers to such unresolved questions. In her suffering, she is not an individual pathetic figure but represents a painful picture of universal motherhood who like her tirelessly waiting for answers. The most agonizing and touching account of a mother's sorrow is vividly portrayed in the following lines by Haleema:

“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)

Psychic wounds are acuter and tormenting than physical wounds. It tears one's own self within. Haleema's suffering as a mother unveils the universal untold tragedies of Kashmiri mother who has to experience such mental or psychological agonies and anxieties. A mother only knows the pain of separation, of losing their sons. It is painful for a mother to accept the tragic and untimely demise of her son. But it is acuter and more tormenting to find a mother living under extreme uncertainties, trauma and existential dilemma for their disappeared sons. The dismal and the universal tragic tale of Haleema reaches its climax when she dies in the hospital, uttering her last words: “Imran Saeba? Aakha (Imran. Have you come?)” (*The Half Mother*, 178)

Set in the backdrop of the 1990s conflict- ridden Kashmir, *Scattered Souls* leads us to a grim world of violence and terror when Indian Army plunged into a massive human rights abuse and violations in their splurge to counter-attack

the militant- separatist agitation in Kashmir. Bashir's short story collection begins with the story entitled *Transistor* which poignantly recounts the harsh and brutal realities of the Kashmir conflict. It is a grim world of brutal savagery where even a petty misunderstanding can claim a person's life. Muhammad Yousuf Dar's tragic story has an ample evidence of it. His transistor draws suspicion and is mistaken for a wireless set that claims his life. Yousuf though a staunch supporter of freedom movement and justice was untimely killed with the crime of being the brother of the collaborative mainstream politician Abdul Rahmaan Dar. The tragic story of Yousuf shows that it is not only the State-sponsored terrorism that plunged in the direst cruelty of human killing in Kashmir, but also the violence perpetrated by the militant group which killed many innocent civilians on the ground of suspicion of being government informers.

Bashir in the story *The Gravestone* painfully depicts how an individual's self-esteem and dignity has to be compromised against the brutality of social, psychological and economic pressures. It is really a poignant account of how Muhammad Sultan, a skilled carpenter and an avowed supporter of Freedom struggle has to compromise and combat with his conscience to accept Government compensation for his martyred son Mushtaq. His conscience surrenders in the face of extreme poverty and social stigma that ultimately drives him for the Government compensation. But he needs to cross the hurdle between the word 'shaheed' and his compensation. It is a pity that he mistakenly scraps off the name Mushtaq instead of 'shaheed'. The fate of such men of Kashmir like Muhammad Sultan will remain perpetually as same.

The short story *Ex- Militant* presents an agonizing account of social exclusion and identity crisis of an ex- militant, Ghulam Mohiuddeen. He is socially marginalized and despised by everybody for his identity as an ex- militant. His predicament as marginalized, being painfully reflected the problems of social exclusion, insult, stigma, and viciousness, he has to experience even after leaving the path of violence and savagery. His identity as an ex-militant throws him into the periphery without the accessibility of electrical connection, daily necessities like gas, ration, and revenue. It also throws some substantial light on how the detainees from the rich and affluent families like Fayaz Shah's become successful in evading jail by bringing 'pashmina shawls' for the entire staff. The success behind another ex-militant Fayaz Shah's social stability and upliftment in becoming an active politician and one of the chief trustees of Insha's school poignantly contradicts the future of the poor and the socially ostracized person like Ghulam Mohiuddeen whose identity as an ex-militant costs him heavily. The story becomes an embodiment of pain, violence, and voicelessness which realistically demonstrate how the normal and peaceful life of an individual like Mohiuddeen is constantly reeling under the barbaric enforcement of a draconian law.

Another brutal story of Bashir, *Psychosis* is one of the shocking and bizarre accounts of the Kashmir conflict. It chronicles the heart- wrenching account of pain and trauma of its woman character Sakeena at the backdrop of military- insurgent agitation in Kashmir. She has to experience an absolute traumatic shock when she finds her husband disappeared mysteriously. She approached every Army Camp, interrogation center, and jail only to trace her disappeared husband. Sakeena's plight as a woman is vividly portrayed when she is told to offer one lakh rupees or to sacrifice her body for the sexual gratification of the guards in exchange for her husband's information. Her feminine psyche receives a shocking jolt when she is gang-raped by the Indian troops with intense barbarity and savagery:

"The men threw her down to the ground and held her legs and arms. One of them stripped her of her shalwaar and stuffed it into her mouth. Insaah shrieked, calling out to the neighbors for help. One trooper lifted Insha by the neck of her shirt and took her away". (*Scattered Souls*, 62)

Such a brutal physical torture takes a heavy toll upon Sakeena's mental health and strokes her hard with acute psychic trauma. She loses her mental strength and stability due to her nightmarish traumatic experience of sexual violence. She falls victim to acute onset of confusion, delusions, hallucination and mood swings. The story also poignantly reflects the motherly feelings and sentiment of Sakeena who gives birth to Bilal, the bastard born of rape. She tried every means to get rid of Bilal as she thinks 'he is the human shape of a painful memory'. Sakeena's plight and suffering as a woman are symbolic of the universal tale of gender subordination and marginalization women have to experience in a phallocentric world. It also seeks to raise questions about the Indian justice system which pays no heed to this gross violation of human rights in Kashmir.

*A Photo With Barack Obama* relates the callous and indifferent attitudes of America towards the problems of Kashmir issue. The story recounts how Biul earns a new name and a new respect for his skill and art in stone pelting. The story narrates how Biul, the bastard has to experience social segregation and ostracization from his classmates in school and boys from his neighborhood. He has to meet with extra punishment in school because of his social stigma of being a bastard. But one never bother to think what sin an innocent boy Biul or his mother Sakeena has committed that they have to experience such a sling of social exclusion and marginalization? Their only sin is that they belong to Kashmir, a place where humanity, individuality, and selfhood are in constant threat and abuse. The painful memory of physical torture in the interrogation center comes back to Biul in retrospect. In his memory, he could see the dark hairy groin of the policeman, the clanking of the policeman's belt with steel police logo on it this painful and traumatized memory shook him so terribly that only a sharp and piercing cry would bring him fro his agonizing past. Biul and other stone pelters like him have to live in constant threat and anxiety of detention and interrogation in custody. Biul like countless other disenchanting Kashmiris expects Obama to mention Kashmir in his speeches. To his utter dismay, Obama speaks about everything else except Kashmir. He wished that the recent uprising in Kashmir that torn the soul of the people would draw some attention in the eyes of the American President Barack Obama. The cherished hopes and ideals by the Obama's impending visit disillusioned Biul when he comes face to face with the grim truth in reality.

*The Woman Who Became Her Own Husband* is another poignant tale of brutal savagery that unleashed untold sufferings and trauma into the happy and conjugal life of Ayesha and Tariq. The happy and ecstatic life of Ayesha is transformed into a vale of tears and mental trauma when she lost her husband in the army firing on Residency Road, Srinagar. Ayesha finds herself in an absolute traumatic shock and gradually suffers from the acute psychological disorder. She starts copying her husband's activities and thus becomes her own husband. Ayesha's tragedy bespeaks of the universal tragedy of loss, pain, and trauma in the lives of Kashmiri women with no faults of their own. Her life is constantly reeling under the threat of existential crisis and resulted in psychic trauma and strange insane behavior. Bashir quite poignantly delineates the character of Ayesha and Sakeena as the true representative of suffered womanhood in Kashmir who is subjected to either rape or physical abuse or military oppression.

Bashir is a witness to the human massacre and bloodshed and this witness is not a dehistoricized one but finds a poignant reflection on the dreadful account of human life and its existence. He is a chronicler of pain- a pain of existential crisis articulated in a perpetual agony of human subordination and marginalization. His work stands out as a rebel against the monstrous and barbaric exercise of chilling brutality, injustice and oppression which results in loss, pain, trauma, and voicelessness. Bashir presents Haleema not as a passive and submissive woman, but as a woman of rebellious spirit who

has the 'voice' to question the hegemony of cruel military oppression in the lives of Kashmiri civilians. Haleema fights for her self-hood, her dignity, her rights as a human. Her voice is the voice of a thousand mothers whose lives have been torn with the sea of sorrow. Bashir's characters are not the meek and submissive one, but the one who knows to fight, to question and to raise their protesting voice. Biul from *A Photo With Barack Obama* registers his voice of anger and protest by picking up stones in his hands. Biul had more substantial reasons for stone pelting than anyone else. Bashir narrates:

"He had more reason to fling stones than anyone else, he knew. He felt like stoning his own slander-infested existence, the forever unknown face of that trooper, whichever of the five men it had been, who had raped his mother." (*Scattered Souls*, 82)

But no one bothers to think why the young boys like Biul pelt stones? Biul, like countless other youths of Kashmir pelt stones or migrates to Pak administered Kashmir for insurgent training only to register their voice of resistance against their oppressors. Thousands of Kashmiris come out on the street to make their voices heard against the military occupation in Kashmir. People in the procession waved the flags, flailed the placards, brandished their green headbands- all reflect the same message, the same slogan: 'Azaadi', a freedom from this terrorized life. Their voice of protest is an outburst of widespread dissatisfaction with the exercise of biased and the obsolete justice delivery system and gross human rights abuse in the valley.

## CONCLUSIONS

The grim faces of the bullet-torn boys, their bloodstained shirts, the grieving and lamenting parents present a real and authentic picture of Kashmir's transformed state of 'burning inferno'. This sordid picture of human massacre and bloodshed might disappear from the headlines, but it can never escape to find its true place in our collective memory. Shahnaz Bashir's literary works present a dismal and a horrific picture of a devastated land where the army and the police are found engaged in mass killing, torture and rape mercilessly and unprecedentedly. Bashir delineates the horrific images of death and trauma in all the characters of his novel and short story. Bashir's narratives are narratives of pain, of fragmented and disenchanting lives of Kashmir, which resist the hegemonic powers of Indian military and paramilitary Forces. Such hegemonic power politics has given birth to the most degrading and dehumanized circumstances in Kashmir, which renders voice to such disenchanting literary figure like Bashir. The narratives of Bashir shows that the Kashmiris can speak, can wage war with pen and paper against the oppressive mechanism of power and militarization.

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